

The Sharecroppers

By GRACE ISABEL COLBRON

AT long last, Washington is taking the matter up. A conference has been called, this second week of January,* for a meeting of "all interested groups" to consider the matter of the sharecroppers facing eviction from their homes in Missouri, Arkansas and Mississippi.

These "interested groups" include landowners, sharecroppers, Federal and State officials, and it's an easy guess that the landowners will be the first to present their side of the question, and to get the notice of the press.

It's a full year now, since the sharecroppers sprang into public attention by a revolt of the dispossessed who, nearly one thousand strong, camped beside a public highway in Missouri. That made the front page, that became news. For the moment only, until other front page news supplanted it. But for a few weeks this mass migration of whites and negroes driven from their poor unstable homes by . . . well, the landlords blamed it on "mechanization of farming," and that is the way most of the newspapers presented it to the general public. Said general public, hardened by now to apparently unavoidable conditions of poverty and unemployment, filed this case with the others and forgot about it.

But not everybody forgot. A series of excellent articles in one evening paper, a couple of good novels (particularly "The Sharecropper," by Charlie May Simon) painted the picture in colors of such strength that some of the public at least must have realized this worst of all examples of the evils of landlordism our country has to show. The situation *has* been realized sufficiently to call forth this conference in Washington, which may either bring it all up to the light of public knowledge—or else smother it completely under pages, and hours of official discussion. It is to be expected that the landowners will give the keynote of the discussion, and that the press notices will follow suit. It will be interesting to watch. There may be something more to say about this in subsequent numbers of *LAND AND FREEDOM*.

Meanwhile, let us take up the matter as it now stands. Who are the sharecroppers? They are—officially—merely tenant farmers in the South Atlantic States, the East South Central States and the West South Central States. The evils of tenant farming in Europe and in other parts of our country are well known by now. It was these evils in Europe that brought thousands of good farm workers into our country as immigrants, hoping to get a little farm of their own. And most of us know how many of these immigrants found themselves again tenants of new landlords in America—and in enough cases, of the same

landlords they had left at home! Small choice of results anyway.

But this sort of tenant farming, bad as it is, is mild, compared to that known as sharecropping, in the cotton lands of the Southern states of East and West. Here the arrangement known as "sharecropping" means that the tenant receives a small share of the cotton he has picked for his landlord, is therefore subject to uncertainty as to cotton prices, and extra deductions from the landlord. Also he has to buy at the "commissary store", which takes what little he has earned, said store being usually run by the landlord. At the very most, the average cash income of sharecropper families in a number of states has, for a long time, been less than \$200 a year. At the end of the year, the cropper generally finds himself in debt to the store-keeper and the landlord.

This was certainly bad enough, but at least the sharecropper had his little home, such as it was, and a feeling of stability with it. Then came the AAA and other well-meant government schemes to help the farm tenant by raising the price of cotton. They helped—in a very few cases. But in by far the greater number of cases, the increased return from cotton prices was absorbed by the landlords, and the sharecropper was worse off than before. Much worse, because the majority of landlords, desirous of capturing the entire benefit of the Federal program, began to change from a sharecropping system to a day-labor system. In other words, the sharecroppers, who had lived up till then on the big plantations in homes that were quite rickety, but still their own, now became mere day laborers with no right to anything but the low wage of a Southern farm day worker, for a few weeks, or at most a few months of work in the year.

This, finally, brought about the mass revolt that won newspaper notices (for a week or so at least) for the hundreds of former sharecroppers camped beside the Missouri highways. Work was found for some of them, charity helped a few others, about five hundred were placed in a better organized camp, largely by the efforts of a negro preacher who undertook to arouse public sympathy.

But sympathy is not the final remedy for a situation growing worse each day. And blaming the plight of dispossessed, wandering, homeless farm workers on "mechanization of farm work" is not an explanation, nor is it a solution of the problem.

It will be interesting to see how the Congressional Conference in Washington works out this problem. What solution will that Conference find for the ever-growing troubles resulting from the fact that a few may possess the earth needed by all?

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*This article was submitted early in January of this year.—Ed.