
The Scab

by Eugene V. Debs

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Philosophers, particularly those who have sought to solve the simpler mysteries of creation, have always been greatly perplexed when endeavoring to find any plausible reason for the existence of certain insects and reptiles, which curse the earth, the air, and the water. They have never succeeded. The mystery is unexplained and unexplainable. But, while it is impossible to explain the whys and the wherefores of repulsive, pestiferous, and poisonous creatures, we may study their habits and guard against contact with them.

It becomes our duty at this writing to discuss the "scab." Generally, people quickly comprehend what is meant when a creature, in the form of a man, is referred to as a "scab." Shakespeare says, a "scab" is a "low fellow" — how low, the great bard does not intimate, but he doubtless believed that a "scab" was the lowest in the list of bipeds. The term, "scab," has a significance wholly repulsive. It is suggestive of filth, disease, and corruption. There is nothing in the term "scab" to redeem it from loathing. When a creature, in the form of a man, rightfully receives the sobriquet of "scab," he is known to be a mass of moral putrescence. He sinks to the level of a loathsome reptile. Honorable men shun him as they would a pestilence. A scabby sheep, a mangy dog, outrank him. He becomes a walking, breathing stench. He is as destitute of soul as a dungeon toad. He is as heartless as a man-eating tiger. He has no more conscience than a tarantula. To call him a dog would be an insult to the whole canine race.

The average scab is a moral leper — unclean through and through, so vulgar and beastly in his instincts that he is as destitute of all sense of obligation, of what is due to others, as a hungry hog, with its snout in a swill tub. The scab is a sneak — analyze him, resolve him to his original elements, and all the subtle arts of the chemist would never discover the millionth part of a milligram of manhood. A scab is as totally deficient of ability to comprehend the right as a

piratical wolf. Being deprived by nature and association, he has no more ambition than a buzzard. When he sees a manly endeavor on the part of others to better their condition, the incident simply suggests to his mind that there is a chance for him, and with his hat under his arm and with bowed form he asks, like a menial, to work for wages that an honorable man refuses. The scab always comes to the front when honest workingmen strike against oppression and injustice. On such occasions employers fish for scabs in the stinking pools of idleness and depravity, and they are ready to do their duty for such considerations as their masters may offer. The scab is a filthy wretch, who though the Mississippi ran bank-full of soap suds, could not wash him clean in a thousand years.

The scab is the natural born foe of labor in its efforts to advance from the condition of servitude to independence, and such he has been found to be in the struggle of the engineers and firemen with the CB&Q,¹ and he is destined to play the same degenerate role in the future. The scab merits universal reprobation, and that will be the verdict of all honorable men.

Edited with a footnote by Tim Davenport

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¹ The Chicago, Burlington & Quincy Railroad, object of a major strike by the Brotherhood of Locomotive Engineers and the Brotherhood of Locomotive Firemen in 1888.