

Hungry



by LAUREN W. GILFILLAN

UPON graduating from Smith in 1921, Lauren W. Gilfillan went to New York to look for a job connected with writing. She found nothing, except this practical bit of advice: "There's a coal strike on in the Pittsburgh fields. Why don't you go there and live with the miners and see what it's all about? If you have writing in you, that ought to bring it out." Miss Gilfillan accepted the counsel and went to the Pittsburgh district where, because of her slight stature and immature appearance, she was able to pass as a miner's child. This article, the first of two, is the result of her experience. — *The Editor*

I

BURRING! rang the alarm. I opened my eyes with a start. At first I thought I was still dreaming — at the sight of the little room. An expanse of plaster ceiling, almost touching my nose, its unpainted surface melting away in the shadows; bare walls, bare floor; the single scratchy blanket covering me; the bare outline of the dressing table made from a packing box, with its squat water pitcher, startlingly white in the gloom; the little slit of a window, through which filtered the first pale gleams of dawn. I shivered, drew the blanket up to my chin, and a sharp lump in the mattress gouged my back. Then I remembered.

I was in a mining town about thirty-five miles from Pittsburgh. I was in the upstairs bedroom of the household of the Konnechecks, at whose door I had appeared only yesterday, asking, "May I stay here?"

"Sure, sure," old Grandma Konnecheck had

welcomed me, grinning a toothless grin, and wriggling her bare toes on the doorstep. "You stay. You sleep in Archie's bed. I make him sleep downstairs."

And so I had walked in, and here I was — in Archie's bed.

Burring! I leaped out of bed and shut off the noise whose shocking loudness desecrated the sleeping house and the dead stillness of the valley. Five o'clock. I looked out the window. Rolling mists enveloped the hilltops in clouds of greenish milkiness, drifted and shifted in the valley, filling it like a cup. Over there, the blurred black outline of the tippie of a mine. Below the window the narrow roadway of cinders, which leads down into the village. And everywhere the smell of coal.

"To-day," I said to myself, "I am to be a miner's child and go to Pittsburgh to beg for money to keep me from starving."

In the pallid light I set to work. I brushed my teeth — although I knew an authentic miner's child would not have done so — with the strange-tasting sooty rain water in the pitcher. Better that than the well water with its danger of typhoid. I neglected to wash my face, shook my hair, mussed from sleep into a shaggy thatch, took some eye shadow and drew blue circles around my lashes. Then I buckled my money belt about my waist. Now — clothes. A faded calico dress, ill-fitting, voluminous, with a tear in one sleeve. Too clean, this dress, but it would soon be grimy enough. No stockings, tennis shoes with holes in the toes. I took up a hand mirror and surveyed myself

in the filtered light. Big eyes stared gravely back at me from a pale, pinched face. Yes, that was the way they looked. I drew my features into a hungry expression. I would do. I looked poverty stricken enough.

Down the rickety stairs into the cool, beautiful morning. Down the cindery road, stretching before me like a sleeping black snake. My feet crunched noisily in the stillness. Mist. I could feel my hair curling in its wetness. It settled on my bare arms and I shivered. Here was a little wooden bridge. I stopped to look down into the shallow yellow water rippling below. How I should love to bathe in its coolness. No bath yesterday, probably no bath for days to come. But this golden water was a poisonous solution, diluted sulphur from the body of the mine. It would make my hair fall out, Yren Konnecheck, aged ten, who looked fifteen, had told me yesterday.

"No baths?" I asked her anxiously.

"Bath?" doubtfully. "You could wash in the washtub."

"You could if you had a washtub," added her ragged little girl friend, who also looked fifteen, and must, therefore, be ten.

One by one, the silent shanties passed me. No lights in the windows. You didn't have to get up early any more, now that the strike was on. At the turn of the road, the square shape of the relief kitchen pierced the obscurity. Formerly it had been a tiny ramshackle candy-and-tobacco store, but the proprietor had been forced to shut down because the miners had no money. I could discern shadowy figures huddled on the broken steps.

"Hello, little missy," growled a hulking figure, "you're up early this mornin'."

"I want to see the picket."

"Well, stick around. You'll see the picket all right, all right."

I sat down on the steps and surveyed the group of miners. Broad-shouldered laborers who slouched and stooped. Leathery work-worn faces of European cast, frequently grizzly with mustache and beard. Trousers and shirts of uncertain hue — earth color. In the half light, they seemed strangely earthy with their hairy fists and faces, and guttural voices. They stood about in knots and jabbered in strange languages. Rapid mutterings, low exclamations, emphasized by jerkings of the head and hands. Now and then I thought I

caught a word in English, strongly accented.

A young fellow with blond Russian features diffidently seated himself beside me. I turned to him and asked in a childish voice, "What are they sayin'? I can't hardly understand."

He grinned. "Oh, they all talk at onct in different languidges. They can't understand each other no better'n you. They just like to argue."

"What languidges?"

"Slovak, Lithuanian — oh, all kinds. They talk about the strike."

"You goin' on the picket?"

"Sure."

"You go every day?"

"Sure."

A stalwart red-haired man appeared in the doorway of the relief kitchen.

"You're a stranger, ain't you? You hungry?"

Thank heaven, I thought, I look hungry. "Well," I replied, "I ain't had no breakfast yet."

"You can git coffee and bread when you get back from the picket."

"But I'm goin' with the kids to Pittsburgh. They start at six."

"Yeah? You goin' with the kids? Ever been to Pittsburgh?"

"I been there once," I answered truthfully.

"Yeah? Where you livin'?"

"I know," a man spoke up unexpectedly, "to the Konnechecks."

"Grandma Konnecheck? Sure, I know her. Slovak family. What are they to you? A relation?"

"Naw, I just board." I dreaded the next question, "What are you doing here?" I did not want to answer, "I'm a college student come among you to study your way of exist-ing." But the dangerous question did not come. Instead:

"If you ain't got enough to eat up there, we got beans and potatoes here."

My disguise, I inwardly exulted, is complete. "Beans and potatoes is good food," I said hypocritically.

"Sure, when you're hungry. But you get damn sick of it."

A diminutive little girl appeared without warning out of the mist.

"Hello, Mary," said John.

Mary strode up to us. Such a scrawny child. I could not guess her age. Her peaked little

face bore the sophistication of a mature woman, but its outlines were so young. She was dressed in sky-blue georgette, sadly wrinkled and soiled, but elaborately pleated and embroidered. It had no sleeves, and her bony little arms, thus left unprotected, were purple with cold. The sheer transparency of the material revealed the scarcity of her underwear and generous portions of her undernourished little frame. She wore coarse silk stockings, one long run thoroughly sewed up with thick thread, and old cut-out strap slippers much too large, with spike heels wickedly high — higher than I had ever ventured. But Mary balanced herself upon them in an assured and sturdy gait. Her face had an unwashed look, but her straight hair was nicely combed, and she had even attempted waves by means of numerous "bobby" pins. John made the introductions.

"This here's Laurie."

Mary nodded. "I seen you yesterday. I couldn't think who you was. I thought I never seen such a strange face."

Then I did look strange. In my anxiety, I forgot to speak in the vernacular.

"Did you mean my face was strange, or that it was a face you had never seen before?"

She laughed, a short husky laugh devoid of childishness. "Your face ain't no funnier'n other peoples'. I thought you was a kid I hadn't never seen before." I breathed relief.

II

MORE MINERS had been constantly arriving. Now a crowd of about fifty men had collected. It was time for the picket to start.

"Two by two. We got to be in order. . . . What mine we goin' to to-day? P. and W. . . . They workin' to-day? . . . We got to hurry. . . ."

The sun was not up yet. In the veiled light, the group shuffled into a long double line and moved off down the road in the opposite direction from which I had come.

"Come on." Mary dragged me forward. "We got to be back by six, though."

We hurried after the receding picket and became the last couple of marchers. Other stragglers caught up, and followed behind us, so that to my surprise I found myself actually one of the picket — and feeling proud of it.

We marched on into the village — the "patch," as the miners called the group of

hovels in which they lived, clustered about the mine where they worked. Crunch, crunch over the line of black cinders which separated the houses on either side. Shacks which were nothing but boards badly thrown together. Row after row, all alike. House ran into house like clod into clod. The earth about their doors was smooth and black, barren of grass or trees. It made a strange contrast, this little black village, to the luxuriant green hills in the distance over which the mists still hung.

Women in draggled dresses and unkempt locks, some with shawls over their heads, and ragged children in bare feet ran out of the houses and joined the picket.

"Which mine you goin'?" shrilled a woman.

"P. and W.," shouted back several of the men at once.

A strapping woman appeared, heavy with pregnancy, and carrying a little child on a vigorous arm. As she joined the picket, a man spoke to her roughly.

"What does he say?" I asked Mary. "Can you understand?"

"He's speakin' Hungarian. That's what my pop speaks. He says she hadn't ought to bring the baby. Maybe there'll be trouble with the cops and it might get hurt."

The woman had replied with a defiant toss of the head.

"She says she'd like to see the cops try anything on her."

We were approaching the mine. Next to it, the slag heap reared from the earth like a miniature gray mountain. The monotony of its grayness was relieved by a series of reddish lines, running from the summit to the level. These were channels hollowed out by rain, and the iron ore made them red. Fine curls of smoke rose languidly from the gray mass.

I looked away to the hills in the distance. It struck me that a group of them was the same stark gray color as the slag heap. Mary said that they were slay dumps — coal mixed with slate, and therefore no good. I asked a man behind us how long it took to pile up a hill that size.

"Maybe seventeen, maybe twenty year."

"You shovel all that?"

"Yeah."

"You get paid for it?"

"No. We only git paid for coal."

Mary began to sing in a strong, husky voice:

The operators say the pay they give
Is no-body's business.
The operators say the way we live
Is no —

"Can it, kid," said the man. "Cops, they shut your mouth for you."

"Let 'em come, just let 'em come!" Mary tossed her head in the manner of the woman with the baby.

Just as we reached the mine, the cops did come. Four of them in a big Buick. In their smart uniforms, their imposing helmets with leather straps under the chin, they looked very much like tin soldiers. The state police. Under the hostile swaggering stares of the miners, their faces wore the impassive non-expression of lifeless dummies. This was my first glimpse of the American police as they appear to the laboring man in revolt. I too felt swelling in my bosom a curious feeling of hostility.

The police car drove up and down, counted the number of the picket, and drove off.

"They do that every morning," Mary informed me. "Sometimes they kick the kids off the picket."

"Do you ever have fights?"

"Yeah, sometimes. Never kin tell when something is goin' to happen. My pop's in jail for sassin' the police. I gotta tear bomb in my nose onct. God! I thought I'd die!"

"Does the picket fight with the miners?"

"The picket *is* miners."

"With the scabs," I amended.

"Not any more. Now they just walk up and down two or three times, and then go back to the relief for to git coffee. That there Annie Sherman," she pointed to another little girl plodding along ahead of us, "sometimes she don't git on the picket. If it rains, she don't. Afear'd to git wet," scornfully. "And she goes and gits coffee to the relief just the same, the dirty scab. Christ, I hate her!"

"How old are you, Mary?"

"I'm thirteen. How old are you?"

"Twenty-two."

"Twenty-two! I thought you was about fifteen."

We were marching up and down in front of the mine now — a yawning black hole in the hillside with railroad tracks running into it. In front of it, on the tracks, stood a coal car full of men. Other men were arriving, dressed in grimy shirt or overalls, a pit lamp attached to their caps, and dinner pails dangling from their fists. Other men were pushing mules about. The scene was alive with activity, but a curiously silent activity. I heard only subdued mutterings. Figures dashed about in the mistiness, the picket line stalked silently back and forth, and the giant head of the tippie towered bleak and black against the sky.

Suddenly a voice arose from the picket.

"I'm hun-ngr-r-ry," it quavered. "You dirty scabs! Takin' the bread out of my children's mouths."

The faces of the arriving scabs were set rigidly. They walked on, with heads erect, looking neither to the right nor to the left, pretending to be deaf to insult, disdainful of recrimination. I felt sorry for them.

A brawny colored miner approached with his dinner bucket.

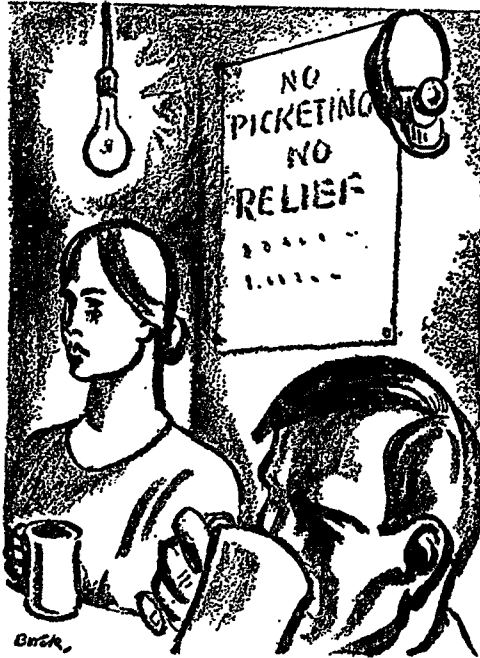
"You dirty black scab!" shouted the man behind us. "We don't want no black meat!" The Negro advanced without turning his head.

Through it all, a man leaned against a tool shed and coolly watched the proceedings.

"That there's the super," whispered Mary.

"Moosilini," muttered the man behind us. "Ol' Moo-silini!" I afterward learned that "Moosilini" was an epithet applied indiscriminately to mine officials, mine owners, and capitalists in general.

Someone at the head of the line began to shout something, but his voice suddenly died.



Drawings by Jacob Burck

The cops had come back again.

"Keep in line there," growled a cop — to whom I could not tell; it seemed to me that they were all in line. When the police had driven off again, Mary said, "It's gettin' late. Let's hurry." She dragged me out of line and we left the picket at a rapid pace.

"Let's run," I suggested.

"I can't run in these here high heels."

"How can you walk in them at all?" I marveled.

"I ain't got no other shoes. I got these off the relief. They're too big fer me, but they ain't no holes in 'em. . . . You got good shoes, ain't you? They just fit."

I looked down at my toes, peeping through their ragged covering.

"They're good to walk in," I said.

III

WE ARRIVED at the relief.

On the plate glass windows could still be seen the lettering, "Coca Cola," and "Drink Red Top Malt Extract," but these signs were now replaced and almost effaced by others. Straight across the window in large, black, handpainted letters stared the words, "National Miners' Relief Station. Help the Starving Miners," and below, in whitewashed letters, "No Picketing, No Relief." Here and there, tacked to the framework, hung smaller signs, chalked in red and blue. "Local meeting, today, 7:00 P. M." "Y. C. L. meets Saturday, 2:00." "White and colored must be brothers in this war. Shoulder to shoulder and struggle, comrades, and put a smile on your face when you get in wrong with scabs. Strike committee order." "Don't let the bosses ride on your back. Let's get together and ride on their backs. Don't be a scab. Be a man, not a scab." *Etc.*

Mary ran in.

"Got some coffee?" she demanded of the red-haired man, who seemed to be the cook.

"Sure," he smiled. "Got sugar, too. Help yourself."

I stood in the doorway and surveyed the interior of the relief. There was nothing much to see but the long bare counter and the vacant shelves, empty except for a collection of bowls, cups, and spoons, and a pair of high-topped woman's shoes. On one end of the counter lay a sheaf of printed leaflets entitled, "The Daily Worker," and at the other end, the man was

busily cutting up loaves of bread. He slit them in halves the long way, and chopped the halves into four parts each. Mary had taken a cup from the shelf, dipped it full of coffee from a huge kettle at the back of the store, and now she sat on the counter, swinging her legs, and nibbling and sipping.

"Don't you want no coffee?" said the man to me as I hung back. "Don't be scared. Take some bread. Ain't you hungry?" He dipped up a cup of black coffee and held it out to me. Reluctantly I accepted the food. Mine was gone before Mary's was.

"I can't eat fast," she explained. "It makes me sick to eat fast."

"Take some more coffee," the man urged me. "We ain't got enough bread this morning fer two hunks apiece, but there's plenty coffee." I shook my head, but he insisted. "You wanna eat when you got the chanct."

The coffee was the worst I had ever tasted, but I took more. Before I had managed to swallow half of it, we heard a burst of song, and a truck full of children drove up. I set down the cup.

"Drink it!" roared my relentless host. "Finish it! There ain't no hurry."

The truck was crowded with a horde of ragged children, all singing at the top of their lungs. I caught the words,

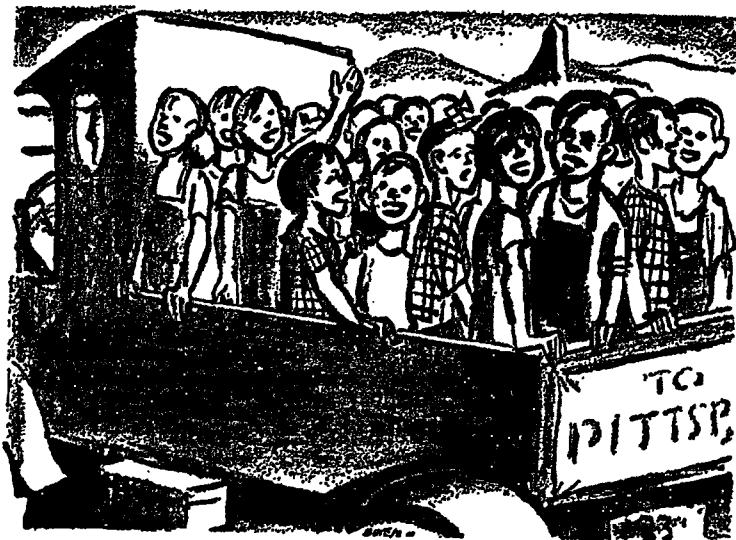
Wave scarlet banner
Tri-um-phant-lee!

I looked at the clothing of the other little girls. They were, as Mary, dressed in finery infinitely more pitiful than my faded calico. One pair of pipe-stem legs, dangling from the rear end of the truck, terminated in bronze satin slippers, very much run over at the heels and frayed at the toes, and decorated with enormous rhinestone buckles. They were so much too big for the bare feet that their owner had resorted to holding them on by means of black elastic garters over the instep.

"These children," I thought, "have dressed themselves in their best clothes to go begging." I later learned that they had borrowed shoes from one sister, stockings from another, a handkerchief here, a hair clasp there, in order to be decently and completely dressed for the occasion.

"Where'd you git your dress, Mary?"

"Off the relief. Ain't you got no clothes from the relief?"



When the cops' Buick had disappeared over the horizon, the driver again started the motor, and this time we were really off. As we rumbled along, the children began an endless series of songs, which continued all the way to Pittsburgh. Their repertoire was limited, but they made up for it by enthusiastic and untiring repetition.

"Why ain't you singin', Laurie?"

"I don't know the words." But I soon learned them. The following was a general favorite and made the little boys grin and spit.

Oh, my country, oh, my country,
How I love each bloomin' spot!
Ain't it funny how for money
You can be a pay-triot.

Boom the business, boom the business,
Says Hoover to his lot.
Sell apples, clean the sidewalks,
And you'll be a pay-triot.

"Who taught you these songs?" I asked Mary.

"The organizers."

"Who's the organizers?"

"He is, and she is, too." She pointed to a young man of about twenty and a young girl of about eighteen, who stood together in the front of the truck. They were both of Jewish countenance, dressed as poorly as the rest of us, and the girl was really beautiful. They seemed to be in charge of the expedition.

"Who's she?" I demanded of Mary.

"Comrade Shirley. He's Comrade Jack."

We drove onward over the macadam road, passing other mining towns which looked exactly like ours, black spots on the green landscape. It was crowded and stuffy in the truck. Skinny arms twined around my neck as the children held to the jolting sides. They breathed into my face and clutched my hands with clammy fists. I remembered the scarlet fever quarantine sign I had seen on one of the shanties on the patch.

The childrens' lips turned blue, but the cool air was exhilarating to me. It made goose flesh stand out on my rounded, well-fed arm.

"I got another dress," I apologized. "But I'm savin' it. Is this all right?"

"Sure," Mary reassured me, "it's all right." She put her arm around me protectingly and pulled me toward the truck. We clambered aboard.

"All set?" called the driver.

"Yes!" screamed the children. But just as we were about to start off, the cops rolled up again. The picket was just returning. They stopped short in their tracks and watched. There was a dead silence. Everybody waited for something to happen.

"You're not allowed to do this," one of the cops said to the driver. "You ain't got a permit."

"We're goin'," replied the driver shortly.

"You get off the road," ordered the cop in suppressed, and it seemed to me, helpless fury. "And let me warn you," he included the inspectors in his glance, "this can't go on much longer. If you kids go to town, we'll lock you up, you hear?"

Silence.

"Get off the road!"

The driver steered the truck to the side of the road, and the cops drove away, amid the jeers of the children. They began to sing.

The cops are havin' a hell of a time,
Parlez-vous!
The cops are havin' a hell of a time,
To keep us off the picket line.
Hinky, dinky, parlez-vous!

But the miners did not raise their voices. They just stood there, speechless, rooted to the spot.

"You're cold, Laurie," observed a little girl near me. "You put on my coat," and she began to slip it from her shoulders.

"I don't mind. I like the cold."

But she mistook my physical pleasure for her own stoicism. "You put on my coat." She held it out.

"No, no, no, keep it!" I protested. "You'll be cold, yourself."

"Take it," said Mary, and she and her friend forced me to put on the coat. It was the dirtiest and most dilapidated little coat I had ever seen.

The children were stiff from standing in the crowded truck for so long. But they kept on singing.

Here's to the Y. C. L.
Build it up, build it up.
Here's to the Y. C. L.
That makes us fight like hell.
Build it up.
For one big union. . . .
Marching for the proletariat.

"What's the Y. C. L.?"

Mary stared. "Don't you know? The Young Communists' League."

"Oh."

Long haired preachers come out every night.
Try to tell us what's wrong and what's right.
But when asked about something to eat,
They answer in voices so sweet.

Chorus: You'll eat by and by
In that glorious land above the sky
Way up high.
Work and pray,
Live on hay,
You'll get pie in the sky when you die.
(That's a lie.)
Working men of all countries unite.
Side by side we for freedom will fight.
When the world and its wealth we have gained,
To those grafters we will sing this refrain:

Chorus: You will eat by and by,
When you've learned how to cook and to fry
Apple pie.
Chop some wood, 'twill do you good,
And you'll eat in the sweet by and by.
(That's no lie.)

"Do you believe in God?" I asked a little Italian. He regarded me with withering scorn.

"Naw," and he turned his back.

"I'm hungry," stated another youngster in a matter-of-fact tone.

"Sure you're hungry," said Comrade Jack. "We're all hungry. We'll get eats when we get

to Pittsburgh." He began to sing a new song in a strong baritone. The girl joined in.

Arise, ye prisoners of starvation,
Arise, ye wretched of the earth.
For justice thunders condemnation.
A better world's in birth.

The song had an arresting and beautiful melody. I listened intently.

No more tradition's chains shall bind us.
Arise, ye slaves, no more enthralled.
The world shall rise on new foundations,
Ye have been naught, ye shall be all.

The children seemed not to know this song very well. The words were a bit hard for them. But the boy and the girl sang on with heads thrown back. At the chorus they raised their right arms, palms facing outward.

'Tis the final conflict.
Let each stand in his place.
The International Soviet
Shall be the human race.

Comrade Jack and Comrade Shirley! Then I knew what that song was. It was the "International." It was beautiful.

Pittsburgh! Pittsburgh was coming. The children were excited. Many of them had never been away from the patch before. We rolled breathlessly into the city.

"Be sure and keep to the back streets," Comrade Jack instructed the driver. And so we traveled by way of the slums.

The people on the streets stared at us, but it seemed to me without surprise. Some of them waved to us. Others frowned. We passed another truckload of children with whom we exchanged frantic greetings. The police of Pittsburgh were on every corner. So far, they had not chosen to notice us. The children had not ceased singing.

One, two, three,
Young Communists are we.
We're fighting for the working class
Against the bourgeoisie.
Four, five, six,
Happy Bolsheviks.
We go out on the picket line,
Despite the vicious dicks.

Suddenly we heard a shrill whistle. Two policemen stood in the street in front of us, and one of them was holding up his hand, his face purple with rage.

"Stop your car!" he shouted: