

By  
A SMITH

## SIXTEEN TO ONE

(By T-BONE SLIM.)

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Years ago, down on the peculiar Ohio river, riverboatmen had peculiar ways in which to "encourage" the Negro roustabouts to work hard.

As a rule "the mate" was the autocrat of the "packet"—with divine and other rights to hire and fire at will, for any reason, any man, at any time, anywhere.

Sixteen men constituted an orthodox crew in them days, but in this particular case the mate hired sixteen, and one (this is where the famous sixteen to one originated). The wherefore of the extra man may develop in this story.

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We are going upstream on this packet to take on a load of barrel salt at the mines which are to this day located at Pomeroy, Ohio—also we are to "pick up" and deliver freight at "all points up," as the company would say.

Every fifteen minutes the boat will jam its nose into the bank at different "points," to give the crew a chance to rush ashore carrying boxes, pianos, corn and stills, etc.—and to return aboard, carrying cases (whisky), hen crates, hogs (squealing), and other live stock, protesting more or less.

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This will continue 24 hours each day until the boat "turns about" at Pomeroy and heads down stream, after which, going with the current, it takes less time to drift from point to point, stopping on either side of the river—the crew is expected to sleep between points!

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Naturally, when the boat reaches the salt mine the men are "all in." The mate will stand "forward" with a handkerchief wrapped around his hand to hide the brass knuckles he is wearing. As soon as the boat touches the dock the mate will "haul off" and hit the *extra* Negro a punch in the mouth and send him spinning ashore. The Negro will pick himself up, look sorrowfully at the mate and murmur through his bruised lips, "Lord o' mercy! Dat Cap'n Alonzo kin hit an awful powahful blow wit' dat sore hand ob his'n."

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Thus, you see, by attacking one, the mate encourages sixteen to almost super-human efforts. (Sixteen to one!) Sixteen pairs of anxious hands reach out for the salt barrels—feverishly they roll the salt-coated, contrary barrels—*running with them*. Sixteen pairs of hands fondle the rough barrels until sixteen pairs of hands are bleeding at finger tips—and when one lags?—brass knuckles!

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Each and every one of these sixteen workingmen will think the *extra* man was hired especially for this hard trip; that it was the natural kindness of the mate that caused him to give consideration to the welfare of the crew—to pay 50 cents per day (of 24 hours) to an *extra* man. Which said 50 cents never was collected.

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Things are not done "this-a-way" any more. We have Law. We have Jails. It is quite possible under our present and abundant laws to put men in jail for almost any crime. We have records of men who were sent to jails who were strangers to crime.

When a worker shows signs of weakening and slows down on the job, it is possible to convict him of giving aid and comfort to the enemy. If he "lays off" he is subject to conviction on the grounds of conspiring to obstruct the interstate commerce.

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All this is possible—and if the worker doesn't roll the salt fast enough he is guilty in the eyes of our industrial kings. If he is put in the pen it leaves the working class weaker, but at the same time, it causes those who are "free" to knuckle down all the harder.

Penitentiary production of course doesn't pay—and the masters of industry do not want to send men there.

"Frame-ups" have come to light—and I am exceedingly sorry—although I am glad they were uncovered. I marvel that such things should come to light considering the fact that nobody in particular is making it his business to discover them. If a few "frames" bob up unaided, then there must be more where they came from that need assistance to make *their* proper debut.

• • •

Is it possible we have extra men in the can? Is it possible that we have laid anxious hands on work? Is it possible we were so anxious that we created an over-production?

Have we, too, been running salt barrels? Have we been interceding for the fellow worker who kissed the brass knuckles?

We have. And I ask *you*—have we?