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COTTON MILL

BY PAUL PETERS

THE personnel manager kept saying: "But you won't be satisfied with \$11 or \$12 a week. I know you won't." Seeing him yield that much, I insisted that I would. "At least I can live on it," I said, "and I've got to live somehow."

He measured me up again, his eyes full of skepticism. He was my own age. He had told me so with an undertone of pride, as if to say: "Now just see where I am and where you are, for all your knock-about adventures." Aloud he said: "Beside, we don't hire floaters and drifters. All our hands are local people and they're satisfied. As soon as floaters and drifters come in, they stir up trouble."

But at last, drenched under my steady stream of argument, he yielded. However, since I had worked on ships and in factories and mines, I was to be no mere \$11-a-week mill-hand. At one bound I became a pipe-fitter on the machine-shop crew. My pay was set at thirty cents an hour for a ten-hour day. "Maybe you can pick up a little more by working Saturday afternoons and Sundays," he said. "Report to Sam Maples at six-thirty in the morning."

So at thirty cents an hour I became a grain of machine fodder in the New Industrial South. Sixteen-fifty a week—let's see: room, \$4; laundry, \$1; carfare, 84 cents; tobacco, 30 cents; food, 75 cents a day; postage, shaves, soap, medicine,

clothes, a movie now and then: say \$3 for miscellaneous. That makes \$14.39—out of \$16.50—umn! . . .

Yet inside I burned with a quiet joy. To work in a machine-shop! All my life I have loved machine-shops. I love the smell of oil, the curl of iron filings from a drill, the feel of a vise tightening to the pull of the wrist, the gnash of saw teeth biting through steel. And then to work in a knitting-mill, to slip unobtrusively into the heart of the miraculous New South I had read about! Why, it was like walking into a gold mine.

Beside, I was broke. I had to live somehow. And in this mountain-valley town of Tennessee there were only the mills.

I didn't have an alarm-clock, and payday was a long way off. So I set my mind for five o'clock, with the result that I awoke every half hour from two o'clock on. I lay in the dark thinking of the Summer that had just ended far up North: the tree-buried Wisconsin town that had come in my eyes to have an almost heart-breaking beauty; strolls around the lake with the most steadfast, the dearest of all companions; days of isolation, living among the turbulent people of my drama, crying out with them in bitterness against the injustice that crushes down the poor, fighting their fight, greedy with them for the joys of sun and wind and water, weeping with them in the defeat that is yet a vic-

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tory for their courage. Then a month of drifting, drifting, ever South, over new hills into new valleys; new people; new cities; (none as dear, none as beautiful as the little town up North). Ahead of me lay Memphis, Natchez, Baton Rouge, New Orleans: names that conjured up the boy, me, who used to lie flat on a Kentucky hill above the river and fish dreams out of a volume of Mark Twain.

The jaws of the mill swallowed me up. It was only in those first days that I saw them distinctly, that I thought of them as jaws with iron pickets for teeth, and a cavernous passage between two buildings for mouth, and a squat door through which shot a flood of human fodder for gullet. After that it was merely the business of going to work, still drugged with sleep, still sore from yesterday's grind.

II

Inside the flood broke up and swirled through a maze of intestines. Big rooms, small rooms, alleyways, tunnels, galleries, bridges; vats boiling, fly-wheels spinning, belts flapping, pistons punching, shuttles twirling, machines roaring. Iron monsters in an orgy of cramming white fluff down their maws, writhing over it, rending it to shreds, gulping it down, spitting it out again with a screech. The air was full of steam and cotton lint.

A man named Cully took me in tow. He fretted, mumbled, cursed, jerked in and out of the store-room. Then, loaded with pieces of pipe, screws, a drill, and some ratchet wrenches, I was led to a new section of the mill built on by knocking out a wall and extending the floor and roof. We cut sections of four-inch iron pipe. We put on sleeves and made several sections up. I did everything wrong. I failed to tighten the vise and the pipe slipped. I couldn't adjust the wrench to the sleeve. When I did, I hadn't the strength to draw the sleeve up high enough. I didn't know what pipe-dope was. I dropped a pipe on its end, chipping the threads. Cully snatched

the wrench out of my hands. "'D you say you was a pipe-fitter?" he fumed. Pipe-fitting: why, the words were so simple, so matter-of-fact. Here all at once it was a science, an art. Nobody will ever know how humble I felt, how disgusted with my soft, clumsy, impotent hands.

With three sections made up, we had to mount ladders and hang the pipe from the ceiling. The ladders were thirty feet high and wobbled like new-born colts. Cully's had a way of tipping off to one side; and mine did not rest evenly on the ground, so that it jiggled all the time I worked and gradually slid together till it was about to collapse. Then I would save my neck by clutching the pipe hangers I was screwing into the ceiling beams, juggle the ladder apart, run down, and plant it firm. Like most factories, this one was plastered with "Be Careful" and "Safety First" signs.

Under the ceiling you melted in sweat. Sweat ran over your mouth, down your armpits, into your shoes. Sawdust from your bit flicked into your eyes and caked your face. Cotton lint, soaked with steam spray to bring it down, gagged your throat. When you stopped to wipe the ooze from your face you could look down into the spinning room with its whirling spools wrapping up endless cobwebs of thread; its swarm of girls stepping a slow waltz around the long machines, bending, rising, brushing, threading, round and round and round. The roar hurled the heat in a white mist against you. From below came the rap of carpenters laying the floor. Then I saw Cully waving his arms at me, cupping his hands to bellow, but the roar drowned him out. At last he flung away his hammer and came swinging up my ladder, sending it teetering from side to side. My hangers were out of line by half an inch.

Raising the three sections of pipe to the beams nearly landed me in the hospital. It was hard enough to lift one end upon my shoulder, where it rocked like a steam-roller on the bone. Ahead rose the cliff of spidery ladder. Cully scampered up his like a monkey. He was on top before I had more

than started, and the full weight of sixty feet of iron pipe slumped down on me. It rolled from my shoulder and nearly pitched me headlong to the floor. I grabbed it with both hands, hooked myself into the swaying ladder with an elbow, and set up a howl. Cully looked down with abysmal disgust. Then the ladder began tipping over, slowly. Two carpenters, fortunately, leaped up to steady it, while a third ran up behind me to lift the pipe. Together we made the top. I was limp for half an hour afterward.

At dinner time Cully told the men in the shop how I had nearly killed him by dropping a pipe.

He tried that trick again twice within a week. Luck saved me the second time. The third time, having done some thinking, I was ready for him. I raced up the ladder first and dumped my end on top. Now it was he who was caught and he who set up the howl. His face scalded with rage, his frog's mouth clamping open and shut like a trap door, Cully told me in eloquent Southern obscenity what he thought of me. Nobody can beat a Southerner at such things. Nevertheless Cully and I worked like twins on three section pipes after that. The secret lies in keeping the pipe level during the hoisting, so that the weight is evenly distributed at both ends.

In time Cully and I even became fairly good friends. But he was never an easy man to work with. Impatient, hot-headed, nervous, callous about his fellows in that thoughtless way which is so peculiarly American—and even more so Southern—he looked after himself first. First of all there was the important business of making a big noise for Cully and the quantities of work Cully could finish in a day, of flying back and forth in a frenzy of haste, explosions, complaints. Ladders went sliding over the floor, pipes came flying through the air, wrenches and hammers were tossed about recklessly; both of us chased madly up and down ladders.

The man was as strong as a bull; and

once he had snatched a wrench from your hands, he would pump at it with such a fever that the beads of sweat swelled into a flood on his face and the veins in his neck popped out like ropes. Actually he didn't do much. He made six trips for tools he could have gathered in one. In his impatience to start he was forever sawing his lengths too long or too short, hanging his pipes crooked, taking them down again.

I learned later that nobody in the shop wanted to work with him. They hated him for a recklessness that endangered not so much himself as his helper. "That guy's plumb bughouse," they told me. "He's always trying to show the boss he can do the whole job in one day." It was not so much from malice as from sheer lack of social sense that, as one man put it, he "wouldn't give a damn if he knocked your eye out."

III

Long before quitting time I was fagged out. Every move tore at my muscles with pincers. My feet burned as if I were walking on hot steel. Inside I was hollow and being ripped apart. I wrenched and lifted and pulled in a blaze of torture. How the minutes crawled! Another hour—another—only half an hour now. Grit your teeth, man: a hell of a fine worker you are! Now only fifteen minutes . . . thank God, the whistle!

Washing in a steam-filled locker room; trudging back through the maze of rooms with a mountain of fatigue on my back; spewed out at the gate with a mob of silent people; slumped like a sack against a pole in the overloaded street-car. Then "home." To sit down: that was the most important thing in the world. I sat in a stupor till hunger stirred me. At the nearest counter I slid some yams and grits down my throat and crept home to bed. Sleep swooped down on me like wind blowing out a light.

In time I became toughened. I learned to spare myself, to stall, to sneak off and hide when I had reached the end of my

strength. But the last two or three hours of the day never ceased to be a nightmare, a tug-of-war between a man's will-to-endure and the dragging minutes. I am sure that for at least two hours out of every afternoon every workman in the mill was worthless. The ten-hour day is not only brutal; it is sheer senseless waste. A six-or seven-hour day would produce fully as much, and would develop in addition a higher grade of workman. He would have time to read, to ruminate, to let his emotions expand, to putter in a garden, to loiter, to dabble in any one of a thousand humanizing hobbies.

But the money back of the New Industrial South doesn't want a higher grade of workman. It knows that only men battered into brutes by relentless drudgery will acquiesce to the heaps of muck, kindling, and rubble that pockmark the cotton mill country of Tennessee, North Carolina, and Georgia. Despite all Chamber of Commerce bulldoze to the contrary, there is only one reason why Big Money is whisking its textile plants from New England to the South. New England in the last twenty years has been driving the mill-owners, strike by strike, into paying half-civilized wages and conceding half-human living conditions. In the South the sky is the limit. In the South Big Money is getting away with murder.

Those little Southern mill towns! No paving, no sidewalks, except on the stereotyped Main Streets (a drug-store, a chain store, a gas station); garbage piles; scummy creeks; rows of blackened shanties; behind them rows of tumbling out-houses; a water-pipe running down the backyards with a faucet stuck up between every two houses. Inside no plaster, no wallpaper, no paint, no gas, no electricity, no baths, no drainage; small windows, few of them; a single flue on brackets half way up the wall—to save brick. If there is a third room upstairs it has no windows at all; the roof presses on your head. This is home, this is life. This and the mill.

The mill is different. Its walls are

white-washed. Its offices flaunt a strip of grass. Its stout iron fence holds it disdainfully apart. Its solid brick walls spread up and out, dominating the town as in medieval days the cathedral or the palace dominated the hovels of Europe. The mill is law, the mill is god, the mill is ultimate reason.

From the company shanty where you sleep and eat and propagate to the company mill where you work ten hours by day (eleven on the night shift) to the company store where you dump out your money again for grubby food and shoddy clothes—this is free life in the New South. Luxury consists of a corn-drunk on a Saturday night (out of an \$11 or \$12 pay envelope), or a sleazy movie in the converted stable in Main Street. All this, of course, is only in the busy season, when the mill showers the blessings of free American living upon you. In slack times you live off credit from the company store. If you don't like it, well, you're free to move, aren't you?—once you've cleared your debts. There are a hundred mill towns like mine down the line.

My town was larger than most, the metropolis of its area. Its Main Street had boulevard lights, fire-brick buildings, one of those gaudy American hotel lobbies with comfort a foot thick; department stores with blocks of show windows; jewelry shops; restaurants where people seemed to eat not because they were hungry (could those people ever be hungry?) but because they had money to spend conspicuously. But turn into a side street and you were back in the cotton mill South. Streets littered with paper; shacks buried in coal soot; boarding-houses stinking of stale grease; grimy windows, dingy lights, poverty—poverty that withers up all the sap and color and light of life like sewage along a canal. Farther out, in the denser mill quarters, the flood of squalor washes the city black. Main Street is a string of pearls on a dirty old slattern, toothless, bedraggled, with hair dangling in her face.

It was an experience to walk those streets at night, thighs stiff and shoulders drooping. What place had I with my heavy shoes and my rough clothes on Main Street? That belonged to the old days, when a man had the solace of books, the vanity of pictures on the wall, the thoughtless security of good food, the dignity of cultured friends. I was through with that. I was hot-footed after a vision, and visions have a way of melting in the overstuffed lobbies and the fat restaurants of Main Street. Now I belonged on the side streets, on the outskirts. I belonged with these gaunt people who seemed to walk by pushing out their bellies and shuffling their limbs up after them.

Mountaineer stock, shiftless, sloppy; sprawling on a door step strumming a guitar, bawling a ditty; talking in a nasal whine; selling grubby tomatoes and wormy apples in the market; sleeping on newspapers in the shop doors; writhing in ecstasy around a preacher on every corner: "Glor-r-ry to Jesus! Bless His holy name. A-a-amen, brother, a-a-amen. Oh, Jesus, save me, Jesus, save me!"

IV

My days, like theirs, were spent sweating for bread. I ate beside them on a stool in a slot in the wall, didn't I?—ate the same soppy hamburgers, the same flabby bacon; swapped smut and gab with them; laughed like them to forget the sour stench that rose in blue steam from the skillet. I bumped into their women on the corners, didn't I?—ugly women who moved along with slow, lewd hips and brazen calculation in their eyes. And then, once in a thousand, there came the radiance of those austere, rugged mountain faces, Lincoln faces, the saddest, most beautiful faces in the world.

In bed mosquitoes zoomed over my face. From across the backyard came the sudden rumble of a drum, the tinkle of a piano. Then shrill with hysteria, a catchpenny revival tune would be beaten with hand-

claps through my window. A woman wailed in an agony of remorse. A man confessed with tremolos sliding up and down his voice. Then all would pray with a wild fervor, groaning, weeping, stamping their feet and clapping their hands, shrieking: "Holy! Holy! Holy!" With what anguish they prayed! They were like wounded animals, roaring in the dark, pounding themselves against an invisible cage. It took a strong people to rend themselves like that with ecstasy and grief. Only the shriveled of heart, the fearfully polished-off, those who haven't the courage to own a single, simple, honest emotion would laugh at them.

Other people came into my focus at the mill. There was the day when Cully, laughing like a schoolboy, splashing water in the locker-room, announced that tomorrow he was "takin' the kids to the fy-er" (the fair). The night-man took his place. He was half Cully's size, had half Cully's strength: pale, frail, with clear gray eyes. Yet what a joy it was to work with him! I never saw a man with hands so deft, nor one who worked with such serene and noiseless speed. Face to face on the ladders we hung the pipes, scarcely speaking, understanding each other with a glance. At times it seemed I could read his thoughts, so simple was his mind, so crystal clear. Then we would stop for a rest, and wipe the sweat out of our eyes; and he would look at me with a quiet smile of friendship. The day went by in a flash. We did double the work with one fourth the energy. I went home whistling that night.

Ira was assigned to help us. Ira was a half-wit; he could not read or write; he had never been more than fifty miles from the farm where he was born. He had a face scraped out of red clay with a blunt knife; ears standing out like thumbs; small yellow eyes; thick lips forever parted in an idiotic grin against yellow teeth sawed up in an arch. Talk! He drowned you in his talk! He poured out words at you, hour after hour; drawling, stuttering, meaningless words, gushed out of an empty brain.

They paid him twenty cents an hour and they worked him like an ox. I have seen him swing a sledge hammer two hours without a stop, driving a cold chisel through a fire-brick wall three feet thick. Once, after wallowing in filth under the floor of the plant all day, we took a shower together. Ira, the idiot, had the body of a Greek god: symmetrical, rippling in hard smooth muscles, flawlessly beautiful. Then he put on his overalls and all you saw was his face, and all you heard was the palaver that splashed through his big yellow teeth.

Everybody in the mill deviled Ira. They hid his tools and his clothes; they locked him up under the floor till somebody heard him pound and opened the trap; they tripped him into the salt-water tank; they turned on the juice when he was skinning wires; they baited his sluggish mind with the glee of a bunch of boys hooting a legless man. They would get him to do their work and stand by winking at one another while he tugged and sweated. Ira grinned. I have an idea he smarted under their derision, but he had no weapons against them. He was the most harmless man I ever knew, maybe the most kind-hearted. The sight of pain threw him into a palsy. Once, when an electrician got tangled up in a short-circuit and writhed on the floor with blood curdling yelps, Ira fell off the ladder. They snapped off the juice and carried the man outside. Then Ira wiped the sweat off his face with his sleeve. His mouth was set in a sickly grimace.

Ira attached himself to me, I suppose because I got no pleasure out of baiting him. He would work like a demon for me, lifting the heaviest loads, crawling into the hottest corners and the darkest holes. But a single gesture of kindness opened up the sluices of his gab, and the flood battered you down.

"Aw, for Christ's sake, shut up. Give me that wrench. Get the hell out of here. Go get that twelve-inch Stillson—go on, get!"

For five minutes Ira would be silent.

Then I would feel sorry, and I was

always curious. "Can't you even read a newspaper, Ira?"

"I ain't never had no larnin'. I ain't never went to school. I guess if I had some larnin' I'd be gittin' the same pay as you. I cain do the work as good as the next feller, if only they don't do nothin' to git in my way."

"I think I'm paying too much for room and food, Ira. What do they soak you?"

"I jist moved the other day. I had a good place, but the girls was always devilin' me, tryin' to git some money out of me, or take 'em to the show and things like that. I'm livin' with a family from Kaintucky now. They're workin' in the mill, everybody but the missus. Five dollars a week's what I pay. They're good people and they feed good: beans and taters and biscuits—good enough fer a workin' man." Then he leaned close: "The girls is always devilin' me. I don't know how to make 'em keep away from me. You know workin' with all them perdy girls in this hyar mill sometimes makes me feel *mean*."

He wanted to ask the family from Kaintucky if they had a place for me too. It would have cut my food and lodging bill in two, and I had little enough money to spare. But when I thought of that idiotic grin and that inexhaustible deluge of talk: "No, Ira, thanks. I guess I'd better stick where I am."

V

The pipes hung, we got a new job. Through the carding and the roving rooms, past the coal bins, through the boiler room, into the engine room, around behind the dynamos.

"This must be the place," said Cully.

"Where?"

"See that trap door? Down there, under the floor."

Eight hundred feet of water and drainage pipe to drag under the floor and hang from the sills! It was pitch dark. Our flashlights were like most other factory equipment: now they flashed and now they didn't. The farther up we went, the lower the head-

space. By the time our knees were cut and bruised, we had to crawl on our bellies. We went wiggling through dust, scraping over rock ledges, tearing against rusty nails and bits of glass. Sills now hung so low that we had to send Ira ahead to see if he could squeeze himself under. Once he got stuck midway, and howled in a panic till we jockeyed him out by the legs. Would we never reach the wall? Our eyes burned, our throats were raw, our breath came in gulps, dirt in our clothes gritted like sand-paper against the skin. It was cool enough there, pressed against the earth, but the space was so small and the air so foul that soon we were smeared with sweat. Cully, his face glistening like a blob of lamp-black, kept hurrying us on. But soon he began to vomit; and the last we saw of him, he was crawling painfully back to the trap door. Ira and I sprawled out on our backs and panted for breath. We did not budge for half an hour.

The rest of the day we worked at our own sweet leisure. At the first hint of dizziness, over we flopped on our backs. How cool the earth was! How the machines trembled and droned overhead, against our very noses! In our nostrils was the mustiness of a tomb.

We strung sockets, we lugged in our tools, back and forth, like worms. By night filth is rubbed into every pore. We ache at every joint as if we've been hammered with stones.

The machine-shop crew splash their lava-suds and laugh. They are all set for the whistle and home before we have even crawled from our grave to scrub off our layers of muck. Dave, the mechanic, fat, red-headed, in loud checks, flips wise-cracks at us; Ben, the old machinist, wipes his rheumy eyes and drops into his habitual docile talkiness: "D' you remember, Cully, when you and me was workin' inside the middle boiler and somebody started turnin' on the steam? . . ." Sam Maples dances in and out, jaunty, cocksure, prim in corduroys, rattling his keys. I hate him for his corduroy primness.

"By God, if I didn't need the money, I'd quit. Think of shoving a white man on a lousy job like that!"

So the days spin by like spokes on a wheel. Life is like the web that flops off the rollers in the shrinking room: endless, grey, soggy. Sometimes—rarely—there is a pinpoint of color in the gray wash: days when you open your lunch bag in the court near the wall, and a bit of sun straggles in; and suddenly you love all these grimy, rough-handed men, and you love the bits of old iron and old pipe in the court; and you laugh and whistle for the joy of being there. Days when you stop in the boiler room to see the opening of a door set the walls on fire; and stare at the stokers trundling coal in wheelbarrows up to the scales, up to the furnace dumps: black, only their teeth and the rims of their eyes showing white, like demons out of a Dante's vision.

The afternoon the whole shop talked of flocking out with oil cans and ropes after the "bad nigger" accused of stabbing a sheriff. White underdogs panting to tear the throats of black underdogs.

The big fly-wheel spins. The big belt shimmies up through a hole in the floor. So a month, two are gone in a whirl. You work; you eat, you sleep, you work some more. You earn a living. Do you live? Do you think?

"It *can't* be five o'clock. God, for another hour of sleep!"

"Whui! Down the jaws of Moloch with you!"

"Wonder how those Molls can dress like that on ten bucks a week? Bah, it's cheap stuff, man. Look at those beads—five-and-ten. Call that fur? Mangy catskin. They want to play their part in the Big Bluff too. 'We're rich, we're rich!' The Great American Lie."

"That ham columnist in the *Sentinel-News* said he was through this mill the other day. 'Everybody seems busy and well-paid and happy,' he wrote. The cheap fake. Picture *him* feeling well-paid and happy on ten bucks a week! Happy? Sure.

What the hell does he think the mill's going to let us do? Sit around and weep from six-thirty to five?"

"Yeow! Why do foreladies always have voices like rusty hinges? That must be why they're foreladies. They're stronger than the rest because they have less feeling. The reward of decency is that you never get promoted."

"Here comes that frowzy-headed old girl with the enameled face again. I'll have to stop kidding her. She's getting too familiar. She leans too close. What she needs is less cheap perfume and a bath. Hell, I guess she's trying to grab off a little life, too. Poor starved old bitch!"

"Some day I'm going to rip those god-damn signs off the wall. 'Save for a Rainy Day!' That's hot. Let's see, fifty cents a week, at three per cent interest, for about a hundred and fifty years—— 'Save for College.' That's better yet. Look at the picture on that one. *Ladies' Home Journal* version of the happy mill-hand's home. Doesn't that make you want to howl! Ah, but this one, this one takes the cake. 'My Country, *my* Flag, *my* Inalienable Right'—at thirty cents an hour—to life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness. Who was it said the Constitution was framed by 'a little group of hogs to protect their own trough'?"

"Christ, what would happen to this dungeon if a single breath of truth, of simple human justice, of simple common sense ever sifted through that brick wall?"

VI

On the top floor knitting machines twirl and shuttle. They suck in a mist of thread, they push out web, flawlessly knitted. Cully and I slap up galvanized insulation tubing between two walls. When you emerge from the hole the glare of the whitewash and the steely jiggling of the machines stab you in the eyes. Cully, always in a hurry, bouncing like a loose wooden toy on a string, comes plunging into the dark passage. With all the force

of his body he runs the end of a twenty-foot tube into my face. At first we think the eye is gouged out. It is the nurse who reassures me: "You're lucky, it just missed." But my cheek is laid open, and the bone is on fire with pain. Soon the half of my face is swollen purple and sightless.

"Why the hell don't you look where you're going?" says Cully.

Two days later I ran into an old school chum who travels the South with a line of electrical appliances. He heard my story and he laughed at me. He laughed at my skinned hands, my bandaged face, my "nutty notions."

"My policy is 'Leave 'em alone,'" he said. "The working class don't know any better, and they're happy." Then he smoothed out the folds under his chin and added: "I'll tell you what I'll do. If you want to go to New Orleans, I'll give you a lift as far as Jackson, Mississippi. We'll follow the levee down the river and stop at all the bigger towns. You might as well take it in, Paul. It won't cost you a nickel. I'll charge it up on the swindle sheet to 'liquor for entertaining customers.'"

And suddenly I was deep in the cushions of a big flashy motorcar speeding toward Chattanooga and Memphis. The grime began to wash out of my fingernails. The stiffness thawed out of my limbs. A few days more and I would be fit for the boulevard lights of any Main Street. Now there were fat meals in fat restaurants; struts in and out of bawdy-looking lobbies; momentous discussion with drummers on the steel-wool business and the weather; booze parties; expensive women (also, I suppose charged to the swindle sheet); late hours in bed; shower baths. I was a gentleman. Policemen, who in my customary travels eye me with suspicion, now took one look at my car and treated me with respect.

"This is the life, huh, Paul? Why don't you grab off something good and forget all that crap about the—my God!—the working class? I tell you, kid, it don't get you anywhere."

I would sit at night in the lobbies watching the parade of drummers, politicians, men-of-affairs. ("Say, there's Governor Bilbo himself!") How they waddled and swaggered! How their paunches bulged with the fat of good living! Those lobbies used to make me think I was sunk to the bottom of an ocean of lard.

"Yeah, it's easy enough for *you* to escape the hell of the knitting-mill," I would say to myself. "Escape? Bah, you were never really *in* it. To *you* it was just an interlude, an adventure. But to Cully and Ira and the machinist, to the nightman with the deft hands and the blue-eyed carpenter and the old girl with the rank perfume, the knitting-mill hell is the beginning and end of life. They are trapped. They can never get out. They will die in it like bony old nags."

"Leave them alone, they're happy," said the drummer.

"Leave them alone, they're happy" is no new American policy. It is the heritage of pioneer days. We smear over the surface with bright lacquer—Santa Claus funds, toy-and-doll funds, community chest campaigns—all done to the tune of banquets for the rich, publicity for the rich, honors for the rich. Underneath worms eat away the wood. "Save the surface and you save all." It took an American to think of that.

The American Enka Rayon Company announced last Fall a project for a \$10,000,000 plant in Knoxville. Thereupon the city council rushed forward with an offer to extend water mains, provide fire protection, waive taxes for ten years, and "*accept the consequences of fumes and odors.*" Against this proposal to burn on the altars of Big Business the very air the city breathes, a few aldermen had the humanity to protest. They were voted down. "We need industry here," declared the council. "We must offer everything to get it."

The next day the Scripps-Howard paper (and Scripps-Howard papers are supposed to be a trifle social-minded) printed a cartoon depicting the proposed plant—with its privilege of "fumes and odors"—as "a gift to Knoxville." In the same issue was

a full-page advertisement of moral pap about bringing up children to be good citizens of Knoxville. "This page is made possible by citizens of Knoxville who are lending their utmost unselfish support to build wholesome character in our youth of today—for they are the citizens of tomorrow." Among the ninety signers was my knitting-mill.

"They're satisfied," the personnel manager had said, looking out at me from his clean office, his rested body, his white collar, his trim tweeds. "Now and then one of them gets the swell-head and goes off to Detroit for big money. After a month he's broke and crawls back begging for his job. But most of our people are local people and they're satisfied."

What will happen when they stop being satisfied? Some day when they open their eyes and suddenly *see* the heaps of rotten lumber they live in; the grubby food they eat; their idiots and malborn; their native stock that cannot read a newspaper or sign its own name; their miasma of religious buncombe and racial prejudices black enough to blot out the sun; their bullring of meaningless days: sunrise to sunset the same drudgery, the same iron-fisted choking off of every vital impulse—for \$10 to \$13 a week?

Already they begin to chafe. They ask questions on the sly. The strongest flare up in bitterness. "They don't pay you nothin' down here. A workin' man ain't more than half human down here." Yes, keep the floaters and drifters out, New South! You're right: they stir up trouble. They bring comparison with them. A dangerous thing, comparison. But some day, for all your nice precautions, the New Industrial South is going to blow up. You can't put all that pressure on powder without its blowing up. However ignorant, however supine these hill-billies may seem to be, at bottom they are a strong people. They have sucked in savageness from their mountains, a burning thirst for freedom. If ever they revolt, theirs will be the bloodiest revolt in history.

THE NEW INNOCENTS ABROAD

BY RUTH EPPERSON KENNEL

MANY and various rebels against American society—budding communists, veteran socialists, I. W. W.'s, labor agitators, dreamers, failures, neurotics and plain adventurers—flocked to Russia after the war. Kuzbas, a coal mining enterprise in the Kuznetsky Basin of Western Siberia, was the most pretentious of the colonization projects. Fantastic plans of the New York Organization Committee called for thousands of American immigrants, but actually about 500 men, women and children joined the Autonomous Industrial Colony Kuzbas and traveled from the United States between 1922 and 1924.

The mines had already been long in operation, with several thousand Russian employes. The American colonists, many of whom were foreign-born participants in the radical labor movement that had so alarmed the Hon. A. Mitchell Palmer, were to be a super-directorate over the Soviet government enterprise. But during the first year the American colony was not actually given control, and so it lived a somewhat anomalous and unhappy existence, absorbed in its own petty problems and conflicts. There was no money, for wages were paid in *piocks* (rations). Everybody, including dependent wives, had to work. Housing, bad as it was, was free, and other communal services, such as electricity, fuel and water, were furnished by the enterprise.

The celebrated William D. Haywood was the first manager of the American colony. Like many other wobblies, Bill, while a glorious fighter, was not fitted by nature for steady and constructive work. He had a simple system of accounts: one

pocket was the debit side and the other the credit. His big heart went out to the Siberians and he wanted to adopt all the homeless children in the district. When he returned to Moscow in the Fall of 1922 to make way for a new director, S. J. Rutgers, he left his protégées as bequests to the Colony. Notable among them was Tovarisch One-Crutch. This 10-year-old boy had lost a leg in a sawmill, and now he lived by his wits. He adored Big Bill and limped after him like a puppy. For Bill's sake, he was given a job as messenger in the mine offices. When Winter set in and ill-smelling sheepskin coats, mittens and huge fur hats were distributed to the colonists, Tovarisch One-Crutch did a thriving business. His appeal to soft-hearted, sentimental Americans was that he had no hat—and the fur hats he collected he sold at the bazaar. Among his victims was Comrade Lemon, an ex-railroad conductor from Illinois and a stern communist of Puritan ancestry. Comrade Lemon stoically wore a wool cap all through the bitter Winter, contracted an abscess in his ear, and was the first to die in the smallpox epidemic of 1925. His widow remained to be the last American in Kuzbas, which in 1927 returned to Russian control.

Everything in those early days was decided in colony meetings. A motion to throw a certain engineer in the Tom river carried, but the debate over the details of the execution dragged on until the river froze over. Another motion that the American office force should work from 7 A.M. to 5 P.M. was railroaded through and enforced by the other workers, who were naturally in a majority.