

Child Labor

Or birth of a Company
By T-BONE SLIM

New York City stood in open-mouthed wonder at the terrific crowds that assembled to hear Einstein's pet theory of relatives expounded in the light of latter day erudition. But great as the crowds were, they do not hold a candle to the crowds that come with their buckets and bags to hear a coal barge captain lecture on the evils of stolen heat.

Appreciative as the audience is, agreeing in substance, and applauding the righteous captain with respectful murmurs of "yes, captain; you're right, captain," no more than the captain turns his back, the crowd swarms over the "combing" and takes up the usual collection of black diamonds—picking blackberries, so's to say.

(Nice start for an article, fellow workers.)

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The winter was cold—so were the people, and suffered much more than we know—more than we can imagine in our wildest dreams. It consoles them but little to remind them "plenty of heat in the next world"—they appear to be earnest, and eager to warm up this one. Apparently they do not understand the logic of the lord in storing so much heat for future use.

How can they?

A little more than children—some so small they can carry only a cement bag-ful. And this they are able to do only because of much practice—remarkable for their size!

But small as they are, they made Rubel Coal Co. go into the ice cream business (to sort o' fill a long felt want). Rubel figuring that if scales won't do justice in selling by ton he'll just reverse himself and sell by gallon or carboy.

And I won't be a bit surprised to see the great Burns Bros. Coal Co. selling peanuts and pop ere long if the kids' kidneys don't play out.

(All this has been sad, so far—very sad.)

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"But stealing coal is against the law, ain't it?"

So it is, brother—but, tell me, what isn't? Everything we do nowadays is against the law—and, really, it's hard on law-tough.

"But the kids ought to be arrested."—Yur crazy. What good is it gonna do to arrest them kids—didn't I just tell you the

people are cold (the lockup is warm)—in the morning the judge thinks of his misspent boyhood and discharges the kids.

"How about arresting the parents?"—What for? What for do you want to arrest a bunch of innocent parents—they ain't getting the coal—they never see any of it—the boys sell it. Business before affection.

The other evening I saw a little lad come puffing along, a sack on his drooping shoulder, ambition and sweat in his eyes. He trips over a cable for a nasty spill and the deck is strewn with boy, coal and silver money—several dollars in quarters, dimes and nickels. (Short as I was myself, I made no effort to help him pick it up.) Had William Jennings Bryan been there, peace to his ashes, the sight of so much silver would have made his eyes pop—mebbe rip his eyelids.

The fond parents didn't hand that boy all that silver—more than I ever saw at his age (and I lived in an unenlightened age with more opportunities, less law—but then, winters were warmer.)

No.

The boy got that money from a coal peddler—horse and wagon.

"Well, arrest him?"

Now you're talking! Now you're talking good sense! He's the hombre that is making criminals of the young, in the name of business.

What happens?

The young coal thieves save their pennies and go in for firearms and strongarm work—anything but labor!

The peddler saves his dollars and forms a coal company and goes in for robbing the people on a larger "Fairbanks"—most companies are born that way. The most respected of companies do not care to glance into their family tree.

Right?

Of course, I'm right. I wouldn't fool you.

* * *

It's really touching to hear him talk about his small beginning: a rickety old horse and ricketier cart; how he had to work long days and longer nights before he got a start. (Many times I've wept from pure sympathy.) (Most of 'em talk that way, you know, and it's next to impossible to hold back the tears.)—But he failed, he failed to mention that he kept twenty young coal thieves in cigarette money and that he had to work nights because the kids stole the coal nights and

he could not trust the kids to hold the coal till morning, for fear the rascals would peddle it and ruin his trade.

Just a small oversight on his part. Now go on with the story:

A free country, but if you commit a crime, you will pay a penalty—after years of training those kids will break one law after another and finally, in New York State, the Baumes law puts them away as fourth offenders—for life.

In all this time the state has done nothing to prevent the "training in crime" had by the boys.

In the meantime the crooked peddler, receiver of stolen goods, has not reformed nor repented—he's now a COMPANY, highly respected dealer in dust, slate and stone to the tune of short measure.

And how he cusses the coming generation for trying to drive him into the charlotte russe business.

But—

You arrest that peddler and give him 100 years, that does not put an end to the business of stealing coal—the boys themselves will sprout out as peddlers, house to house. A shallow view would dictate that an end might be had by prevention—prevent the boys from having fuel to sell—the only stealing then would be based on stark necessity—a condition of empty stove and low temperature.

But there is a way to end the stealing of coal:

People are inherently honest.

Coal is inherently heavy.

Putting these two together, coupled to the fact that many people have not the wherewithal to purchase coal by the ton and must buy it by the sack, the market of the young coal thieves can be destroyed by doubling the workers' wages. Or is that too much of a sacrifice on the part of the parasites?

Much or little it must be made, to keep the young pure, and out of jail.

The quickest way to bring this very desirable thing to pass is for the workers to organize in a one big union—the I. W. W., to be exact.

—T-b S.