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Farming in the Southern United States

Freedom Press (London)

June, 1888

[An American correspondent sends us the following interesting picture of life in the agricultural districts of Alabama]:

DURING the fifteen years of my residence here settlers have multiplied twenty to one, chiefly from the adjacent State of Georgia, and of late Northern companies have bought up on speculation all land that was for sale. The process is to offer the farmer a few dollars for the option of buying his place within a specified time. When a large enough tract has been thus hypothecated, the agent advertises it for sale in the North. The booming is done with, by, and for Northern capitalists. The fertility of the soil and advantages of climate are praised to the skies, whereas time truth is that except in the valleys, which are agreeable, it is only by annual manuring that crops worth their culture can be raised, and the spring frosts cut off fruit about three years out of four. Thus, although my farm is favorably situated, I have peach, plum, and pear trees that have borne but once in eight or ten years. The merchants persuade the ignorant farmers that their imported manures are *the thing*, so the

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barnyard is neglected and the fertilizers hauled, losing a day for every load, and mortgaging the crop to pay for it. This, and supplies of corn and bacon in the summer (for hardly any one raises enough to eat until next crop), at an advance of from 50 to 100 percent for credit, keeps the farmers in the relation of permanent debtors, and I have not seen or known of more than a dollar or two at a time in any farmer's hands since I have been in the country. Nearly every acre of rich river bottom land is owned by some merchant, who does not live there, and who cultivates by either tenant or hiring labor. The wages are about 10 dols, per month all found, or 50 cents. per diem; but government works on the river, canalizing, and railroad construction pay 1 dol. to 1 dol. 50 cents.

All children now go to school. The amount of what they learn after several years' teaching is to stammer over a newspaper, or a hymn book, without knowing the meaning of any but the commonest words, to scrawl half legibly, and do the simplest sums in arithmetic. Only the *elite* of scholars reach this acme. Such is our boasted public I school system, in so far as the masses of the South are concerned, in the rural districts. Something more is taught in the cities. There is an ornamental extra branch of culture, viz., the old-fashioned system of musical notation, whereby ambitious youths and maidens charm their evenings once a week with psalmody, the arch type of which is "the tune the old cow died of."

Local manufactures are confined to the blacksmith's shop and handloom; yet until lately the smithy was competent to supply the demand for farming tools, and the hand-loom the clothing of working folk. Effective plows imply deep culture, and this, either alluvious or copious manuring. On mountain land, with but an inch or two of organic matter at the surface, shallow culture is the rule, and as it is also the rule to cultivate 25 acres to the hand, this land can never get more than a sprinkling of manure. Most farmers clear new ground every winter, so the forest is being rapidly destroyed, cyclones aiding. Farmers are generally aware that they can never get ahead by cotton culture, all the profits of which are for the mer-

chant and the factory agent--- a margin of 7 cents. per lb., while 5 cents. paid or allowed barely covers costs. As our farmers live in log cabins without windows, and on very scarce food, and are temperate, tobacco, homegrown, their only luxury, and as their taxes do not average 5 dols., it might seem feasible to better their condition by a change of cultures; but the merchants exact cotton in payment of dues, and the farmers are all in debt.

If there were steady employment outside one's farm, a man might save enough from his wages in a year or two to enter land and buy a farm and stock it, but there are only occasional jobs to be found. A stout young negro neighbor last spring took such a job in street paving from the hands of his friend, the colored preacher. When it was done this divine contractor whittled him out of the payment! Then, to get means of cultivating his own ground, he hired himself on a malarial river bottom, with the result that in a few weeks he came home dropsical and died.

No one can borrow on the best security at less than 20 percent, unless he is a merchant, and credit goods range over that up to 200 percent and more. Corn always doubles and trebles in cost during the year; so do potatoes and bacon. (I have to pay 1 dol. 75 cents. per bushel for seed potatoes.)

To break this vicious circle it would be necessary to give up electing sheriffs---the agents for collecting debts---i.e., usury and profits. But this people is saturated with governmentalism. Their automatic legal habits are as ingrained as their Methodism, or their Baptism, or their Presbyterianism. They can no more quit electing sheriffs than worshipping God and his Son, Jesus, which occupies all their spare time both on Sundays and after the crop is laid by. To show you how destitute they are of the consciousness of personal rights, irrespective of government, our local railroad will suffice.

EDGORTH.

(To be concluded).