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EDITORIAL

NEARER, MY GOD, TO THEE!

By DANIEL DE LEON

THE ranting professional atheist, with his customary superficiality, will derive much sneering glee from the Lacer, Ky., dispatch to the effect that “kneeling on the ground in the moonlight with their heads bowed, while their leader offered prayer, a band of ‘night riders’ destroyed on the night of May 18 the big tobacco barn of H.G. Maddox”; that “the spectacle was witnessed by Flint Randall and Miss Maggie Tate, two young people who were returning from a party, and who were captured by the raiders and forced to accompany them to the prayer meeting and barn burning”; that “after a torch had been applied and the flames were under good headway the young people were led some distance away with instructions to go home”; and, finally, that “as they left they heard the strains of ‘Nearer, My God, to Thee’ floating through the air.”

This is no occurrence for glee, or sneers; it is an occurrence to cause the thinking to pause and ponder.

These incendiaries were no hypocrites. They were devout and sincere in their prisons; the hymn to their God rose from their hearts—criminal tho’ the act was on which they were bent, and which they executed. Is this a contradiction—Devotion and Crime? To those who think it is, the lamentable spectacle of the hymn-singing barn-burners is a wasted experience.

Profound and pregnant is the Marxian generalization, which, grasping all the facts of history and the philosophy of the human mind, teaches: “Religion is the reflex of the material conditions that need such reflexes.”

A live dog is better than a dead lion, says the Proverb. Without life, no opportunity for aught, however lofty. The essential for human sentiment and action is life—it is more than an essential, it is the foundation. The foundation is purely material. He is not a groveller, he is wise who seeks to preserve that foundation.

The seeking after the foundation is an act responsive to the panting after higher things. The material foundation is the gate through which to reach the higher aspirations. Thus the material acts upon the spiritual, the spiritual upon the material—each affecting the other. The Kentucky hymn-singing barn-burners were in search of life. To them, in their benighted capitalist ignorance, the tobacco of the planter who refused to join their organization stood in the way of their life. Their material condition reflected a Deity that those conditions needed—a Deity that would hearken to their property-destroying prayer, and nearer to whom their souls fervently aspired to draw.

Joshua invading and appropriating another people's territory with chants to Jehovah; Gideon invoking his God in the Valley of Jezreel; Constantine seeing and causing others to see the cross in the sky and the appropriate motto of encouragement, on his march to the Milvian Bridge; the Swedish invader of Germany, Gustavus Adolphus, in sight of the Catholic hosts at Breitenfeld, gathering with his soldiers around the regimental chaplains in deep devotion; Cromwell intoning at Dunbar the song of the Psalmist—"Let God arise, let his enemies be shattered!"; Miles Standish bowing to the will of the Lord who had decreed the death of the Indians who happened across Standish's path;—these and hundreds of other leading instances in history shed their merciful light upon the hymn-singing Kentucky barn-burners, and bespeak deep-felt pity for them, while their execrable conduct should spur every enlightened man and woman in the land to hasten with unflagging perseverance the remodelling of the social, or material, conditions that Capitalism surrounds man with, and substitute these heinous material conditions, the heinousness of which may be judged from their reflection of an arson-approving Deity, with the material conditions of the Socialist Republic, whose religious reflex is Peace on Earth.

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