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[Cosmetics and Coal]

COSMETICS AND COAL

(A Depression Victim Story)

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COSMETICS AND COAL

“Ours is much better coal than you are selling and it will certainly server your customers to greater advantage.” A man's voice was saying as I walked into the office of the Fuller Coal and Wood Company.

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His high-powered salesmanship must have been very effective for when he left he carried with him an order for three carloads of coal to be delivered by May 15.

A vase of flowers and a partly finished dress on a sewing machine evidenced the feminine touch in this office, which otherwise was like the usual one of its type.

Mrs. Fuller, owner and operator, to a very diminutive person, who weighs not more than ninety-five pounds. On this particular morning she was wearing a shirtwaist dress and her light-brown hair was combed straight back and arranged in a bun on the naps of her neck. Her manner was very brisk and businesslike.

An Mr. Milton of the Tennessee coal Company left the office with a “desire accomplished” look on his face, Mrs. Fuller turned to me with a smile, as one said:

“And now, what can I do for you?”

“Well,” I answered, “Our work at this time centers around people who were drastically affected by the Economic Depression 2 and because I know that you come under this category, I have come to ask you to tell me of your experiences.”

She agreed readily but told me that she would need prompting as she went along in the shape of questions that would keep her on the right track.

“You’re asking quite a lot when you expect me to go all the way back to my birth date. However, I’ll try.

“Our old home was on a plantation in Wilkes County. My father was a native of Wilkes but my mother came from Lincoln County. I was born September 10, 1890, the third child in a family of 12, but only six of us reached maturity.

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“My father believed in educating his children and although though we each had special work to do on the farm, he saw we had ample time to attend school.

“My mother passed away when I was 12 yours old, and as I was the oldest girl, I fell heir to her work. So then, I not only had to do the cooking and washing for the entire family but also had to find time to go to school. Of course I couldn't hold out very long under this strain and because my father was unable to obtain help, school had to be given up.

“My father finally married again, but the home was never the same. My stepmother was undoubtedly a good woman but she didn't understand children. In other words the maternal instinct was entirely lacking in her make-up.

“When I was 16 yours old, I married B. L. [MoManus?], who 3 was employed as a loom fixer at the Sibley Manufacturing Company. Thus a little green country girl came to Augusta to establish a home. My three boys were born of this marriage.

“My husband gave me a lot of trouble. Whiskey and women were his weaknesses and after fifteen years, even he came to realize his failure as a husband. One day he admitted it and asked me why I didn't leave him.

“I answered: ‘If I can't succeed at making our home, I certainly won't break it up.’ Well, he had no such [scruples?] and he left me with my three little boys, when the youngest was seven. I didn't know what to do and felt certain we would starve.

“When my father learned of my trouble, he came to my rescue immediately. There was nothing left for me, but to move to the country with him. I was very grateful for the food and shelter but was very dissatisfied eating other people's bread.

“I applied for support from my husband. He agreed to give me \$10 a week and then a little later a friend of mine sent for my oldest boy to work on his laundry truck at \$5 a week. I

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now felt that I was financially able to move back to Augusta and put the two younger boys in school.

“I was almost a nervous wreck from all the worry and trouble. I prayed every day for a way to open that would enable me to get the oldest boys, Otis, back in school also.

“One Saturday as he was working on the truck he found a 4 copy of the Augusta Herald. He could never explain where it came from and I have always felt that it was an answer to my prayers. I [searched?] eagerly for the want ads, and found that there was an opening for a lady to sell California products.

“I could hardly wait until Monday. Somehow, I felt almost certain I would get the job and that through it would come the solution of my financial difficulties.

“I lived through Sunday somehow, and bright and early Monday morning I was on hand to apply for the job. My spirits were somewhat dampened when the lady told as me I would have to put up a \$5 deposit for the sample kit for that was just about \$5 more than I possessed.

“I found the proverbial ‘friend in need’ who offered to lend me the money and first thing Tuesday morning I reported for work. I didn't realize how very weak and nervous I had become and at first I was only able to work 3 days a week. It wasn't very long before I had built-up a clientele who ordered regularly and my average earnings reached \$50.00 a month.

“As the mental strain lessened I began to improve physically, and I began to feel like I was really living again. I was now able to keep all three of the children in school. I only-worked from 8:30 A.M. to 2:00 P.M., in order to have my afternoons at home with my boys.

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“Even with such short working hours my sales mounted to \$1,000 a year for several of the ten years I worked for the 5 company. Each of those years I received a \$50 bonus as a reward.

“For the last two years I remained with that organization and for sometime afterwards, I also sold coal for Mr. Fuller as a side line. He allowed me a commission of 50 cents for each ton I sold. Some seasons I made as much as \$100.00.

“I had always wanted a home of my own and before long I located a lot that suited me on Ellis Street. The cost was \$575.00 and the owners offered it to me for a \$10.00 cash payment; the rest to be paid at the rate of \$10.00 a month.

“One day when I had my lot about half paid for, I went to the hospital to deliver some orders. I saw a crowd gathered at the emergency room, but as I was in a hurry to get home and have supper, so I could go to prayer meeting, I didn't stop to inquire who was hurt.

“You can imagine how amazed I was when upon my arrival at home, my next door neighbor hurried out to ask how Otis was.

““He is all right.’ I answered in surprise. ‘Why do you ask?’”

“don't you know that he was run over by a city truck and rushed to the hospital with a broken leg?”

“And before I realized what I was saying I cried: “Oh, God, why did you let it happen to my boy?’ A minute later I was horrified at my [sacrilege?] in daring to question what God had done for after having a minute to think I remembered that

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‘He doeth all things well,’ as he showed me later.

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“My boy's leg was in an awful condition and the doctors told as that an operation was absolutely necessary. They explained to me that the leg would have to be cut and put back together with silver pegs.

“I just didn't see how I was going to stand it and the morning of the operation I stayed away from the hospital until I thought it was all over. When they brought him down from the operating room he looked so bad I was telling myself: ‘He'll never walk again!’

“Joy seldom kills but it came pretty close to it when the doctor said, with a much lighter manner than I thought suitable for the occasion:

““Well, when we put him to sleep, we pulled his leg and kneecap slipped into place and it was not necessary for us to operate. In about three months, he'll be up and walking.””

“The injured leg in about half an inch shorter than the other but the difference is scarcely perceptible. The city paid the hospital and doctor's bills and gave me \$500.00.

“I finished paying for my lot and used the rest of the money to make a deposit on the house. In a very short time I began building my home.

“Did I tell you that each of my boys helped themselves through school by carrying the Augusta Herald?” She asked with pride.

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“I couldn't always take up the notes just when they were due.” Mrs. Fuller went on. “But both of my creditors were very considerate and as long as I paid the interest they were both satisfied.

“And now I want to tell you about the best part of my life. All through my troubles when I came face to face with a crisis of any kind I first asked God to guide me and without his

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help I would have failed. Yes, I have had many trials and heartaches, but God always helped as carry my burdens.”

“When did you marry Mr. Fuller?” I asked.

“We were married in January 1926.” She answered. “And I kept on selling California products until he died in 1928.”

“And he left you the coal and woodyard?” I queried.

“No he left a will which gave the executor the power to do as he liked with the property. I have never really known how much Mr. Fuller had. My lawyer advised me to ask for a year's support and I was given a houses, a lot, and a small cash payment. The house was in such ill repair that it took the better part of the money to put it in rentable condition. What was left after this was done I used to make the final payment on my home.”

“Who got the woodyard?” I asked.

“Mr. Fuller's nephew. He told me that he had bought it.”

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She replied. “I worked for him here in the office for \$10.00 a week. As didn't know a thing about the business and just at the beginning of the Depression, I bought the place from him. It took all the cash I had as I also had to pay for several carloads of coal then on order.

“The effects of the Depression upon my venture were immediate. I took the business over at the very beginning of the season and instead of my sales increasing they were falling off daily. I lost a lot of money on coal that had already been delivered on credit. Most of this had been sold to railroad employees, who had been laid off after the receipt of the coal. It seemed that the bottom just fell out of the railroad business about that time.

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"I didn't realize that the trouble was here to stay and kept on selling on credit. Of course, there was no way to collect for nobody had any money. The few cash sales I was able to make and the very little money derived from those who did pay failed to net we sufficient funds to keep coal in the yard for delivery. Then the larger coal dealers cut the price of coal to \$6.00 a ton, in an effort to force me and another small local dealer out of business.

"I had spent my last dollar and the mines refused to ship more than one carload of coal and that was shipped C.O.D. I borrowed \$175.00 to pay for a carload and when I had sold that, I ordered another.

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"I had mules to feed in addition to the upkeep of the wagons and the first two years of the Depression I only made \$500.00. I felt as though we were facing starvation. As a last resort I mortgaged my home to keep my boys in school and to buy coal and wood."

"Did you continue to sell on credit?" I asked.

"Yes, I couldn't refuse when folks would tell me they had sickness or that their little children were cold. Some of them I knew would pay when they could, others I was dubious about. And do you know I am still collecting some of that money? Sometimes they can only give me 50 cents a week, but at that - they are paying."

"How is your business, now?" I asked.

"Good, very good." She replied. "For a long time now it has been increasing. I have replaced my mules and wagons with four modern trucks, have paid off all the mortgages and have the money on hand to pay for my coal upon delivery.

"Yes I have a bank account. My average income is about \$500.00 a month and I am able to save quits a bit of it."

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“Did your boys go to college?” I asked.

“No, but they all finished High School. My oldest son is married and has two children. The middle boy is an accountant and the youngest works for me. Both of them are single.

“I am very tired and nervous and before very long I expect to turn my business over to my sons and take a much needed 10 rest.

“Anyway, as I see it men make better managers for this type of business. I knew that in a good many cases women are more successful but where you hire colored drivers, it takes a man to keep them going and the responsibility is too great for a woman. I can notice a great difference since my son has been with me. Yes, a man is better fitted to manage this business.”

“Mrs. Fuller, I notice what your place is surrounded by small houses, apparently occupied by people of meager incomes. Do you have many calls for help?’ I asked.

“Yes, I do.” She replied, “And up until this winter I gave away several tons of coal in sacks. I never turn an old person away or refuse to give coal where there's sickness. I have had fewer calls for help this winter although it has been the most severe on record. Times are really better. The nearby mills are running full time and are employing three shifts. I tell my boys constantly how very thankful we [should?] be. [Especially?] so, that we are Americans and live in a free country.