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EDITORIAL

FOOLISH TORTOISES!

By DANIEL DE LEON

THE American Working Class has been likened in its time to many and various sorts of animals—beavers, for instance, when it was wanted to flatter them for their industry, or lions, perhaps, when some one had need of their courage. But it remained for the VICOMTE GEORGES D'AVENEL to liken them to a great herd of tortoises.

“What saves the American proletariat from discontent and bitterness,” says the Vicomte, “is not its material welfare, but its mental state. It is not the five or ten francs more per day which the workman earns, but his dream of fortune, which he always cherishes, though he rarely sees it realized.”

Had he felt in the mood for giving examples, the Vicomte could have spoken of the bonus held out to the steel workers for an extra cast of metal per day; it is well known that only by the rarest chance can the extra cast be turned out; but by keeping the men constantly sweating after the unattainable, the company gets so much extra labor done without extra pay.

Or, the Vicomte might have mentioned the stock-sale plan, by which the workers of the Westinghouse companies are led to act as their own slave drivers all through the year for the sake of a penny or two “dividends” at the year’s end.

Or still better, the Vicomte might have told the story of the tortoises of the Royal Botanical Gardens of London. Here a score or more of the giant turtles are kept—for children and grown folks to ride on. Provided with a head of lettuce tied to a stick, the rider bestrides his tortoise, and holds the tempting morsel out in front of



VICOMTE GEORGES D'AVENEL

the beast's nose. In his eagerness to grasp the succulent leaves, the tortoise labors over the ground with his burden; but the faster he ambles, the faster the juicy greens fly before him. He is made to go fast or slow, steered to the right or left, speeded up or stopped short at will, by the skilful manipulation of the lettuce head dangling within apparent reach. But hardly ever does he succeed in grasping the elusive prize, and then only by an oversight on the part of the rider.

Sometimes human thought outstrips the clumsy vehicle of words, and speeds unexpressed to its goal. The Vicomte d'Avenel, newspaper man of renown as he is, must know of these London tortoises. His thoughts must have flown to them when he wrote the above words of the American proletariat.

Foolish tortoises! one is tempted to say. But are they any more foolish than the workingmen who allow themselves to be humbugged the same way?

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