

## [Ima Buckner]

Asheville Cotton Mill

Asheville, N. C.

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I. L. [A.?)

IMA BUCKNER

It was late Saturday afternoon. A heavy fog hung over Factory Hill. Ima Buckner was deeply worried and the dreary day added to her depression. Her husband, Ned, fifty-five, withered and toothless, sat on the porch with his hands folded together and his head bowed.

Right up hill from Ima's house her mother and unmarried sister live. A few feet below her in a little house on a washed-out lot her brother, Dan, his wife and four children live. I had just accepted Ned's invitation to seat myself in one of the two chairs on the parch when Ima, accompanied by her sister, returned from her mother's house. Her brother come over from his house and stood in the narrow rut of a yard, shifting from one foot to the other.

"I jest have to go off now and agin fur a cryin' spell," Ima said to me as she flopped down on the steps and covered her thin, yellow face with her hands.

"Are you in trouble?" I asked.

"My daughter was operated on Thursday and she's bad off. Today's the first day she's begged me not to leave her and I'm afraid she's uneasy about herself."

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"Is she married?" I inquired.

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"Nom, and I hope she won't never be now. She's thirty-four and she aint been right well since she was fourteen. That gym they made her take at school was always against her."

"You oughtner let her took it," Dan said gruffly.

"I couldn't help it," Ima defended herself.

"They couldner made her. It aint the law," Dan continued.

"I don't understand nothin' 'bout the law," Ima said and burst into tears again. "I don't even understand about them work benefits. We have to sign up every Thursday, you know, and I had to go to the City Hall not more'n a hour after Mamie come off the operatin' table. They close at half past four and if you aint there on the day set for you you don't get nothin'. My hand was so trembly hit wouldn't hold a pen and my boy had to sign fur me. The girl up there talked so hard to me." Ima's sniffing changed to heavy sobbing.

"What made her talk like that?" Dan asked belligerently and then proceeded to answer his own question. "Cause she was settin' behind a desk gettin' good money to hand us out little checks."

"Do you reckon she can keep me from gettin' my money just because I answered her back?" Ima asked as 3 she turned toward me. Before I could speak, Dan was answering her question for her.

"Course they caint," he said. "Taint the law. Hit aint theirs to give or to take away. Hit belongs to us and we've got a right to it. Uncle Sam started this; now let him finish it. They got to pay. I signed up sixteen times before I got a cent of mine durin' them weeks last winter when I was jest agettin' two days a week in the mill. Hit's almost worth it to get it but

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I'll have mine even if I caint get there by half past four of a Thursday to sign fer it. They say since I get off work at 4 o'clock I oughter be there on time. They think I'll come on jest like I work in the mill but I aint adoin' it. I'm gonna bathe, and shave, and brush a little cotton off me before I go up there to see them people that stay dressed in good clothes all the time. How's a fellow like me goin' to pay his bus fare, too? '[?] I walk from here to the City Hall hit's past 4:30. Why caint they let me sign up on days when I aint aworkin'? They's plenty of them days now, plenty of 'em."

Ima's mind was no longer on her unemployment compensation. She was thinking of her sick daughter in Mission Hospital. Then a tiny chicken perched itself 4 up on the edge of a pasteboard box near the end of the porch, she said, "Thems her chickens. She's the craziest thing I ever seen about little biddies. She was in bed five weeks before she went to the hospital and I'd spread a cover over the bed and put them chickens on it fur her to see. She's got a hen here that her feller give her when it was nothin' but a biddy. If anything happens to Mamie I'll keep that hen as long as it lives."

When Ima had gained control of herself again she continued, "I've got Mamie's picture in there on the piano if you'd care to see it. She's the prettiest thing and as good a girl as ever lived."

I followed Ima through her comfortably equipped kitchen which would have been clean except for the sooty walls, through a fairly comfortable bedroom and into the parlor. "This is Mamie's piano," she said with pride. "She bought it herself outa the money she made in the mill. That radio belongs to my son, Harry. My three children have shorely worked hard to have things like other folks. You ought to see the bedroom suite them two girls has got upstairs. And Mamie's got a whole cedar chest full of fancy work. Here's her picture. Aint she sweet-lookin'['?]"

"Both of your daughters are nice looking," I said, glancing from Mamie's picture to the one still on the 5 piano. "Henrietta's a fine girl too," Ima said proudly. "They both stayed

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in school till they finished the ninth grade. Both got certificates from Bible school, too, and that gives 'em the right to do any kind of church work. They are Sunday School teachers down in the Patton Ave. Baptist Church.”

“You've never had but three children?” I asked presently.

“Jest three. After the boy was born I was in such shape that a year later I had to go to the hospital and have everything took out. The doctors told me not to go back to the mill for six months after that operation. In two months time I was at work agin. I was inspector in the cloth room then and none knowed about a certain kind of cloth but me. The mill got orders for it and the superintendent asked me if I couldn't come back. He sent his car right up to my door for me and I went. I've spent many a day down there in that mill so sick I could hardly go.”

“How many of your family are working now?” I asked.

“Ned, and Henrietta, and Jim got three days apiece a week. I was workin' up to last December but I fell and broke my arm. We was managing fairly well till them heavy doctor's bills come on us. My broke arm cost a sight but it wasn't a beginnin' to what Mamie's sickness 6 will cost.

“I doubt if they'll ever give me work agin. They's so many people tryin' to get a place in the mills now. Since we've got the stretch-out and short time too, the mill don't need all of us noway. You seen Ned settin' out there on the porch and lookin' plumb wore out?” she asked. Then as if she were afraid someone else might hear her Ima came nearer and began speaking again but in lowered tones. “He's doin' two men's jobs now and hit'll kill him before long. He caint hold up under it at his age and him about used up from workin' since he was a child. Me and him's spent most of our lives down there in that mill.”

It was not hard to believe as she stood there that most of her life had been spent toiling. Her drab grey hair formed a fitting frame for her withered face. Her eyes still struggling,

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looked merrily out of their sunken sockets. The loose pink dress she wore wrapped in folds about her fleshless body.

“A body don't know whether Mamie'll ever be able to take care of herself agin,” Ima said as she led the way back to the porch. “And I'm so anxious for my children to have things like other folks.”

Ima's sister had left but Dan was still standing out in the yard. Dan's two oldest children sat on the doorsteps and held boxes of 5¢ blocks of candy in their laps. The pale twelve-year old girl looked up and said, “We make thirty-five cent apiece a week sellin' candy, and I get a dollar and five cent a week for stayin' with Mrs. Johnson while her husband works on night shift.”

“Hit's almost as much as I make,” Dan said, laughing bitterly.

“Do you reckon they'll keep me outa my work benefits?” Ima asked, turning toward me.

“I'm sure you'll get it if your work record meets the requirements of the law,” I replied.

“Course they caint keep you from gettin' it,” Dan said stoutly. “Taint the law to keep it from you.”

A foggy silence fell over the crowd. Ima looked uneasily at her brother and he dropped his head, abashed. Dan's wife came out of her door and joined her husband where he stood in the yard. Everything about her suggested tuberculosis in its latter stages. She looked at her daughter and said, “Reckin you'll git your thirty-five cent this week?”

“I think I'll finish sellin' my box this evenin',” the child answered.

Ned who had not spoken since he invited me in, looked up at me with a toothless smile as I got up to leave. “Come back agin, m'am,” he said and lapsed again into weary silence.

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I turned to Ima and expressed my hopes for her daughter's quick recovery. Tears sprang to her eyes and her voice was unsteady as she asked me to come again. All of them watched me in silence as I went down the path and away from Factory Hill.