

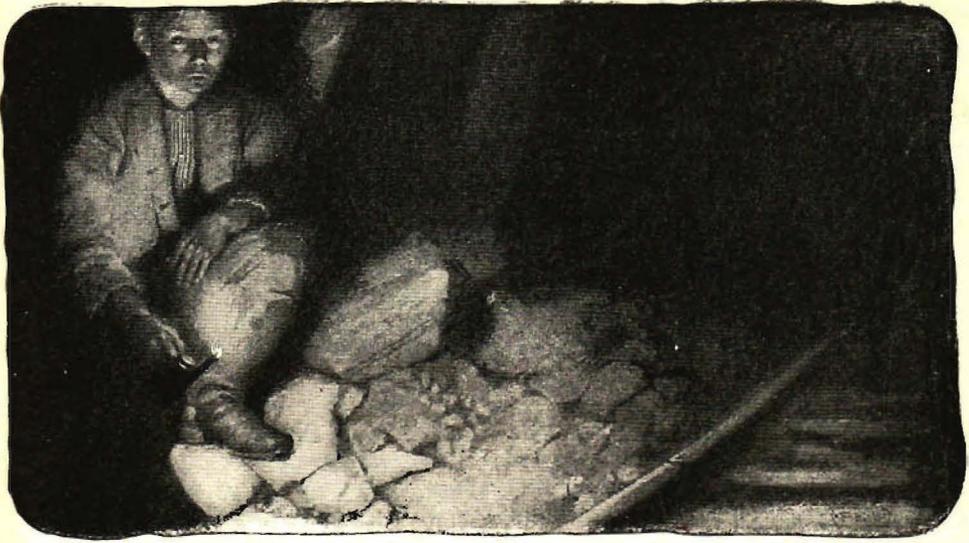
McClure's Magazine

ILLUSTRATED
PUBLISHED MONTHLY

Volume XX
November 1902 to April 1903



The S. S. McClure Co.
New York & London
1903



CHILDREN OF THE COAL SHADOW

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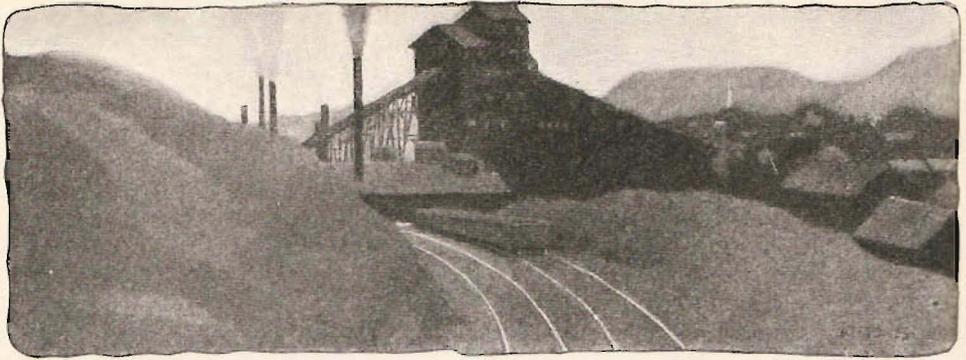
In his article, "The Right to Work," which appeared in the December MCCLURE'S, Mr. Ray Stannard Baker told the story of the non-striking miner. In this article Mr. Nichols tells about child labor in the coal regions. Mr. Baker and Mr. Nichols both went to the coal regions for MCCLURE'S MAGAZINE, each made a thorough investigation of the conditions he was asked to write about, and each has let the facts which he found speak for themselves. The editors of MCCLURE'S know that, in this great controversy, what their readers want first of all is simply the facts.—THE EDITOR.

THE nine "hard coal counties" of Pennsylvania are Susquehanna Lackawanna, Luzerne, Carbon, Schuylkill, Columbia, Sullivan, Northumberland, and Dauphin. A community of interests and the ties of labor unions have so bound the counties together that they constitute a sort of separate and distinct state, called by its inhabitants "Anthracite." Practically the whole population of the nine counties is discontented. Nearly every man has a grievance, and lives in a state of protest, and in this protesting wives and mothers join; with their husbands and sons they share a deep sense of wrong and injustice. It is not my purpose to attempt an explanation of this chronic unhappiness; I only wish to call attention to the atmosphere and life into which a child of the coal shadow is born. Almost the first words which his baby mind can grasp are his mother's complaints of the exorbitant prices charged for the necessities of life at

the "company's store," or his father's curses at the injustice of some "docking boss," or his sister's sobs when a ten-per-cent. wage reduction has been declared at the knitting mill.

What the Children of Miners are Born To

So far as the conditions of his life are concerned, it makes no difference to the child of the Coal Shadow whether his parents are Americans or foreigners. If they are Americans, they were born in Anthracite of Irish or Welsh parentage, and they have known no world but the coal fields all their lives. If foreigners, they were recruited by some agent of the operators twenty years ago from among the poorest peasantry of Continental Europe, and emigrated thence directly to their present homes. In either event the child's parents are uneducated, their mental



AN IMPRESSION OF THE "COAL SHADOW"

horizon is in everything bounded by the coal heaps, and their hope is the union.

Every child of the coal fields who to-day is ten years old has lived through at least two great strikes. During these periods the indefinite and sullen discontent takes a concrete and militant form. There is talk by idle men of "the rights of labor" and the "wickedness of riches." Deputies armed with rifles are guarding the company's property. A de-

tachment of militia is encamped at the end of the street. The child's mother, whose face grows daily paler and more careworn, goes once a week to the District Local to receive a dollar or two of relief funds, with which she buys enough food to keep together the bodies and souls of her family. The child's father at night attends secret meetings of the union, and feels highly honored when the district organizer calls to whisper to him the password. The child learns that the worst crime a man can commit is to be a "scab," and that his noblest privilege is to join the union.

The Prohibition of "Coal Picking"

The effects of the strike are directly felt by the children of the miner almost as much as by the miner himself. A case in point during the strike of 1902 was the prohibition of "coal picking."

While the mines were working, the miner was permitted to buy coal at the colliery at a moderate price. Upon the declaration of the strike, this privilege was denied him. The miner's wife naturally turned for her supply to the mountain of culm beside which she lived. The children of the villages began to fill their coal-scuttles from the heaps, that were the accumulations of years, and which had been always regarded as valueless refuse. But the company put up "No trespass" signs, and stationed deputies to see that not a pound of culm was removed. Impelled by their need for fuel, parties of children were sent out to steal coal on more distant culm heaps.

A Child's Opinion of the Company's Motive

Walking from one mining village to another, I frequently came upon these little ones crouching on their hands and knees, searching the refuse for pieces of coal. At our approach



A MUSICIAN OF THE BREAKER



CULM BANKS

the children fled like startled deer. One day, in a hollow of a culm pile near Audenried, we surprised a mother with her baby and a seven-year-old daughter. The baby was rolling on a shawl, while the others worked. The girl rose quickly as she saw us, and started away, but she was so frightened that she fell back again beside her coal-scuttle. She pointed to it, half-filled, as she said, "That's all we've taken. I'll throw it back if you'll let us go."

"We haven't got no money for to pay fines with. We'll have to go to jail," pleaded the mother. It was some time before we could convince them that it was not our intention to place them under arrest.

"Why does the company guard all this coal so carefully?" I asked of the girl.

"All the people round here is striking," she replied. "So, of course, the company wants them to starve, and if they can't get coal to cook their food with, they will starve faster."

This was a seven-year-old child's idea of justice—and of the company. And the children know the company. The boys are seldom more than eight years old when they enter its employ.

The School of the "Breaker"

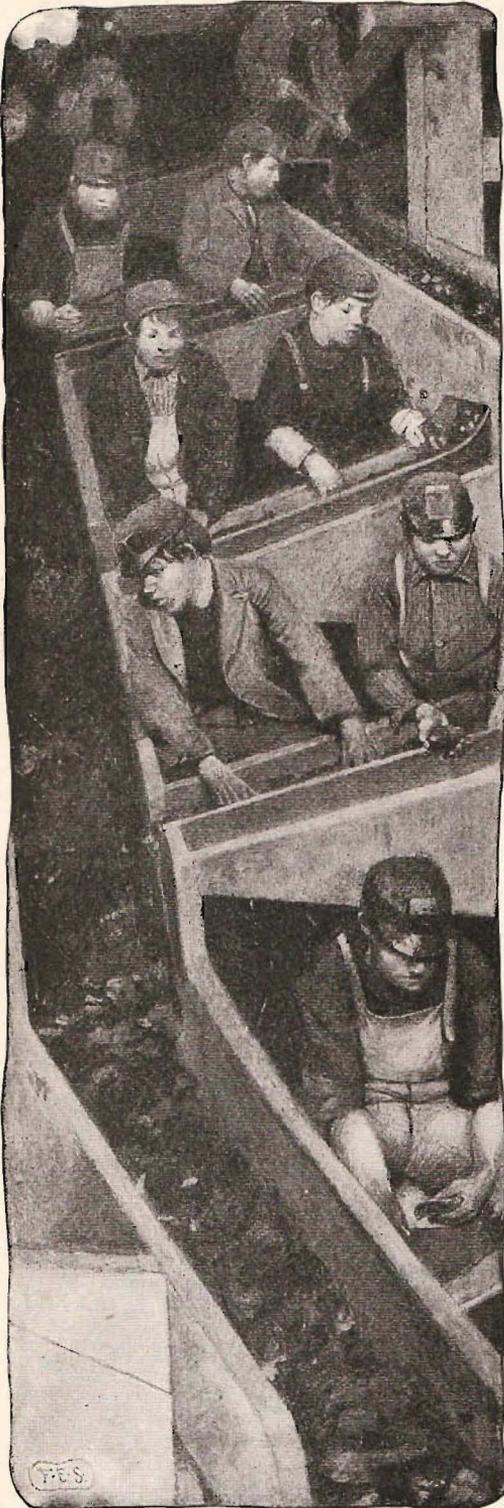
The company's nurseries for boys of the coal shadow are the grim black buildings called breakers, where the lump coal from the blast is crushed into marketable sizes.

In speaking of the events of his childhood, the average man is far more apt to refer to the time "when I was working in the breaker" than to any occurrence of his school-days. After being ground in heavy machinery in the cupola of the breaker, the broken coal flows down a series of chutes to the ground floor, where it is loaded on freight cars waiting to receive it. The chutes zigzag through the building, about three feet apart. Between

them, in tiers, are nailed a series of planks; these serve as seats for the "slate-pickers." Mixed with the coal are pieces of slate rock which it is the duty of the slate-picker to detect as they pass him, and to throw into another chute which passes to the refuse heap below. A few of the slate-pickers are white-haired old men, superannuated or crippled miners who are no longer able to blast coal below ground, and who for the sake of a dollar a day pass their last years in the breaker; but an overwhelming majority in all the breakers



NOTICE PROHIBITING COAL PICKING



IN THE BREAKER

are boys. All day long their little fingers dip into the unending grimy stream that rolls past them.

Dangers and Hardships of the Work

The coal so closely resembles slate that it can be detected only by the closest scrutiny, and the childish faces are compelled to bend so low over the chutes that prematurely round shoulders and narrow chests are the inevitable result. In front of the chutes is an open space reserved for the "breaker boss," who watches the boys as intently as they watch the coal.

The boss is armed with a stick, with which he occasionally raps on the head and shoulders a boy who betrays lack of zeal. The breakers are supposed to be heated in winter, and a steam pipe winds up the wall; but in cold weather every pound of steam is needed in the mines, so that the amount of heat that radiates from the steam pipe is not sufficient to be taken seriously by any of the breakers' toilers. From November until May a breaker boy always wears a cap and tippet, and overcoat if he possesses one, but because he has to rely largely upon the sense of touch, he cannot cover his finger-tips with mittens or gloves; from the chafing of the coal his fingers sometimes bleed, and his nails are worn down to the quick. The hours of toil for slate-pickers are supposed to be from seven in the morning until noon, and from one to six in the afternoon; but when the colliery is running on "full capacity orders," the noon recess is reduced to half an hour, and the good-night whistle does not blow until half-past six. For his eleven hours' work the breaker boy gets no more pay than for ten.

The wages of breaker boys are about the same all over the coal regions. When he begins to work at slate picking a boy receives forty cents a day, and as he becomes more expert the amount is increased until at the end of, say, his fourth year in the breaker, his daily wage may have reached ninety cents. This is the maximum for an especially industrious and skillful boy. The average is about seventy cents a day. From the ranks of the older breaker boys are chosen door-boys and runners, who work in the mines below ground.

The number of boys who work in hard coal mines is imperfectly realized in the rest of the United States. According to the report of the Bureau of Mines of Pennsylvania for 1901, 147,651 persons were employed "inside and outside the mines of the anthracite region." Of these, 19,564 were classified as slate-pickers, 3,148 as door-boys and helpers, and 10,894 as drivers and runners.

The report makes no classification of miners by their ages, but I am convinced that 90 per cent. of the slate-pickers, 30 per cent. of the drivers and runners, and all of the door-boys and helpers are boys. In other words, a total of 24,023, or nearly one-sixth of all the employees of the anthracite coal mines, are children.

Age Certificates and What They Amount To

According to the mining laws of Pennsylvania, "no boy under the age of fourteen shall be employed in a mine, nor shall a boy under the age of twelve be employed in or about the outside structures or workings of a colliery" (i.e., in a breaker). Yet no one who stands by the side of a breaker boss and looks up at the tiers of benches that rise from the floor to the coal-begrimed roof can believe for a minute that the law has been complied with in the case of one in ten of the tiny figures in blue jumpers and overalls bending over the chutes. The mine inspector and the breaker boss will explain that "these boys look younger than their ages is," and that a sworn certificate setting forth the age of every boy is on file in the office.

Children's age certificates are a criminal institution. When a father wishes to place his son in a breaker, he obtains an "age blank" from a mine inspector, and in its spaces he has inserted some age at which it is legal for a boy to work. He carries the certificate to a notary public or justice of the peace, who, in consideration of a fee of twenty-five cents, administers oath to the parent and affixes a notarial seal to the certificate.

Justifiable and Unjustifiable Perjury

According to the ethics of the coal fields, it is not wrong for a miner or his family to lie or to practise any form of deceit in dealing with coal-mine operators or owners. A parent is justified in perjuring himself as to his son's age on a certificate that will be filed with the mine superintendent, but any statement made to a representative of the union must be absolutely truthful. For this reason my inquiries of mine boys as to their work and ages were always conducted under the sacred auspices of the union.

Testimony "On the Level"

The interrogative colloquy was invariably something like this:



THE FORELADY

"Leads an isolated life of conscious rectitude for about \$5.00 a week"

"How old are you?"

Boy: "Thirteen; going on fourteen."

Secretary of the Local: "On the level now, this is union business. You can speak free, understand."

Boy: "Oh, dat's a diffurnt t'ing altogether. I'm nine years old. I've been working since me fadder got hurted in th' explosion in No. 17 a year ago last October."

A system of compulsory registration of births, such as exists in most of the other States of the Union, might settle the question of the ages of children, but, strangely enough, such does not exist in the State of Pennsylvania. Without some such source of evidence, notaries and inspectors, knowing to a moral certainty the perjury, can prove nothing.

Where the Daughters Work

While the miner's son is working in the breaker or mine it is probable that his daughter is employed in a mill or factory. Sometimes in a mining town, sometimes in a remote part of the coal fields, one comes upon a large, substantial building of wood or brick. When the six o'clock whistle blows, its front door is opened, and out streams a procession of girls. Some of them are apparently seventeen or eighteen years old, the majority are from thirteen to sixteen, but quite a number would seem to be considerably less than thirteen. Such a building is one of the knitting mills or silk factories that during the last ten years have come into Anthracite. Underwear and men's socks are now manufactured in large quantities near many of the mining towns. The silk factories are usually offshoots of older establishments in other parts of the country. Anthracite is away from the main lines of railroad; it is at an unnecessarily long distance from the markets where the product of the mill is sold; the raw material used on the spindles and looms must be transported from afar.

Why the Mills Have Come to the Coal Regions

The factory inspector will tell you, "The mills locate in Anthracite because they all employ girls, and girl labor is cheaper here than anywhere else." A glance at a "textile" map of Pennsylvania will show that wherever there are miners, there cluster mills that employ "cheap girl labor." Besides silk and hosiery a local feminine industry is the manufacture of the fuses or "squibs" which are used in coal blasting. The statistics of the nine counties of Anthracite count up

11,216 "females" employed in them, 2,403 between twelve and sixteen years of age.

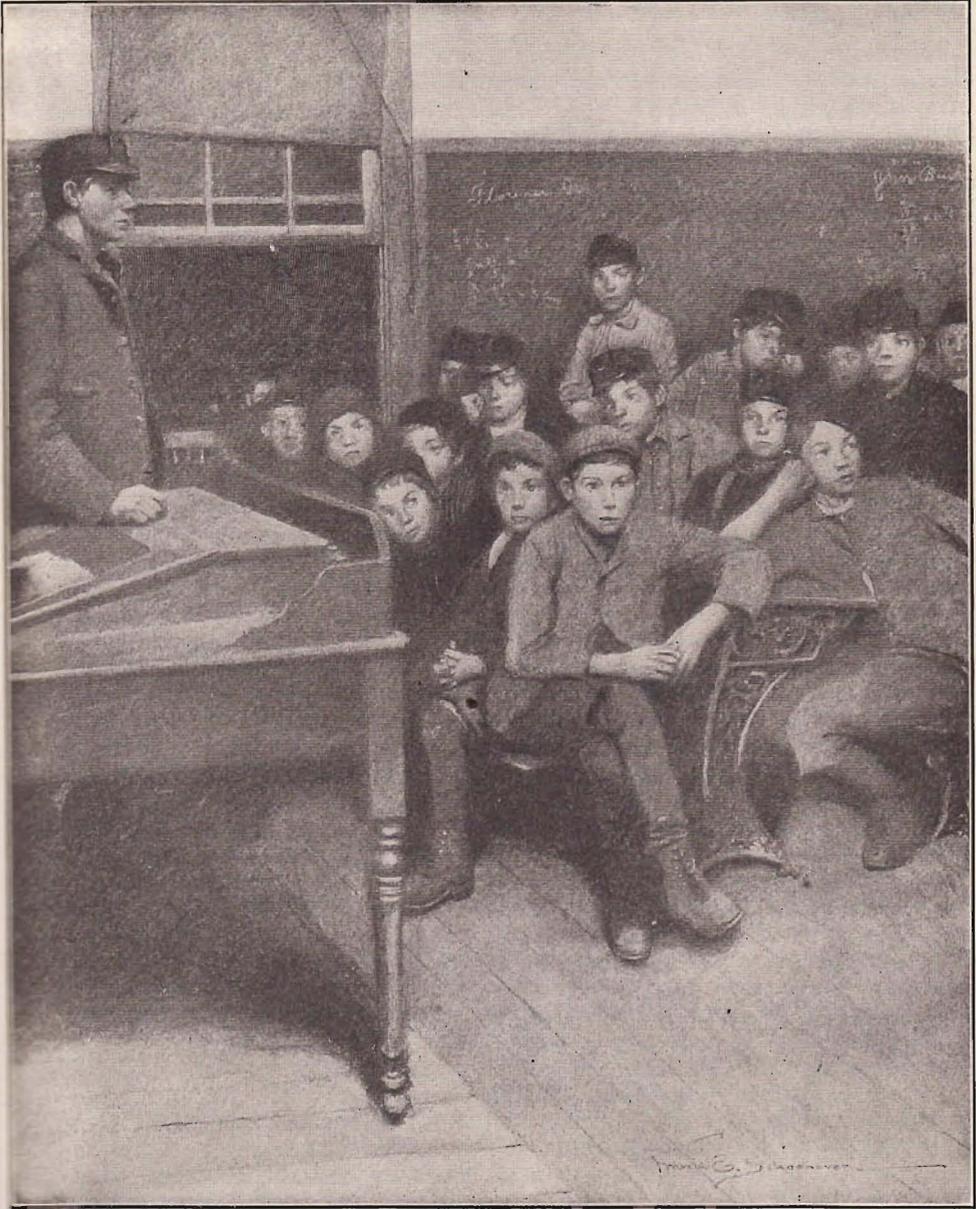
The perjury certificate prevails for the girls, as well as the boys, and I estimate that 90 per cent. of the 11,216 females are girls who have not yet reached womanhood. They work ten hours a day, and the majority stand all of that time, having a chance to sit only in the noon hour. This brings on a characteristic lameness in the girls during their first year at the mill. The report of the Secretary of Internal Affairs of the State places the "average daily wage of children between the ages of thirteen and sixteen" employed in the manufacturing of underwear at forty-seven cents, in hosiery mills at forty-six cents.

More Testimony "on the Level"

Through a district organizer I was enabled to interview under union auspices a number of little girls who were employed in a knitting mill. One girl of fifteen said that she was the oldest of seven children. She had worked in the mill since she was nine years old. Her father was a miner. As pay for "raveling" she received an amount between \$2.50 and \$3 every two weeks. Another thirteen-year-old raveler had worked since the death of her father, two years before, from miner's asthma; her brother had been killed in the mine. The \$3 she received every two weeks in her pay envelope supported her mother and her ten-year-old sister. A girl of fourteen had "looked over" stockings for two years. She was able to make about \$4 every two weeks. A "looper" of fifteen received \$6 every fortnight. She had worked for four years. Her father was a confirmed invalid. Yet all these children seemed to take great pride in assuring me that their "papers was all right and sworn to when we started to work."

The breaker boss finds at the mill or factory a counterpart in the "forelady." This personage holds a prominent place in the civilization of Anthracite. It is taken for granted that the forelady must be habitually hateful, and in all controversies side with the proprietor against the rest of the girls. It is her duty to crush incipient strikes, and to do all in her power to "break" the union. She enjoys being hated by every one, and leads an isolated life of conscious rectitude for about \$5 a week.

"How many pairs of socks can a girl make in a day?" I asked a forelady. "They can easy do forty dozen pair if they is good workers, but none of them is good. They all is kickers. That's what's the matter with them," was her reply.



A BREAKER BOYS' UNION MEETING

Boys' and Girls' Unions

And they do "kick," both boys and girls. They are organized to "kick." The children have their unions as well as the grown folk. Almost as soon as the breaker boy's certificate is accepted and placed on file in the colliery office he makes application to become a member of the "Junior Local," the members of which are all boys under sixteen. Their weekly meetings take place at night, and are conducted with the utmost secrecy, the members

being admitted only by password. The monthly dues range from ten to twenty-five cents, in accordance with the wages received by the members.

Every Junior Local has its full quota of officers, from president to corresponding secretary, elected semi-annually by the boys. To the weekly meetings of the Junior Local the regular Miners' Union of the district sends a representative, but he is not an officer of the Juniors; he acts only as referee and instructor.

A Boys' Union Meeting

At Harwood, a village about four miles from Hazelton, I attended a meeting of a Junior Local. Promptly at eight o'clock the boys, about fifty in number, gathered in the school-house. Their oily caps and grimy overalls gave evidence of their having only recently left their day's toil in the mines and breakers. After the blinds had been drawn, and the door locked, the president mounted the teacher's platform and called the meeting to order by pounding on the desk with his fist. On the front row of benches sat the vice-president, treasurer, and secretary. Comparatively few of the members who filled the benches in the room would have been pronounced by any observer of ordinary perspicacity outside the perjured world of Anthracite as being more than ten years of age.

"How old are you?" I asked the assembled meeting, and the answer came back in a grand chorus, "Thirteen." An accord of ideas, as well as ages, worthy of a union.

Mill and factory girls are as zealous as their brothers in forming and maintaining unions. The employees of knitting mills are members of the Textile Workers' Union of America. Silk workers have a union, and girls who make squibs belong to the United Powder and High Explosive Workers of America. The weekly meeting of the union is the great event in the life of every child in the coal fields. When attending meetings members of girls' unions are required to wear "the same clothes that they would in church." The debates relate to grievances, and they are always of a serious and sometimes of a strenuous character.

First Lessons in Striking

Before a local can be taken seriously it must have wrung some concession from the boss. Its members must have gone through at least one strike before the district organizer will point to them with pride and will say, "They are all right. They know how to assert their manhood." This is one of the technical phrases of labor leaders, and is always used in the generic sense. Pale-faced little girls "assert their manhood" quite as often and as vigorously as do stalwart coal-begrimed miners.

"When we had a strike at the mill two years

ago," the former president of a knitting girls' union said to me, "the vice-president and myself walked all the way from Pittston to Nanticoke, making appeals to the locals in every town we passed. The \$150 we raised kept us going for the two months that we were out, and we won that strike."

After the members of a union have determined upon a strike, the first step is to send for the district organizer and to tell him their grievances. In a town of the Coal Shadow I witnessed the formal narration of the sorrows of unionized children to their district organizer. The operatives of a silk mill were contemplating a strike. During the noon hour about twenty little girls, who constituted the grievance committee, crowded around the district organizer in an alley. The girls were led by their president, one of the few boys employed in the mill. He



A BREAKER BOSS

was tall, round-shouldered, and had red hair. He explained that "We are getting ready to fight the oppressions."

The oppressions were the firm that owned the mill, and they afterwards told me at length of the base ingratitude of their employees. "The more you do for them the more they want. They don't appreciate the chance we give them to work and to earn money. They're ignorant, and led by labor agitators."

What These Child Unions Have Done

Puerile, and almost amusing, as are children's unions, they have in some instances met with success in advancing wages and in shortening hours of labor. The secretary of a knitting union told me that during the three years of its existence the organization had by a series of demands and strikes obtained an advance of fifteen per cent. for every one of the 300 employees. The girls who work in a squib factory were receiving seventy cents per day. They asked their employer for an increase of five cents in their daily wage. His refusal was prompt and indignant.

"Then," said the president of the union, a girl aged sixteen, "we served notice upon him that unless he gave us the raise within twenty-four hours we would strike. We knew that he had lots of orders to fill, and he couldn't afford to shut down. The next day he posted up a notice that hereafter we would be paid seventy-five cents a day, and

we're getting it yet. That's what the union done."

It is, however, a peculiarity of children's unions that they not infrequently declare a strike because of a grievance that has nothing directly to do with hours or wages. The child of the Coal Shadow submits uncomplainingly to a habitual treatment which in a country like China would be considered cruel and intolerable. But when extra pressure is so brought to bear upon the little human machine that it is strained to the breaking point; when the child's very life is threatened; then, as a last resort, he turns for protection to the union, composed of children like himself, who share his sorrows and who can appreciate his sufferings. The seventeen-year-old girl president of a union told me this story of the latest victory of her District Local:

In the performance of certain work in the factory a little girl was employed to operate a treadle.

"She had to work all day long, and as she was growing pretty fast, she began to get kind of crippled-like. She was lame in one leg, and she was lop-sided, one shoulder being higher than the other. By and by she got so bad that she had to lay off for a week and go to bed. While she was away the boss hired a big boy to work the treadle, and paid him, of course, considerable more than she was getting. But when she came back to work, he fired the boy and put her on the treadle again. Our Grievance Committee waited on the boss and asked him polite, as a favor, to give her an easier job, because she was getting deformed. But he said that he wouldn't have no interference with his business. He was an American citizen, and no one could dictate to him. Then I called a meeting of our Local.

A Seventeen-year-old Girl's Speech

"'Girls,' I says, addressing them from the chair, 'shall we stand for it—we, that believes in the rights of man? Shall we stand for seeing her growing up a cripple and the union not doing nothing nor reaching out no hand for to help? I know that it's tough to strike now, because some of us is supporting our families, whose fathers is striking. Shall we stand for it?' They voted unanimous to strike if she wasn't took off the treadle. We had the resolution wrote out nice on a typewriter. The Grievance Committee handed it to the boss. He thought it over for two days, and then he give in. The boy is working the treadle yet, and the girl is at the bench."

Education in the Coal Regions

In the vicinity of every mining town is a district school, whose usual need of paint and general appearance of dilapidation gives evidence of its slight importance in the life of the community. According to the State law the schools of each township are under the exclusive control of a local board elected by the voters of the district. In a community where almost the entire population are miners the school board is necessarily composed of miners; the schools must be managed from the union miners' standpoint. The miner on the school board is no better educated than the rest of his kind, and while he may be opposed theoretically to child labor, he regards its continuance as a necessity, and it is therefore his business to see that the school in no way interferes with a parent's prerogative of sending his child to the breaker or mill. The teacher must be in full sympathy and accord with the union. If, as the result of going to school, a child should learn to question in the slightest degree the utterances of the union, then the teacher is at fault, because the union cannot be mistaken about anything.

The State law provides for the appointment of "attendance officers, whose duty it shall be to arrest and apprehend truants and others who fail to attend school." In most mining towns such an officer is unknown. School boards may, under the law, "grant the use of school-houses for lyceums and other literary purposes." This is construed to mean meetings of the union, and in consequence everywhere in the coal region the school-house is the recognized headquarters of the Local. It is as often referred to in this connection as an educational institution. An inquiry for a miner is very apt to be met with the response, "He's up to the school-house." The prevailing idea of the school in Anthracite is an institution where children may go when they have nothing else to do. Except during strikes, for the most part the pupils are less than seven years old.

"Scab" Scholars and "Scab" Steam

During the last strike a number of breaker boys took advantage of the enforced idleness to obtain "two months of learning" by going to school; but the ruling passion of their lives, their devotion to the union, found expression even here. It was the breaker boys who organized the school strikes which occurred in many mining towns. The "cause" was characteristic. The children discovered

that some of the pupils were the children of bosses or non-union men, or suspected that the teacher's father or brother or sweetheart "was friendly with the scabs." A breaker boy who belonged to the Junior Local would call the school together at recess and address them. However young he might be he was well versed in the arguments of the union. He told the other pupils that "we must all hang together now if we wish to assert our manhood." Such an orator always found ready listeners, and during the afternoon, when the teacher's back was turned and the door was open, the school would rise *en masse* and would walk out. At Plymouth a school strike was declared for another cause. By an arrangement with a neighboring colliery, the steam with which a school was heated was brought from the boilers of the power-house. During the strike the coal company employed in their engine-room some non-union firemen. When, on the first cold day of the term, steam was turned on in the school-house, the pupils struck because they "wouldn't sit in no room what was heated by scab steam." School strikes were usually of short duration, because the leaders were promptly expelled, and their followers were too young "to get organized," as a school strike leader in McAdoo explained to me.

This leader was perhaps the most remarkable character that I met anywhere in the nine coal counties. He said that he was ten years old, and that he had worked in the breaker a year under a certificate which described his age as fourteen. He could nei-

ther read nor write. With tobacco juice evident about the corners of his mouth as he talked, he explained to me that "this school will never amount to nothing until it is organized." Although school strikes are usually deprecated by miners, several of them have told me that "they couldn't stand for having their children learning in the same room with a non-union child."

Painfully ludicrous and pitiful as it all is, it is perfectly understandable. The children of the Coal Shadow have no child life. The little tots are sullen, the older children fight; they rarely play, and almost their only amusement is, as we have seen, the union and the strike that is the logical result of the conditions of their existence. They have no friends. Their parents, driven by what they think is necessity, forswear them into bondage. Their employers, compelled by what they regard as economic forces, grind them to hatred. The State, ruled by influences, either refrains from amalgamating laws or corrective enforcement. The rest of the world doesn't care. So the shadow of the coal heap lies dark upon these "unionized" little ones as they grow up to be men and women. Within a few years the breaker boy will be a miner. It is the only trade with which he is familiar, and his lack of education will make a commercial or professional career for him almost impossible. He will have to live in Anthracite, because it is the only country where a hard-coal miner can follow his trade. The mill girl will marry early in life; her husband will be a miner. They will both be American citizens. They will remain in the Coal Shadow.

