
Railroad Managers and the Brotherhood of Locomotive Firemen

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In the discussion of any subject, social, scientific or moral, religious, educational, or financial — it matters not what — a very large margin should always be allowed for ignorance, stupidity, and bigotry. There are always to be found in every community an element composed of those who wear the “human face divine”¹ for no other purpose, seemingly, than to disgrace and degrade it, and these creatures, when “dressed in a little brief authority, play such fantastic tricks before high heaven as make the angels weep.”²

The Brotherhood of locomotive Firemen was organized, primarily, for the social, moral, and intellectual advancement of its members. Its aim is to inculcate sobriety and frugality, self-respect and independence; in a word, the highest type of manhood and citizenship. We unhesitatingly challenge the severest scrutiny of the fundamental principles of our noble order by friend or foe, and demand of them to point out in the constitution and bylaws of our Brotherhood, or in its record, from first to last, any measure or practice which bears testimony in conflict with the declarations we have made.

¹ A phrase from *Paradise Lost*, Book 3 (1667) by **John Milton** (1608-1674).

² From *Measure for Measure* (1604), Act 2, Scene 2, by **William Shakespeare** (1564-1616). The original lines read:

But man, proud man,
Dressed in a little brief authority,
Most ignorant of what he's most assured,
His glassy essence, like an angry ape
Plays such fantastic tricks before high heaven
As makes the angels weep, who with our spleens
Would all themselves laugh mortal.

It must be admitted, therefore, that our purposes are strictly in accord with all things of good report. Our aims are high, our ambitions praiseworthy. Locomotive firemen are not theorists; visionaries laboring to give hallucinations the force and value of verities. They are, on the contrary, pre-eminently practical men — necessarily so, for their vocation compels them to deal with problems demanding caution, vigilance, courage, and risks of life and limb. Inebriety, carelessness, or neglect invite such terrible penalties that Locomotive Firemen cannot fail to observe that however lightly such defects may be regarded by others, for themselves, they cannot be tolerated without increasing, in a terrible ratio, the damages which forever accompany them in their perilous rides on the rail.

The Brotherhood of Locomotive Firemen, as an organization, seeks to intensify the abhorrence of its members of all things calculated to imperil life, character or employment. It seeks to create and to foster those ideas of manhood and citizenship which, if carried into practice, must of necessity make a Brotherhood fireman the peer of his fellow-citizens in any and every walk of life — sober, industrious, frugal, intelligent, and self-respectful.

The Brotherhood of Locomotive Firemen, as an order, has reasoned thus: "If our members are temperate men, intelligent men, cautious and watchful, men of integrity and high social standing, they will be in demand by all railroad managers throughout the land." In this we conclude they have reasoned intelligently. The logic is sound. The proposition cannot be successfully controverted, and yet it must be written that there are railroad managers who will not employ firemen who are members of our Brotherhood. We confess it is difficult to believe that at this high noon of intelligence the country is disgraced by such railroad managers. They are not men of common sense. They are victims of vulgar prejudices. Their judgment is warped and distorted. They are the enemies of the roads they control and the foes of society. They are public nuisances. They refuse to employ men who are honest, sober, capable, and industrious, qualities of head and heart which should be a passport to employment everywhere, and in which the public is profoundly interested, because such Locomotive Firemen belong to an organization designed to inculcate such virtues. These bull-headed burlesques of humanity by their acts, and acts speak louder than words, inform the public that a drunken, dishonest, negligent fireman, who does not belong to our Brother-

hood, is preferable to a sober, honest, watchful firemen who does belong to our Brotherhood.

In pursuing a course so manifestly in conflict with the interests of railroads, and which is well calculated to fill the public mind with alarm, it becomes important to ascertain, if possible, the reasons which prompt such action. It is at war with prudence. It is a protest against virtue. It is in open revolt against sobriety, intelligence, and manhood. It is a bid for ignorance, drunkenness, and incapacity, and railroad managers, who discard Brotherhood firemen, say to the owners of their roads, "As between a sober, industrious, vigilant fireman and a drunken, profligate, incapable fireman, we prefer the latter." And in view of the stupendous infamy of the choice the people ask, Why?

We answer the question without hesitancy. It is because railroad managers who pursue such a course belong to that class of despicable creatures who a few years ago throughout the South were known as negro whippers, a class of brutalized creatures, whose vocation, in the eyes of those who employed them, sunk them by irrevocable laws to a level infinitely below that occupied by the helpless victims of their lash. These railroad managers, who make war upon the Brotherhood of Locomotive Firemen, would have their employees destitute of intelligence and independence, cringing, fawning slaves, devoid of manhood and ready to do their bidding, as if they were chattels. If a locomotive fireman spends his earnings like a profligate, if his associations are low and vulgar, if he cares little or nothing at all for character, if he is devoid of noble ambitions and neglects his wife and children and makes no provision for them, if death or sickness overtakes him, he is the man who is wanted by the class of railroad managers who refuse to employ Brotherhood firemen.

It is difficult to understand why it is that great interests are committed to the keeping of such men as the railroad managers we have referred to, whose inherent meanness defies description. They are the advocates of all that is groveling, abject, and contemptible in life and character, because when a locomotive fireman descends to such a level, the arrogant, mercenary, and narrow-minded manager can dictate his destiny and keep him forever in the despicable position of a serf.

But it is to us a source of extreme gratification to say that such railroad managers as we have referred to and who arouse our ineffable contempt are not numerous, nor is their influence such as to stay in

any degree the gigantic step and upward march of the Brotherhood of Locomotive Firemen. Their vulgar antipathies, their arrogant, dictatorial policy, their patronage of drunken thriftlessness and opposition to intelligence, industry, integrity, and capability, will in due time arouse such unutterable loathing and universal denunciation that they will be compelled to abandon their policy or get out of the way. The time is at hand, indeed, it has already come, when railroad managers will recognize in the Brotherhood of Locomotive Firemen an organization which is putting forth its mighty energies to produce a class of workmen worthy of the confidence, the respect and the esteem of all men, and the great traveling public, quick to appreciate faithfulness to trusts involving life and property, will join us in anathematizing such railroad managers as seek to place upon our noble order the brand of persecution, or subject its members to penalties for their devotion to manly and virtuous lives.

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