

What Shall We Think of Ourselves? (January 7, 1914)

Some time ago on a train rolling into the Union Station at Peoria a lady in the seat ahead of me turned about and said: "This is the wickedest city in the country but one — Terre Haute is worse."

About the time of that disgraceful public celebration here when graft and corruption won the day in our courts — which was in fact a celebration of the rottenness of our courts — a paper in a neighboring town had an editorial paragraph about as follows: "Terre Haute is not the only rotten city, but it is the only city that rejoices in, and whose leading citizens participate in the public celebration of its rottenness."

Here is another bit of comment: "It appears to be essential to a successful candidate for mayor in Terre Haute that he be charged with having stolen a carload of something."

Down in New Orleans the other day I heard a man say: "If Terre Haute is as bad as its reputation, it ought to be blown up with dynamite."

We have here what others think and say of us and this may be of little consequence. But the question that *is* of consequence in the light of the nationwide notoriety of Terre Haute at this hour is, What shall we say and think of ourselves?

A little over a year ago nearly everybody, especially our "leading" citizens, wanted Donn Roberts elected mayor; now nearly everybody wants him sent to the penitentiary. I did not want him elected mayor then, nor do I want him sent to the penitentiary now. The worst human being is still too good to be locked up in the best penitentiary as now conducted. But a social system that breeds criminals as carrion does maggots cannot be expected to have any great mercy on its victims.

It's the Same Roberts

Why were the people of Terre Haute so hot for Roberts for mayor a trifle over a year ago and why are they now rejoicing in the prospect of seeing him in a felon's cell?

There has been no change in Roberts; not the least. He is now exactly as he was then. When the people of Terre Haute, a great majority of them, led by rich tax dodgers and influential "first citizens," voted to make Donn Roberts mayor, they knew him just as well as they know him

today. They knew that his own father had charged him over his own name in a public newspaper with having robbed his own family; they knew exactly what he was and what he would do; and in full possession of this knowledge they made him mayor, and if he ought now to go to the penitentiary every solitary man who boomed him and voted for him ought to go there and keep lock-step with him.

I recall the incident of a wealthy tax dodger (who has been seized with cod feet and writer's cramp since the federal court has entered upon the scene and Roberts' power is broken and he has no more goods to deliver) boasting at the time of Roberts' "vindication" and Weeping Eph's "glorious triumph" that if the elections were to take place then Roberts would be elected mayor by 10,000 majority. This particular tax dodger, who was one of Roberts' chief backers as long as he could profit by his corrupt misrule, is not slated for the pen, but has since been proclaimed a great public benefactor.

I hope to see Roberts and all his pals acquitted unless those who put them in power and are absolutely responsible for their corrupt regime are sent to the penitentiary to keep them company.

I am opposed to punishing the poor victims of a crime and allowing its rich beneficiaries to go scot free.

Scores Fortune

Now if there is a man in Terre Haute who ought to go to the penitentiary for what has happened in Terre Haute during the last few months, that man is Judge Charles M. Fortune. It is he who turned the bench into a filthy auction block and the courthouse into a den of prostitution. There is not a convict among all the number this judge has sent to the penitentiary who was guilty of as mean a theft and as low a crime as this same judge has committed against the community. These are plain words and I mean them to be. A community of cowards is worse than a community of criminals.

The very hour Judge Fortune betrayed the people of Vigo County by throttling the grand jury of his own appointing he should have been driven from the bench in disgrace. The office he now holds, to which he has appointed himself, after raising the salary to suit himself, is deliberately stolen from the people, even though the theft, like our crooked city boundary lines, may run the gauntlet of legal technicalities so cunningly devised to cover the crime.

There is another matter not to be overlooked while we are cleaning up. The traction company has no franchise and never has had the right to haul freight trains over our streets. That franchise is worth hundreds of thousands of dollars and the city has been robbed of that amount. Five years ago the suit of the city against the company on account of this franchise was hung up by a special judge appointed for exactly that purpose. It is about time to call this case and have it settled, even if we have to do so by appealing to the mob.

Proud of One Mob

Mob Rule, as an eastern professor said not long ago, is better than thief rule.

The mob is what the common people have always been called by the rich and respectable robbers. We are pretty proud today of the mob, led by that notorious outlaw, George Washington, as the Tory press then called him, that rose up and smashed the government of their time for a good deal less cause than the people of Terre Haute have to rise up in indignation and put an end to the outrages that are now being perpetrated upon them.

If the people of Terre Haute will stand for what Judge Fortune has put over on them, they will stand for anything. And in the meantime the rich gangsters who thrive in municipal misadministration are already beginning to spring the names of a fresh set of "good men" to put into office to do us good — and plenty. It is high time this "good men" gag, which is always sprung in such a crisis, were understood by the people for the political decoy it is. As long as we wait for a "good man" to do for us what we ought to do for ourselves we will get just what we are getting today, and more of it.

It is a good system we want instead of a rotten one, and if the present upheaval helps to open the eyes of the masses to this fact it will be worth its entire cost to the people of Terre Haute.