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In the Shadow of the Coal Breaker

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While many of these little boys are full of the playfulness and enthusiasm of youth, there are some, like fourteen-year-old Joe, whose little spirits seem lost in the desert of their daily drudgery, whose environment stifles ambition, and who stand, at the close of the day, with a culm bank for a background and a bewildered gaze toward a future barren of inspiration or hope.

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IN THE SHADOW OF THE COAL BREAKER.

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"I went to the breaker when I was eight years old, and it never done me no hurt!" declared the burly breaker-boss. He yelled his conviction of the benefits of Child Labor close to my ear, for in the din of the machinery and the metallic rush of coal down the dusty chutes the ears were confused by the deafening roar no less than were the eyes by the dense cloud of coal-dust that surged around us. The breaker-boss was a kindly man, and the heavy cane in his broad hand was probably used less to caress the backs of the riotous breaker-boys bending over before us than to save his own limbs as he went from place to place through that darkened building.

"The little devils like it," he continued, as some remark from his sentimental visitor expressed a protest against such work for little boys. They sat, about forty in number, bent over the troughs in which the coal came pouring down from the crushing machinery, and with rough and hardened but deft little fingers picked out the slate and rock and "bony" from among the pieces of coal. Indeed, the jovial grins on the black faces of the boys as they watched the stranger feel his way through the dust and among the timbers of the breaker seemed to confirm the eulogy upon their occupation. The dust which blinded the eyes and filled the nasal passages, and choked and strangled one unaccustomed to such air had become their element, and one instinctively felt that were they brought into the sunlight they would blink and shrink from the glare of day.

THE INEXORABLE BREAKER.

It was day—a glorious spring day in the Allegheny Mountains of Pennsylvania. The laurel and wild rhododendron painted the broad mountain-sides a deep green, while the dogwood mingled its pure white with the delicate pink of the unfolding maples. Above, the fleecy clouds seemed to fall like soft coverlets upon the distant sleeping hills, and, where man had not yet civilized the landscape, Nature had made the world beautiful. But within!—It was as though the very hills were being ground by the huge machinery of demons who wrought in darkness

some shameful design. The smoky whale-oil lamps in the caps of the little blackened boys, bobbing up and down as they moved their heads at work, cast flickering shadows and added to the weirdness of the scene. The sunlight was forgotten, and the worth and dignity of human life



"THE LITTLE DEVILS LIKE IT."

seemed trifling and remote. The whole monstrous thing—the huge building two hundred feet high perched above the shaft through which the cars of coal were hoisted from a thousand feet below, surrounded by great culm-banks, hills of slate and refuse from the mines—screed its inexorable omnipotence.

Men may come and men may go,
But I go on forever!

The coal-breaker dominates the anthracite region. The most important object on the landscape, the largest building, with the most mysterious machinery—the coal-breaker paints the first deep picture on the mind of the miner's son. From the dawn of his intelligence he recognizes its power, and in it his destiny. He *may* go to school; he *will* go to the breaker. The old theological "argument from design" is valid here to the core. Yonder is the miner's "patch"—thirty or forty black, squatty huts, with alleys of mud and coal-dirt winding among them—birthplaces of a hundred boys. Here stands the great building with a hundred narrow boards laid across the coal-chutes—seats for a hundred boys.

The plan is complete: A boy is born; let him hasten through his babyhood! Can he not see the breaker needs his labor and the hut his wages?

Daughters were unwelcome in many miners' homes until the enterprising silk manufacturer discovered the waste human energy and began to plant silk mills everywhere among the cities and hamlets of the region. Now the daughter also has a *raison d'être*. But the boys—no boy ever asks, "Shall I go to the breaker, or seek some other way of living?" He simply goes.

The breaker makes no effort to brighten its darkness or hush the hideous roar. In fact, the very mystery and danger of it are elements of attractiveness to boy life. The boy sits bent over his task for eight or nine hours every day. His back aches with the stoop and monotonous swing as he throws the slate and rock aside, while the coal runs through between his little feet. During the first weeks of labor his hands are



ONE OF THE BETTER COAL BREAKERS.

cut and torn, his nails are broken off, and the pain of handling the sharp stones and slate is intense. But he does not complain. Does a twelve-year-old boy ever complain of what other boys endure? He looks back afterward with haughty contempt on the days when he had bleeding finger-tips, and much of the suffering of the new boy in the breaker is from the ridicule of his "red tops." But none of this deters him. At the earliest possible age—in many parts of the region at nine or ten years,

though the law forbids his employment under fourteen*—he is off for the coal-breaker, with or without a few months in school, and he is thenceforward a trifling factor in a gigantic industrial process.

THOUSANDS OF DUSTY LITTLE TOILERS.

Between six thousand and twelve thousand little boys ranging in age from nine to fourteen years are believed to be working in the coal-breakers and mines of the anthracite field. This estimate was made a year ago after an investigation by the National Child Labor Committee. Another investigation just completed, also covering an extensive area of the region, confirms the former estimate, although, unfortunately, no accurate figures, either official or unofficial, are available. These figures, as well as those given in the report of the Department of Mine Inspection, are a mere guess.

Little Sullivan Meroccaf seemed not to share the customary willingness of the boys to enter the coal-breaker. He was just coming thirteen years old when he was seen this spring, and said he had been picking slate for a year. He had never been in school, and his sad face showed a sort of formless discontent as he explained, "Me fader don't leave me go to school." Other boys in the group told of the beatings and hunger imposed on the little fellow by his parents to force him to the breaker. But no personal complaint has been made. The town has no child-saving agency, and besides, Sullivan is only a poor "foreigner."

But this is not a typical example of child labor in the coal-fields. Few miners' homes are found in which children are not loved and cared for with a plain, rough kindness. The typical breaker-boy is proud of his breaker and boasts of its daily output. He is proud of the independence which personal economic value gives him in the home. Every mine-center affords many examples of strong young lives, full of energy, rich in possibilities that, if wisely directed, might help to inspire men to that social awakening which is the sole hope of our democracy. But they will not be wisely directed. They will be dwarfed by a daily round of monotonous slate-picking. And the highest social service that can be hoped for the graduates of the coal-breaker is that in coming years they will strike, as their fathers strike to-day, for a ten-per-cent advance in wages, to be eaten up by the doubled cost of coal and other necessities.

LAW VIOLATIONS IN THE REGION.

An example more typical than the foregoing of the thousands of little boys who work in violation of the child labor law of the state, is Walter Wilcowsky, of Girardville. Girardville is a small borough of about 4,000 population in the once beautiful Mahanoy Valley, now a blackened

*The law of Pennsylvania forbids the employment of boys under sixteen in the anthracite mines, and of boys under fourteen about the mines or in the breakers. It also forbids the employment of women of any age in this industry.

†(We have asked Mr. Lovejoy to suppress the real names of the boys, but in every instance the ages and period of employment are correctly given.—ED. NOTE.)

and culm-covered waste, with a muddy stream winding down between its gloomy hills in a futile effort to wash away the dirt, slate and debris from the mines. The estate of Stephen Girard covers 4,229 acres of coal lands, some of the richest in the region, and the report of the directors for the year 1905 shows that the thirteen collieries and two washeries on the estate yielded in rents and royalties a total of \$627,052.54. The amount of coal taken from these mines in 1904 was over 1,822,000 tons and on every ton the estate receives a royalty averaging more than thirty-three cents. The homes on the Girard estates are nearly all built on leased ground, and one awakens to a new conception of the cost of Girard College, when a few days are spent in company with the little slate-pickers of the village who cannot even read their names, and whose hard labor in the huge coal-breakers for sixty or ninety cents a day helps to pile up the fortune that maintains the splendid institution in Philadelphia. It must be added, however, that the directors of the Girard estate are to be credited both with the noble purposes to which the funds are devoted, and with the maintenance of a scale of rents less burdensome than the tribute wrung from the people in many other parts of the coal regions.

Little Walter was thirteen years old the ninth of last December, and began to pick slate in one of the large collieries on the estate five weeks before he was thirteen years old. He earns seventy-seven cents a day for nine hours of work. When asked about his age certificate he said he "got it off de squire. I told de squire I was fourteen, and me mudder said I was fourteen to de squire." He says he left school in the fourth grade and can read a little (though a test of his ability was far from satisfactory), that his father is a miner, a "rock contractor," and when he has steady employment earns fair wages.

AGES, WAGES AND EDUCATION.

Among the scores of boys met and questioned in this valley of the region the following are typical, and will convey an idea of the ages, wages and educational attainments of the boys who are under the legal age, and also the practical utility of the work certificate. Frank Brizelle was thirteen the ninth of July, and has been working for a year, having entered the breaker three months before he was thirteen. Although he is smaller than his age would indicate he has never had an age certificate, and affirms that he has never been asked for one. Little Michael Nicuola has been employed four months, and earns \$4.93 a week. He claims to have reached fourteen years the sixth of May, but several of his companions positively assert that on his recent birthday he told them he was twelve. John Barrows, who works in the same breaker, will be fourteen next December. He is working on the "jigs" at present and earns one dollar a day. He has been steadily employed since he was eight years of age. Andrew Komovosky, who was thirteen years old April 28th, left school from the first grade to enter the breaker. He is absolutely illiterate. Charley Carpenter has been working two years.

although he is but twelve years old at present. His wages are seventy-two cents a day. Michael Lutousky has also been working two years, although but twelve years old the seventeenth of August. He earns sixty-six cents for a nine-hour day, and cannot read his own name. John McLaughlin, who was met in this group of boys, was fourteen last January, and has been in the breaker five years. His wages are sixty-five cents for eight hours' work. He says he has had three certificates from the squire, but none from the school. He added, "Last year a lot of de boys got sacked, but dey couldn't get papers from de school, 'cause de teacher wouldn't give 'm, so dey all went back to work."

That these boys are not all shiftless and dissolute, as sometimes pictured, is apparent to anyone with love enough for a boy to study beneath the uncouth surface and find the soul. Little John Thomas began work in the breaker when he was nine years old and has worked for five years. He will be fifteen years old next November. A year and a half less than the legal age, he is working inside the mine. He learned to read two years ago. During the summer months he attended school in the village while the "mines was idle a good bit," and those three days a week of contact with the American school system can be read in every feature of his fine, ambitious face.

One small borough in the vicinity of Wilkes-Barre yielded in a single afternoon twenty-eight boys who reluctantly confessed to holding falsified age certificates. One group of twenty-two boys, all between nine and twelve years of age, who were met a year ago, before the enactment of the new Pennsylvania Child Labor law, was revisited during the present month, and of these sixteen are still at work, three have returned to school, one has moved away and two could not be discovered.

One little fellow, who was in terror lest he should give information that would cost him his "job," was just fourteen years old two months ago; nevertheless, he has been working inside the mine a year "nippin'" (tending door) after having spent nearly two years in the breaker. He has the appearance of an eleven-year-old boy to-day, being dwarfed and poorly developed. He said he was earning about \$3.50 a week, and several of his pay checks in our possession show his wages for a subterranean life and a hazardous occupation to be eight cents an hour!

The superintendent of the schools in this borough of 7,000 population estimates that of the three hundred and fifty young boys working in the breakers, not less than one hundred and sixty are less than thirteen years old. On a holiday one can easily gather in five minutes a group of twenty-five or thirty boys, not one of whom can read or write a word—boys who, by their difficult and unhealthy toil, are able to earn at the most five dollars a week.

THE FATE OF THE BREAKER BOY.

Little Joe Bartuskey, the driver boy whose body was torn in pieces by the explosion in the Shenandoah City mine on May 15th, began working inside the mine a few weeks before the coal strike of 1902. Prior

to that he had been picking slate in the breaker. Six of his sixteen years were given to the coal industry. The maximum compensation for his labor in the dark corridors of the mine was \$7 a week.

Unless too many of the boys' ancestry or brothers have lost their lives in the mine, or the usual course of life in the coal regions has been changed because his mother has that nameless dread of the pits that women sometimes suffer, the breaker-boy will go from the breaker into



WORKING IN THE BREAKER.

the mine in a few years. The dangers are greater, but so are the wages, and the laborer must not count his life dear unto himself. If rheumatism, asthma or old age chance to reach him before the casualties of falling rock, run-away car, broken rope, powder blast or fire-damp befall him, he comes from the mine prematurely old and enfeebled, and finds his place again in the breaker, there to end his career where he began.

One old man, bent and broken with years and toil, and scarred by buffetings in the mine, begged not to have his picture published lest

he might lose his position with the firm that now pays him \$1 a day. He need have no concern. Many employers in the coal-fields appear as far above the trifling sentiments and interests of those who labor in and about the mines as are the towering breaker buildings above the low cottages that cluster in their shadow. But it cannot be learned that the coal operators make any effort to promote child labor. If the children come, with certificates, they are taken in and employed, and the families are grateful.

MAKING THE LAW A FARCE.

"How is it possible, in that small mining area, for ten or twelve thousand little boys from nine to thirteen years of age to be employed about the mines when the law explicitly forbids their employment under fourteen?" Here is the answer: Pennsylvania promotes perjury by process of law. In the mining region the age of a child is established by the oath of the parent taken before a notary public. Frequently the people have no knowledge of the oath they take, being unable to understand a word of English. They simply know that they have come for a "work paper." The paper is filled out by the notary, naming some date as the date of nativity, by which the child suddenly becomes about fourteen years and two weeks of age. To this paper, after lifting his hand while a few unintelligible words are mumbled by the notary, the parent affixes his name or mark, pays the fee of twenty-five cents—and the deed is done. The boy may be fourteen or twelve or nine years old. It is all the same. Armed with this certificate he enters the coal-breaker, and against all suits for damage or accident the coal company is protected by this flagrant travesty in legal form. The boys, unintentionally, give a very picturesque and accurate description of this certificate—"I bought a paper off de squire for twenty-five cents."

A year ago an attempt was made to remedy this abuse. A law was passed providing that documentary proof of age and certain educational qualifications must accompany the oath of the parent; or, in lieu of the proof of age a schooling certificate which, by showing him to have reached a point in school that would be normal for a child of fourteen years, should in effect be evidence of the age of the child. The certificate feature of the law was soon declared, by the Luzerne County Court,* to be violative of the Fourteenth Constitutional Amendment, in discriminating between individuals of the same class—namely, children above fourteen years of age. This decision has recently been sustained by the Superior Court of the state.

The effect of this new law, with the cloud upon its constitutionality, has been chaos in the anthracite field. A few school superintendents have adhered strictly to the new law, and several collieries refrain carefully from employing any child who fails to qualify under its provisions. In these places one will rarely find tiny children in the coal-breakers. In Hazel Township not less than 400 children are believed

* October 13, 1905, in the case of Collett vs. Scott.

to have been added to the school rolls as a result of this well-intentioned law.

Such examples serve chiefly to demonstrate the tremendous advance on behalf of the children that could be made in the coal communities with the aid of a strong, valid law. The employers were not slow to learn that the law was defective and, with notable exceptions, have continued the employment throughout the year of little boys of any age as before. One boy who worked in the breaker last year said the boss first asked him for a certificate and "then he said de law was broke anyway, so it didn't make no difference." Little Charley Rice, of Girardville, who declares he was thirteen the ninth of August, and worked in the colliery a year ago, said regarding the certificate, "Me fader went over and told de squire to write out a check for fourteen and he give it to me."

WHOLESALE DISREGARD OF LAW.

The superintendent of the borough schools in Nanticoke states that he has not received an application for a single certificate under the new law, and believes that 600 boys under fourteen years old working in the breakers of that borough of 12,000 population is a conservative estimate. In the neighboring borough, Plymouth, with a population of 15,000, the superintendent of schools estimates not less than 1,000 boys working illegally. Even the child labor law applying to factory labor has here been flagrantly abused. One of the city officials, entrusted with the issuing of employment certificates, confessed that it was his custom when a child came to apply to "send someone out to ask the doctor or the attending nurse if the child was fourteen, and if they said 'all right' he would issue the paper." Since one of the children thus investigated was born in Michigan, one in Canada and one on an ocean steamer coming from Russia, we are compelled to admire the fleetness, if not indeed the ubiquity, of the official's messenger! It is significant that of the first five breaker-boys met in this town, four acknowledged that they were under fourteen years, while the fifth, two months beyond that age, has been working in the breaker three years. But at this point the boys became suspicious of their investigator and spread the alarm. After that all the boys met were "fourteen past."

In a word, this defective law has been a success in but one point—in making the boys wary. The difficulty of getting reliable information from children or parents has been multiplied tenfold in the year, and the assertion is made without qualification that under the present law in Pennsylvania no census of working children could be relied on as approximating accuracy.

The owners and superintendents of a number of collieries have established rigid rules against the employment of under-age boys. But, in face of the authorized "work paper" they are powerless. A flat refusal to employ a boy whose age is in doubt is sometimes resorted to, but this seems unjust to the parents, and lays upon the employer a responsibility which the public has no right to impose.

FOOLING THE MINE INSPECTOR.

In rare bursts of confidence boys twelve and thirteen years old who tend doors inside the mine, where child labor is forbidden under sixteen years, will gleefully relate how they outwitted the mine inspector on his last visit. "De boss put de drivers nippin' an' de runners drivin' an' de laborers runnin' an' hid us away on de gob.* Dat was a cinch to get pay for sleepin' all day on de gob." Such instances do not reflect on the integrity or the ability of the mine inspectors. Each one is set to do the



FOOLING THE INSPECTOR.

task of five or ten men, without even the arm of an enforceable law to support him. An inspector may be assigned to visit from fifteen to thirty mines, and frequently a mine will contain from forty to one hundred miles of gangways and headings, all of which should be carefully inspected for gas, loose overhanging slate, defective timbering and faulty ventilation. The thorough inspection of a large mine may consume from five days to two weeks. It is requiring of a man nothing less than superhuman knowledge and ability to expect him to read at sight the ages of two or three hundred boys—especially in the face of legal documents which justify their presence.

*The rock and slate thrown out of the chambers by the miner and not carried to the surface is piled in high heaps along the corridors beside the tramways, and is known as "the gob."

SCHOOL FACILITIES.

In nearly all these mining centers evening schools are established for the breaker-boys. These, from the educational standpoint, are a farce, for not only are the boys too weary in body and mind to profit by class-room work after a day in the breaker, but the books and equipment are too poor and the courses too meagre to be of interest. Year after year they will receive the same tattered old books, cast off by the day school as unfit for further use, and the attendance drops near the vanishing point before the winter is ended. School boards complain that they have not funds to maintain proper night schools. This is doubtless true—but not from lack of local wealth. Here is a section of American territory which, with the exception of a few of our larger cities, has more wealth to the area than any other part of the country. One township has thirteen large collieries, one of which was valued by its owner on the witness-stand at ten million dollars. Yet the total tax valuation of this township is but \$985,000. If the heroic efforts of the school authorities fail to make their pitifully small budget cover the necessary expenses the "Tax Payers' Association," composed of the owners of these thirteen coal properties, hushes local criticism, and even earns a reputation for philanthropy, by contributing to the School Board the amount of the deficit. Equally unfair valuations were discovered in many parts of the coal region.

Naturally the evening schools suffer most from this system. They are poorly equipped, the teachers are underpaid and overworked, and the books used for the boys in the evening schools are an insult to American youth. The evening schools, as maintained, are a cheap and shabby extravagance. Better facilities are needed both in these and in the day schools. Children in one township, with schools especially well directed, travel nine miles to attend the high school, and in the graduating class is one ex-breaker-boy, who, having lost one leg in the breaker, has ceased to yield any return to those who would employ him.

The anthracite region could well afford to pension every breaker-boy from Forest City to Shamokin to the extent of giving him a first-class school course until he is sixteen years old. To-day he is looked upon as of a special class, to be neglected or patronized. In the cities of the region one will hear the wildest tales of the savagery of the breaker-boys, and there are old residents in Wilkes-Barre and Hazleton who absurdly consider it unsafe for a stranger to visit a miner's patch unprotected. As everywhere else in America, local ignorance and prejudice are the chief bars to progress.

In Wilkes-Barre some years ago a charitable industrial mission was formed for the breaker-boys who lived on the outskirts of the city and in surrounding patches. The newsboys and messenger-boys and school-boys and street-urchins flock to the place nightly, but the breaker-boy will have none of it. He is never, strictly speaking, a "boy." He springs in a day from childhood to manhood, and the elision of that precious

period of boyhood brings upon him and on the community consequences too obvious for discussion.

THE CHEAPNESS OF CHILD LIFE. .

The welfare of the breaker boy is of very minor concern in the coal region, and readers of this paper must not suppose that "child labor" is a vital topic there. No subject is less frequently discussed. The churches are almost wholly silent. Nobody seems disposed to "dodge the issue." No issue is recognized. With many operators the employment of children is simply a part of an industrial process into which the thought of the development or the dwarfing of a human life does not enter.



AN HONORABLE DISCHARGE?

If a boy is injured, a hospital, maintained by the "annual contributions" of large property owners, chiefly coal-operating companies, will care for him until he is able to get about. No one apparently thinks of putting any money value on the boy who, before his injury, was so essential to coal mining. Little Peter had been working during the summer since he was twelve years old, and constantly for two years since he was fourteen. On the second day of March, while working, his arm was caught in the belt of the scraper line of which he was in charge in the breaker, and torn out at the shoulder. The boy received

no "damages" from the company, but considered himself under obligations to them for paying the expense of his operation and care at the hospital. Inquiry was made at the City Hospital in Wilkes-Barre, and it was learned that no charge had been made, because the company was an annual contributor. Since the accident the operator has properly boxed the dangerous part of the machinery. And now, with an empty sleeve, at sixteen, this little industrial soldier, with no pension from our government nor one cent of recompense from the corporation, has left to him what should have been his by birthright—such opportunity as the village school affords. Yet with a complacency which is positively stupefying, this region goes on feeding its little boys to the coal-breakers, to have bodies maimed or minds dwarfed, or souls scorched beyond recovery.

"THY KINGDOM COME."

Our guide through one of these great breakers was Steiney Bolinsky. He is eighteen years old, and has been working in the mines and breakers since he was twelve. He is a fair type of the fittest of those who survive the dwarfing effects of this environment. The meagerness of his life is the goal toward which the majority of the breaker-boys are hastening. He knew the meaning of "jigs" and "spires" and "bony." "Nippin' and spraggin'" were familiar words, but this technical knowledge was the limit of his education. On his coat were two badges—one the picture of President John Mitchell, the other a small cross. He had seen the famous labor leader and adored him. The cross he "got off one of de sisters." Under Mr. Mitchell's picture were the words "Labor's Best Friend." On the cross was written "Thy Kingdom Come." He was absolutely unable to read either expression. When the words "Thy Kingdom Come" were read to him the blankness of his countenance betrayed his utter failure to comprehend their meaning. When he was told these words were a prayer that right and justice may come; that a man by honest labor may be able to feed and clothe his family; that every boy may learn to read and may not have to go into the breakers when he is ten or eleven years old, and that everybody may be kind to his neighbor—his slow eyes kindled and he answered, "Is that it? That's what I want!"

Persons who contribute from \$2 to \$25 per annum toward the support of the National Child Labor Committee are enrolled as associate members, from \$25 to \$100 as sustaining members, and those contributing \$100 or more as guarantors of the Committee. Members receive the publications of the Committee and are kept in touch with the child labor movement throughout the country. Send remittance to V. Everit Macy, Treasurer, 105 East 22d Street, New York City.