

## More About Sharecroppers\*

By GRACE ISABEL COLBRON

**S**HARECROPPERS Week (March 3rd to 10th) in New York City has come and gone. City dailies said a few words in advance, and the Grapes of Wrath Dinner-Forum on March 5th, at which Mrs. Roosevelt and other notables spoke, received some polite notice. But, just as the Washington Sharecropper Conference in January came to naught, as far as the public knowledge of it was concerned, just so the doings of that week in New York were of little avail, as far as public knowledge was concerned, to the Sharecroppers.

Some newspaper articles spoke of the "migrant workers" (particularly one series of excellent articles in a leading daily), but it was only the "migrant worker," individual and family, with whom all these stories dealt. The specific problem back of the case of the actual sharecropper of the South was touched on very lightly, if at all.

The migrant worker, the wandering farm worker, moving from place to place in search of seasonal work, is quite a different person from the Southern sharecropper. The migrant worker is, as a rule, a lone man cursed with Wanderlust, a "hobo" of a better sort. Jack London, for instance, was a migrant worker at one period of his varied career. He wandered, for many reasons, and found it necessary to work now and then to provide cash for incident expenses, or to work for a night or a week's lodging mayhap. But his case, as the case of most such migrant workers, cannot and should not be confused with the case of the sharecroppers—of many thousands of whole families who are victims of the worst examples of landlordism our country can show. We are just beginning to hear something of their case, their hopeless condition. But the news is changed in transit. The Sharecropper is treated as a "migrant worker", and the actual point, sum and substance of the situation is lost—deliberately smothered, one may well say. It is treated as an individual problem.

To deal with the case of the sharecropper as a social problem would interfere with a large vested interest—with the greatest, the most dangerous of all vested interests, the ability of one man, through undisturbed ownership of land, to make all others work for him, at his price. Working for a landlord at about 10 cents a day, these modern slaves of the landowner are much worse off than the black slaves of a former generation. For those chattel slaves were of actual money value to their owner. The sharecropper is of little money value

to his landlord, who can dispossess him at any moment, and take some one else on in his place.

But the sharecropper has won some friends. He has been organized into a Union that fights for his interests and the interests of his family. The Southern Tenant Farmers' Union, a comparatively new organization already numbering more than 40,000 members among tenant farmers, especially among the sharecroppers, has as its motto: **THE LAND IS THE COMMON HERITAGE OF THE PEOPLE.** A worthy motto indeed. But even this daring Union fails to see the only way by which landlordism can be robbed of its power to exploit. Here is what they suggest:

"For the dispossessed wanderers, the Southern Tenant Farmers' Union proposes federal communities, co-operatively managed, where a new life can begin. It asks that sharecroppers be represented on local committees administering the federal agricultural program. It seeks for agricultural workers the benefits of federal social security laws and the National Labor Relations Act. . . . But the real solution, the Union insists, lies in the establishment of farms of their own, cooperatively run. These farms will produce not only cotton to sell, but vegetables to eat, milk to drink, timber for homes and schools."

Perhaps something can be done that way, but not all that is needed. However, the Union's power and its determination to put through some part of its program to rehabilitate the sharecropper—who asks nothing more than his little home, and earnings enough to support his family—seems to have disturbed, rather seriously, the Southern landlords, the "planters" who are resurrecting a sort of Ku Klux Klan in an attempt to kill the Union. One can respect the Union for the enemies it has made as well as for its constant efforts to bring the sharecropper problem before the public without confusing it with farm problems in general.

Now that the sharecroppers have created some public interest, some very amusing efforts have resulted on the part of those seeking public interest—and eventually, public office. Such, for example, is Thomas E. Dewey's vacuous program for achieving agricultural prosperity.

The attempt to put the case of the sharecroppers comprehensively before the general public has seemed, thus far, to have achieved nothing more than a deserved popularity for John Steinbeck's "Grapes of Wrath". But at least the surface has been scratched. It may lead to a clearer understanding of this most pitiful condition in our "land of unlimited opportunity". And when it is more clearly understood, the implications in the motto of the Southern Tenant Farmers' Union will be more fully realized—the declaration that the land is the common heritage of the people.

\* An article on the Sharecroppers by Miss Colbron appeared in the January-February issue of LAND AND FREEDOM.