Sharecropper

By Dorothy Day

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Summary: Describes her travels with the sharecroppers and the situation with which they are faced. Unions try to organize but planters violently break up meetings and evict those who participate. Depicts the conditions of tent colonies and sickness that exists among those who live there. Advocates distribution of land and farm cooperatives. (DDLW #60).

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It was seventeen above zero when we started out this morning with a carload of flour, meal, lard, sugar, I coffee and soap. The car was so full in the back that Marie Pierce, the colored girl who is on the executive committee of the Southern Tenant Farmers' Union and I were crammed together warmly on the back seat. But our feet were icy (it was not a heated car) and when we stopped at a gas station where there was also a dry goods store, we went in to buy an extra pair of socks. They had only cotton ones, but they helped. I bought some candy, and Marie wanted to know whether I had an extra nickel for some snuff.

She and her husband were sharecroppers and they had been evicted on account of their work for the union, and now she was on her way home to her husband's people where there were three other evicted families living in the two room cabin. But they were comfortably off people–there was timber on the little piece of land they rented from the Government and they could keep warm.

We had set out from the headquarters of the Union which was just across the river in Memphis where it was safer. H. L. Mitchel, executive secretary of the Union, who with J. R. Butler had started the work of organizing two years before, had lived in Tyronza, Arkansas, but his life wasn't safe there. What with meetings being raided, union members shot in the back and then arrested for disturbing the peace, it wasn't healthy to keep the union headquarters in Arkansas. Especially when the union membership grew from seventeen to 25,000. So they had moved to Memphis.

The offices of the Union, on the outskirts of town where the rent is cheap, comprise two rooms. In the room where I am writing there is a table and two chairs and shelves piled with literature and papers, for they are publishing a monthly called the *Sharecroppers' Voice.*Around the wall there are crudely painted signs:

"Woe unto them that join house to house, that lay****field to field till there be no room, and ye be made to dwell alone in the midst of the land."

“What mean ye that ye crush my people and grind the faces of the poor?”

" Land for the landless."

And landless indeed these people are, for although most folk now realize that there are eleven million unemployed in the cities, they do not know that there are eight million dispossessed through the South, according to figures published by the University of North Carolina Press.

Marie had come into town for some meetings, and on the way out to bring relief to dispossessed families, we were going to drop her off at her home.

The road was frightful and it was only because we were wedged in that we were saved from being bruised by the jolting we received. We skidded through and over the frozen ruts for miles, and after a while we cut across fields where not a track of a road was visible.

We passed some Negroes with a sack of chickens over their shoulder on their way to sell them.

“They get ten cents a pound,” Marie explained. " Good frying chickens, too. They’re all selling whatever they got. Can’t afford to eat them themselves. Lots of folks haven’t even chickens to sell."

Marie’s house was right on the edge of the woods and we stopped to let her out and we, too, went in to warm ourselves by the stove. The room was lined with newspapers, there was one high bed made up neatly, and a few chairs around the stove. It was no better than a shack through which the wind tore and nagged at the loose-hung doors. Everyone came in to say hello and one of the evicted men told of trying to get relief.

“They told us to go out and kill rabbits.” he said. “Until March, and then the planters’d take care of us. So they said. Hoover hogs we used to call them rabbits. They ain’t any now showing themselves.”

“When Roosevelt come in they said it was against the law to kill rabbits. Just ketch ’em, milk ’em and leave ’em for the next fellow,” and the farmer who propounded this one laughed uproariously.

That laughter sounded strange to me, conditions being**as they were. But I had seen nothing yet. I was to see more laughing as we went through the day – a hard desperate laughter, but it was laughter.

One of the Negro boys stayed on the running board and directed us through fields until we struck another little road as rutted and dangerous as the last. The fields had been better. It was some eight miles along this road until we reached Earle where most trouble was lately.

We passed the Holiness Church on the outskirts where the meeting of five hundred sharecroppers and tenants had been broken up some weeks before. The planters had come, broken in all the windows, beaten up the men, women and children.

On the way from one of those meetings two of the men had been shot in the back, then carted off to jail.

The whole town had been aroused and had wanted to hold another meeting immediately, an armed meeting, that would be prepared for an attack. But the Union is opposed to violence. That's why there are no meetings being held right now, except back in the woods, in cabins and barns, behind locked doors with guards stationed out along the roads to warn them of the coming of the planters.

Strangely enough, the American Legion in that town is all with the Union. The small towns want the Union, want justice for the croppers, want some small measure of freedom for the farmers. As it is now, the plantation owners have company stores and "furnish" the tenants during the season, so that no business ever comes the way of the towns.

Six miles out of Earle we visited another little church which was not much more than a shed. You could not even dignify it by the name *barn.* In this church, five families were living with all their belongings. They too had been evicted, put out on the road the month before. The men were out when we came, foraging for wood. But the church was packed nevertheless with humans.

By the door, one young woman was washing clothes. It was one of the saddest sight – to see this attempt at cleanliness in this hovel unfit even for animals. Furniture was stacked everywhere, and beds took up every available inch of space, except around the fire.

J.R. Butler, an Arkansan all his life, president of the Union, was the one who was driving around distributing the relief. There was also Blaine Treadway, a printer on the Scripps Howard paper at Memphis.

"Some time back, an automobile killed a hog," Butler said, " and of course the driver didn't stop. The State ranger took it off into the woods and it was rotting there. Of course he could have given it to the poor families in the first place but he didn't. This crowd found it when it was all bloated and swollen and stiff, and they ate it. Hunger's gripping them everywhere."

It wasn't until late in the afternoon that we reached the worst place of all, just outside Parkin, Arkansas. There drawn up along the road was a tent colony, which housed 108 people, four infants among them, and God knows how many children.

Three little girls giggled and laughed with their arms around each other while we talked to this evicted crowd of sharecroppers. Only one of them had on a sweater and the heels and toes of all of them were coming out of their shoes. And it was seventeen above. Their giggling started them coughing and woke one of the babies who cried fretfully, weakly.

"We ain't got much to complain of about health," one man said. "All the childern's got colds and two of the young ones got burned against the stove. Pretty bad, too. Mine was one. He's four year old. One man died last night. He

was taken desolate sick out here. He died last night between three and four. He shore suffered afore he died."

The little tent where we stood on the frozen earth was filled with fourteen children and there were thirteen more in the camp. Here too there were four infants, in scanty cotton blankets.

"The trouble with Arkansas," Mr. Butler said, "is that it is planter-owned. Most of them are absentee landlords at that. They put in a boss-driver and they go off and live in the towns. The Dewey-Chapman plantation has about 20,000 acres. Wilson's is the largest with 30,000. The boss driver allows about fifteen acres to the family so you see how many families are affected. They always end up the year owing the boss. There is no money for shoes, for clothes. They grow cotton but they dress in flour sacks. It's the richest land in the country, but they aren't allowed to put in a garden or keep a pig. They can't go to school, every child that can works in the fields. The Government has started rehabilitation farms but all that happens is that the owner rents his land to the Government, the boss-driver is left on to direct the job and the work runs along same as usual."

What the sharecroppers want is small farms of their own and some help from the government the first year to buy equipment and food until they get going. What the Union wants to do is to start cooperative farms of 2,400 acres compared to the planters' 60,000.

But nothing can be done. Eighty per cent of the people are disfranchised on account of the poll tax and legislature, relief, and the press are run by the planters.

This is the situation in one State but all the other Southern States are affected in the same way. There are 125,000,000 acres devoted to a single crop, nearly as much land as is given to all other crops in the whole region. Negroes no longer make up the bulk of cotton tenants. White workers outnumber the blacks five to three. A seventy-page study of the collapse of cotton tenancy is published by the University of North Carolina Press. The preface of this is signed by Rt. Rev. Msgr. John A. Ryan and Rev. Edgar Schmiedeler, with fifteen other leaders.

While surveys are being made and written, the Southern Tenant Farmers' Union carries on. They are organizing the sharecroppers into a union, they are holding meetings on cooperation, they are bringing relief. They have had a hard struggle in the past and the future looks dark. But combined with faith and charity, they have hope, and the terror that walks by day and by night in Arkansas does not daunt them.