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EDITORIAL

MODERN REPRESENTATIVES OF THE DARK AGES.

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AT the public debate that took place in this city during the Mayoralty campaign of 1886, between Henry George as the representative of the Single Tax and Sergius Shevitch, as the representative of the Socialist theory, the latter brought home to his adversary that the gist of the Single Tax theory was the notion that the Labor Question begins and ends with a question of taxation, whereas the Labor Question was nothing short of a Social Question, implying and portending a Social Revolution. From the official report of the address delivered in this city on the 7th of this month by Mr. Arthur W. Towne, at the State Conference of Charities and Corrections, the inference to be drawn is that the reform successors of Henry George are to-day occupying a ground that simplifies the issue still more. The Tax Question surely is not a very broad one: the ground occupied by Mr. Towne is still narrower. The only conclusion that the gentleman's address justifies on that head is that the Labor Question begins and ends with the question of truancy. To quote the report of Mr. Towne's address literally, it runs this way: "Mr. Towne especially pointed out that the most helpful way of combating the tramp nuisance is to lessen the habit [!] of stealing rides upon freight cars. From a mass of statistical material never before collected Mr. Towne showed conclusively that a large number of boys, especially those living not far away from the railroad tracks, become addicted [!] to stealing rides. For instance, in one truant school, 19 out of 21 inmates had stolen rides before reaching the age of 15 years, and 14 of the boys had done so when only 6 to 10 years old." In other words, the "tramp" is the product of a bad "habit"; the bad "habit" consists in becoming "addicted" to stealing rides; and the "addictedness" springs from "truancy." This beats the Single Tax; it matches the theological astronomy of the Dark Ages which imputed pestilence to

sun and moon eclipses.

In these days of ours it is no longer necessary to bestow years of study in order to acquire at least a general knowledge of social phenomena. Close study is useful for full information; the current literature of master-minds brings general information within the reach of all. To us in America the Genius of the land has been so kind as to bestow general information on the genesis of the Tramp in the most readable of fascinating style. No less a genius than Mark Twain undertook the task, and he performed it well in his historic story “The Prince and the Beggar.” Mark Twain’s work condenses in one little volume the thick volumes of history from which the genesis of the Tramp may be gathered, and which prove the Tramp to be nothing less than the manifestation of a social phenomenon.

The original Tramp was not bred of any bad “habits,” acquired by that social waif. The Tramp is the result of the confiscation of Labor’s product, through the confiscation of Labor’s natural and social necessities of production. The first crop of Tramps came from the confiscation of the land on which the peasant worked; the subsequent and present crops of Tramps come from the continued confiscation of the product of Labor by the capitalist class, whereby, even if the land were now free, it remains inaccessible to all except those who command that hew, that social power—Capital—whereby to utilize Nature. The Tramp is a victim of the social system of private ownership in the necessities of production. The Tramp, twin of the Prostitute, is a social manifestation of a social ill, which to trace to the “acquirement of bad habits by truants” is as idiotically irresponsible as the old time tracing of pestilence to sun and moon eclipses.

The capitalist wiseacres on social ills occupy in this generation a position even lower than that which the theological wiseacres on terrestrial affairs occupied during the Dark Ages.

Transcribed and edited by Robert Bills for the official Web site of the Socialist Labor Party of America.

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