

The Old Umbrella Mender (March 1913)

It was on a cold morning late in November last, just after the national election, and I was walking briskly toward my office. A stiff wind was blowing and a drizzling rain was falling. The threads in one of the ribs of my umbrella snapped asunder and the cover flew upward, as it has a way of doing, and I was about to lower my disabled shower-stick when I ran slapdash into an old itinerant umbrella mender with his outfit slung across his back and shuffling along in the opposite direction. He had noticed the ill-behavior of my umbrella. It snapped from its bearing even as he had his eyes upon it. Perhaps it understood. Anyway he had not a cent in his pocket and he had not yet breakfasted that cold and wet November morning.

He was about 65. His clothes had evidently weathered many a storm and besides being worn and shabby were too light for that season. Overcoat he had none. Nor gloves, nor overshoes. Mine embarrassed me.

His hat had been brushed to a standstill. His shoes were making their last stand and a protruding toe, red with the cold, seemed to have been shoved out as a signal of distress.

The outfit of the old fellow, carried on his back, was sorry enough to fit his general makeup, and if he had offered himself for sale just as he stood, including his earthly belongings and his immortal soul, he would have found no bidder nor brought a cent.

The face of the old umbrella mender lighted up with a kindly smile as he commented on the strange conduct of my umbrella in slipping a cog just as he happened to come along. I asked him by what evil magic he did the trick and he laughed in a half-hearted way just to be polite, but it was plain that he had long since forgotten how to laugh.

As we stepped into the shelter of an adjoining store he sat down on the steps and drawing a threaded needle from beneath the lapel of his thin and faded coat, he began to sew the cover back into its proper place. His fingers were red and numb. A discolored nail partly hid a badly bruised thumb.

He had difficulty in doing this bit of sewing, and it plainly distressed him. His eyesight was failing and his fingers were stiff in the joints. Yet he strove eagerly and intently to master their dumb protest. And he hoped, as he remarked, that he would be able to make an extra bit of

money to provide himself with a pair of spectacles, now that favorable weather had set in for his trade.

Poor human soul, I thought to myself, as I looked down upon the weatherbeaten brother at my feet! A vagabond dog among his kind would fare better than this worn-out old umbrella mender in a civilized human community.

The warm clothes I had on made me uncomfortable as I saw him sitting there in rags mending my umbrella. The overcoat I wore made me ashamed of myself. Every time the umbrella mender looked up out of his rags I winced.

What crime had he committed that condemned him to go through the world in tatters to be lashed by the merciless blasts of winter and tormented by hunger-pangs, and of what rare virtue was I possessed that entitled me to wear the best of clothes and eat the choicest food?

Dared I call him brother? And could I call him brother without insulting him?

These were the reflections that agitated my mind and troubled my heart.

“Good morning, Mr. Debs!” was the cheery greeting of a man who passed on the sidewalk, calling me by name.

The old umbrella mender fairly started at the mention of my name. He had just completed his bit of sewing and the threaded needle fell from, his fingers.

“Excuse me!” he said timidly, “is this Mr. Debs?”

“Yes,” I answered.

“Eugene V. Debs?”

“Yes, brother.”

“Thank God,” exclaimed the old umbrella mender as he fairly bounded to his feet and seized my extended hand with both of his. There were tears in his eyes and his face was flushed.

“Of course I know you now,” he went on. “This is your home and I have often seen your picture. But this is the first time I have ever seen you and if it hadn't been for your umbrella snapping just as I came along, I would have passed you by and the chances are that I never would have seen you. God must have tipped off your umbrella to give me a stop-signal.”

“Say, Gene,” he continued, still holding me with both hands, “I am pretty well down, ain't I? About all in and making my last stand before shuffling off.”

“But say, Gene, I never scabbed. Look at these hands! I'm an old rail and I followed the business for twenty-seven years. I broke and ran a freight train most of that time. Never got a passenger run because I was too active on grievance committees and called a firebrand by the officials. I wouldn't stand for any of their dirty work. If I'd been like some of? em I'd had a passenger train years ago and been saved lots of grief. But I'd rather be a broken down old umbrella fixer without a friend than to be a scab and worth a million.”

A gleam of triumph lighted up his seamed and weatherbeaten countenance.

“Did you belong to the ARU?” I asked.

“Did I?” he answered with peculiar and assuring emphasis. “I was the first man on our division to sign the list, and my name was first on the charter. Look it up and you'll find me there. My card I lost in Ohio where I was run in as a vag.¹ The deputy that searched me at the jail took my card from my pocket and I never saw it again. It was all I had left. I raised a row about it and they threatened to lock me up again. I was told afterwards that the deputy had scabbed in the ARU strike.”

“Did I belong to the ARU? Well, I should say I did and I am proud of it even if they did put me on the hummer and pull me down to where I am today. But I never scabbed. And when I cross the big divide I can walk straight up to the bar of judgment and look God in the face without a flicker.”

“We had the railroads whipped to a standstill,” he said, warming up, “but the soldiers, the courts, and the army of deputy United States marshals that scabbed our jobs were too much for us. It was the government and not the railroads that put us out, and it was a sorry day for the railroad men of this country. Mark what I tell you, the time will come when they will have to reorganize the ARU. It was the only union that all could join and in which all got a square deal, and it was the only union the railroad managers ever feared.”

And then he told me the melancholy story of his own persecution and suffering after the strike. His job was gone and his name was on the blacklist. Five jobs he secured under assumed names were lost to him as soon as he was found out. Poverty began to harass him. He picked up odd jobs and when he managed to get a dollar ahead he sent it to his family. His aged mother died of privation and worry and his wife soon followed her to the grave. Two boys were left, but whatever became of them and whether they are now alive or dead, he could never learn.

The old fellow grew serious and a melancholy sigh escaped him. But he was not bitter. He bore no malice toward any one. He had suffered much, but he had kept the faith, and his regrets were at least free from reproach.

He was a broken down old veteran of the industrial army. He had paid the penalties of his protest against privately owned industry and the slavery of his class, and now in his old age he was shuffling along in his rags toward a nameless grave in the potters field.

Had he been an obedient corporation lackey; had he scabbed on his fellow-workers; had he been mean and selfish and cold-blooded, he would have been promoted instead of blacklisted by the corporation and honored instead of hounded by society. His manhood and self-respect cost him dearly, but he paid the price to the last farthing. His right to work and live, his home, his family and his friends were all swept away because he refused to scab on his fellowmen.

The old umbrella mender stood before me proud and erect and looked me straight in the eyes as he finished his pathetic story.

The shabby clothes he wore were to him capitalist society's reward of manhood and badge of honor.

There was something peculiarly grand about the scarred old veteran of the industrial battlefield. His shabbiness was all on the outside, and he seemed transfigured to me and clad in garments of glory. He loomed before me like a forest-monarch the tempests had riven and denuded of its foliage but could not lay low.

He had kept the faith and had never scabbed!

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¹ That is, arrested for vagrancy. Open-ended vagrancy laws were used in many locales as a blunt tool for legal authorities to arrest the homeless unemployed and potential labor agitators at will.