

else could it be done? Do you care to think what would happen at such a meeting? It took us just one meeting to discover that we had become beggars—rotten, whining, sniveling beggars all of us, because no man could claim his pay as his rightful earning, he had no rights and no earnings, his work didn't belong to him, it belonged to 'the family,' and they owed him nothing in return, and the only claim he had on them was his 'need'—so he had to beg in public for relief from his needs, like any lousy moocher, listing all his troubles and miseries, down to his patched drawers and his wife's head colds, hoping that 'the family' would throw him the alms. He had to claim miseries, because it's miseries, not work, that had become the coin of the realm—so it turned into a contest among six thousand panhandlers, each claiming that *his* need was worse than his brother's. How else could it be done? Do you care to guess what happened, what sort of men kept quiet, feeling shame, and what sort got away with the jackpot?

"But that wasn't all. There was something else that we discovered at the same meeting. The factory's production had fallen by forty per cent, in that first half-year, so it was decided that somebody hadn't delivered 'according to his ability.' Who? How would you tell it? 'The family' voted on that, too. They voted which men were the best, and these men were sentenced to work overtime each night for the next six months. Overtime without pay—because you weren't paid by time and you weren't paid by work, only by need.

"Do I have to tell you what happened after that—and into what sort of creatures we all started turning, we who had once been human? We began to hide whatever ability we had, to slow down and watch like hawks that we never worked any faster or better than the next fellow. What else could we do, when we knew that if we did our best for 'the family,' it's not thanks or rewards that we'd get, but punishment? We knew that for every stinker who'd ruin a batch of motors and cost the company money—either through his sloppiness, because we didn't have to care, or through plain incompetence—it's we who'd have to pay with our nights and our Sundays. So we did our best to be no good.

"There was one young boy who started out, full of fire for the noble ideal, a bright kid without any schooling, but with a wonderful head on his shoulders. The first year, he figured out a work process that saved us thousands of man-hours. He gave it to 'the family,' didn't ask anything for it, either, couldn't ask, but that was all right with him. It was for the ideal, he said. But when he found himself voted as one of our ablest and sentenced to night work, because we hadn't gotten enough from him, he shut his mouth and his brain. You can bet he didn't come up with any ideas, the second year.

"What was it they'd always told us about the vicious competition of the profit system, where men had to compete for who'd do a better job than his fellows? Vicious, wasn't it? Well, they should have seen what it was like when we all had to compete with one another for who'd do the worst job possible. There's no surer way to destroy a man than to force him into a spot where he has to aim at *not* doing his best, where he has to struggle to do a bad job, day

after day. That will finish him quicker than drink or idleness or pulling stick-ups for a living. But there was nothing else for us to do except to fake unfitness. The one accusation we feared was to be suspected of ability. Ability was like a mortgage on you that you could never pay off. And what was there to work for? You knew that your basic pittance would be given to you anyway, whether you worked or not—your ‘housing and feeding allowance,’ it was called—and above that pittance, you had no chance to get anything, no matter how hard you tried. You couldn’t count on buying a new suit of clothes next year—they might give you a ‘clothing allowance’ or they might not, according to whether nobody broke a leg, needed an operation or gave birth to more babies. And if there wasn’t enough money for new suits for everybody, then you couldn’t get yours, either.

“There was one man who’d worked hard all his life, because he’d always wanted to send his son through college. Well, the boy graduated from high school in the second year of the plan—but ‘the family’ wouldn’t give the father any ‘allowance’ for the college. They said his son couldn’t go to college, until we had enough to send everybody’s sons to college—and that we first had to send everybody’s children through high school, and we didn’t even have enough for that. The father died the following year, in a knife fight with somebody in a saloon, a fight over nothing in particular—such fights were beginning to happen among us all the time.

“Then there was an old guy, a widower with no family, who had one hobby: phonograph records. I guess that was all he ever got out of life. In the old days, he used to skip meals just to buy himself some new recording of classical music. Well, they didn’t give him any ‘allowance’ for records—‘personal luxury,’ they called it. But at that same meeting, Millie Bush, somebody’s daughter, a mean ugly little eight-year-old, was voted a pair of gold braces for her buck teeth—this was ‘medical need,’ because the staff psychologist had said that the poor girl would get an inferiority complex if her teeth weren’t straightened out. The old guy who loved music, turned to drink, instead. He got so you never saw him fully conscious anymore. But it seems like there was one thing he couldn’t forget. One night, he came staggering down the street, saw Millie Bush, swung his fist and knocked all her teeth out. Every one of them.

“Drink, of course, was what we all turned to, some more, some less. Don’t ask how we got the money for it. When all the decent pleasures are forbidden, there’s always ways to get the rotten ones. You don’t break into grocery stores after dark and you don’t pick your fellow’s pockets to buy classical symphonies or fishing tackle, but if it’s to get stinking drunk and forget—you do. Fishing tackle? Hunting guns? Snapshot cameras? Hobbies? There wasn’t any ‘amusement allowance’ for anybody. ‘Amusement’ was the first thing they dropped. Aren’t you always supposed to be ashamed to object when anybody asks you to give up anything, if it’s something that gave you pleasure? Even our ‘tobacco allowance’ was cut to where we got two packs of cigarettes a month—and this, they told us, was because the money had to go into the babies’ milk fund. Babies was