

# The Tyranny of Strikers

Lizzie M. Holmes

1902

Two ladies sat earnestly conversing in the little parlor belonging to one of them, in a city of the eastern middle states.

“But I am so sorry for the strikers’ poor families,” said the visitor, a Mrs. Helen Hazard, who was said to be fairly well off, eccentric and somewhat imbued with some “strange socialistic notions.” “They are not to blame for their suffering and they are starving and are half clothed and sheltered. And they will soon be driven from their miserable houses by the mine owners because they cannot pay rent or keep up their payments in cases where they have bought them, it is said.”

“So much the more those great, hulking, lazy men ought to be ashamed of themselves. If they can see their children starving and do nothing to prevent it, I do not see why any one else should worry about them. All they have to do to put a stop to it is to go to work. I have no patience with these mischievous “labor unions.” They are exacting, tyrannical, and encourage men to be idle and greedy. They would ruin every man or company who is able to employ labor if it was in their power, and very often it is. I have no sympathy with them or their ‘troubles’ which they bring on themselves.”

The other lady looked a little surprised and hurt, but unconvinced.

“Well, but they must be strict in their rules for self-defense. Co-operation is the only weapon of the workingman .ind it is not co-operation at all if all do not co-operate. You see they have nothing to put up against their masters, the owners of the mines, mills and tools, in a struggle for their rights but their powers of enduring hunger. But wise or foolish it is a sin and a shame that here in civilized .ind enlightened America .little children should suffer from hunger and a law is made making it a crime to feed them.”

“A judge’s injunction is not a law,” responded the other.

“But its effects are the same. It would prevent the good, natural promptings of the human heart; it is as bad as the old ‘fugitive slave law’ or the anti-tramp ordinances which old foggy towns are yet fond of passing, making it a crime to give a cup of cold water to a needy fellow being. A good man will not obey the law too well, Emerson said, and I believe it.

“You have gotten hold of some pretty mischievous notion, Helen, I think. I never told you how we lost our property, did I? I believe I will tell you, then you will see that your trade and labor unions are not so benevolent and noble as you seem to think them. You know my husband was a millwright and contractor and used to undertake huge enterprises in which thousands of dollars were involved. He undertook a large mill in Illinois a little over ten years ago, and everything

looked prosperous for a good year's work. He gave bonds for thirty thousand dollars as surety that it would be done at a certain time. He commenced work with a full force of able, willing men, as he thought, and for a while everything went swimmingly. All his money was invested, in raw material and a sum for the men's wages, and all his estimates and calculations were made with reference to the prevailing price of labor. Then all at once when the work was about half completed, the building trades all went on strike for a raise in wages. Then everything stopped. We could not get a man to do a stroke, not even to bring material. All business was hampered and many a middle class dealer went to the wall; it was a ruinous piece of work all around. My husband, of course, could not yield to the demand of the unions; it was not his own men, mind you that made the demand, because it would have taken more than he expected to clear to pay the extra amount. The strike lasted a long time and there was a great deal of suffering among the strikers themselves, and finally the whole affair was compromised and neither side gained anything. When it was settled and the time came that the building should have been done, it stood there a half erected structure, falling to pieces, with the material spoiling in great heaps around it. Of course, he had to forfeit the money he had put up and then he gave up in despair. Nearly everything else had been put into material which he now could not use. We barely saved enough out of our once fair fortune to buy this poor little home, and you know how sparingly we are obliged to live. The unions are to blame—if it had not been for them we would be well off to-day."

"It is a sad story for you, dear friend, but you must remember that under the present system of exploitation and unfair exchange, defensive measures must often harm individuals; but while the unions may do one such ruinous act, think what the mighty combinations of capital called trusts are committing against both their employes and the consumers every day. The only way to meet the great consolidations of capital is by combinations of labor. Where there is invasion and injustice on one side there is bound to be resistance on the other, and in the struggle it would be wonderful if some one were not hurt. And this example shows how absolutely essential labor is. If it stops for a day, people suffer, and if for any length of time, it becomes a calamity. Without the continual exertion of labor, the rich man must suffer as well as the poor."

"I declare, Helen, I thought you would have more sympathy for me; when we have gone through such troubles as that and you have nothing to say more than to manufacture an excuse for those miscreants, I begin to doubt your lifelong friendship. We have been so close to one another ever since you were my little girl pet and I was a brown young woman, that I can't bear to think of anything coming between us. But I can't stand heartlessness. And I hear that your son, Ernest, who, of course, belongs to a union, is getting full of these new, dangerous notions and preaching them everywhere. If he persists in that way of thinking I don't see how I can let my Gertrude marry him. Why, she'd never feel safe with such a husband."

"Dear old friend, don't let such subjects separate us, or what is worst of all, do not let them separate our dear young people, who I know love each other dearly. We look at this question from different standpoints but it need not interfere with the warm regard we have always had for each other. And, indeed, you must not think I have no sympathy for your trouble—I know a little something about your misfortune, but never heard the particulars, and I felt the deepest concern for you when I knew you had lost so much of your property. But I had so much confidence in your courage and in your ability to make the best of everything that I have not considered that you really needed pity. As to separating our children—I think it is too late for us to do that. Your youngest daughter will soon be of age, and my son Ernest is of too independent a nature to allow

me to control him against his will, especially in a case of this kind. He is a good son, but he is too strong and self-reliant to let any one interfere in such matters.”

“Well, well, we’ll see. My daughter’s happiness is so much to me that I would leave no stone unturned to prevent her from bringing misery to herself.”

The two ladies separated soon after, with a little coolness that never before had shown itself between them, each trying to cover the fact that it existed.

The strike in the adjoining coal fields continued without any changes in the situation from day to day. Many sympathizers were sending in funds every day, but it is a great task to keep several thousand people in something to eat, saying nothing of other needs, and, of course, there was much suffering.

Mrs. Hazard took a journey with her son to the coal regions and visited the miners’ families in their own homes. Misery enough she found, but such courageous, well borne misery she had never imagined. In the little two and three-roomed cabins sheltering families of from five to eight or nine, she usually found the mother working away at washing or cleaning and the quiet, listless children sitting or lying about, and it was only by this peculiar quietness that one could have told anything out of the way was the matter. The children were thin and wistful and followed with their hollow eyes every movement of mother and visitor as will a hungry dog who thinks you may have something for him if he waits long enough. Each child wore little beside one garment, which in many cases was patched and clean, but in others was ragged and dirty and looked more miserable than necessary. With those who do not know how to make the best of every situation poverty seems more abject, more squalid and pitiable, and appeals more strongly to the superficial minded; but nothing is more pathetic to the societary student than the patient mother and children bearing their sorrows silently, with a subdued pride that will not disclose the fact of hunger and nakedness if they can avoid it.

At the best these people had been but one remove from hunger and homelessness. There was never a surplus to lay by, never more coming in than would suffice from day to day for the plainest living. And yet, how dangerous, how difficult, how exhausting is their toil! And how useful, how absolutely essential! All the magnificent ramifications of commerce, all the mighty engines of the world’s mighty movements, all the marvelous enterprises of genius, must stop if for one single week the miners of the world should cease their toil! The results of a coal miner’s toil reach around the earth and into every crevice of it; they have been built into monuments of magnificent buildings, gigantic bridges, wonderful machinery, railroads, trains and great ocean ships. They will last long after he is a part of the dust of the earth; and yet—for return he has received scarce enough to keep himself and family in good condition, and is never assured of sufficient for a week ahead!

A pinching income is bad enough when all the family are well. But when sickness comes—then is there wretchedness indeed! The man who can send for his favorite physician when a dear one is ill. can arrange the best room in his house with every convenience and comfort for the sick one. can order anything desired and bring the rarest dainties to tempt the feeble appetite, knows nothing of the squalor and misery of sickness among the poor. Mrs. Hazard one day entered a little shanty of two rooms, with a little shed attached where lived a man and wife and five children and a bedridden grandmother. One little child was sick of a fever and he lay upon a straw pallet made on a rough, hard board bedstead. Hot, stuffy, colored blankets constituted the bedclothes—no delicate, cool, clean linen soothed the burning limbs, no cooling drinks or delicious fruit allayed the choking thirst—everything was sordid, wretched, miserable! The other

children crept aimlessly about, none of them well and all needing healthful nourishment, good care, kindness and love. The unhappy mother and over-anxious father could give them none of these. Mrs. Hazard could not bring clean linen to all the sick ones in the striking district, but she did to this family, and encouraged them with kind words and brave thoughts. She saw so much misery that individual cases did not mark themselves on her mind as they did at first; for there are always so many degrees of wretchedness before one reaches actual starvation. Little children were trying to earn a few pennies picking berries, and wintergreen, or by running' errands for the better off people. There was deprivation of comforts and many necessities, and still the determined courage which made even little children silent under their sufferings. Mrs. Hazard felt that the lesson was a never-to-be-forgotten one for her. She saw too much of the injustice prevailing in the streets; the armed militia were everywhere. Groups of miners were never allowed to congregate, meetings were daily interfered with and broken up, and no processions or demonstrations of any kind were permitted. One day a miner answered a military officer rather pertly and disrespectfully, and the officer pulled a revolver and shot h;m. He was borne to his home by his comrades and cared for by them and the expenses were paid by the union; no one else even came to inquire about him, and nothing was done about it by any of the authorities. Mrs. Hazard kept up a correspondence with her old friend, Mrs. Leslie, and void her of everything she saw and heard, to which she received very little in answer.

Meanwhile her son, Ernest, was very busy looking into affairs and helping and encouraging the strikers. There were rumors abroad of a general eviction of the families who could not pay their rents or their payments, as the case might be, and the hitherto patient men were beginning to get excited over the prospect. There was certain to be trouble if this was attempted, and it was Ernest's greatest endeavor to prevent it if possible. With a great deal of skillful management and tact, he contrived to get the Board of Mine Managers to meet a delegation of the miners, tho', as usual, they maintained "there was nothing to arbitrate." and had himself made one of the delegates. He made an opportunity when before them to make a speech; in answer to a question, he requested a little time to go into detail. He then presented the situation in- full to the gentlemen, who at first appeared to be very much bored, but as he proceeded, they involuntarily began to listen with deep attention. He went over the subect carefully, reminded them first of the difficulties, dangers, risks, which their workers underwent, of the great importance of their work to the world in general, then described their methods of living as he had seen it. gave some pictures of the homes which some of the miners were trying hard to buy for their own. and of the hardship and injustice which would be inflicted if these men, who had almost paid for their homes, should be turned out of them. He spoke with such clearness, moderation, and with so keen a sense of justice that his hearers were evidently effected. A few more questions were asked of him and without further comment on their part the miners' delegation was dismissed.

Nothing further resulted for some days. The miners were not disturbed in their homes and there were no further aggressions on either side. This unusual inactivity tried the miners' patience more than anything else. Rations were getting low, and up to this time men who had come there expecting to find work had been paid out of the funds. No new men were coming in, however, and there was absolutely nothing to take the miners' attention from their misery. Many of them would have welcomed a fight, and if it had not been for Ernest and the . miners' leaders there might have been some serious occurrences.

Then one day when all were getting very despondent and hopeless, the leaders were sent for. At a closed meeting, where concessions were made on both sides, the strike was settled, and the next week the mines were to be entered for work again.

Mrs. Hazard was glad to hasten home, and first of all she visited her old friend, Mrs. Leslie. To her surprise she found that her friend had had every one of her letters published in a daily paper in the city.

“They were too good to be wasted on one simple woman, and they have opened my eyes so well, that I thought they ought to reach as many others as possible. I don’t believe the unions are perfect and they cause some unnecessary suffering, but I realize that workingmen could be immeasurably worse off than they are were it not for their united efforts and faithful, untiring work.”

There were no further objections to the marriage of their children, and in a short time their wedding took place at the home of the bride’s mother, where a sweet, simple and beautiful ceremony made the two one, as their minds were one in the cause of toiling humanity.

— Lizzie M. Holmes.

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