

# There Lived a Man in Our Town

RUTH CRAWFORD

TERRE HAUTE, IND.

**E**UGENE DEBS was considered bad for our town. He kept labor dissatisfied. He organized unions. His presence there, so they said, kept factories from locating in Terre Haute. That was the reason the town was not forging ahead along with Gary, Fort Wayne, Evansville and South Bend. Some said he ought to be put up against a wall and shot for knifing our soldiers in the back in 1918. He was causing trouble all the time, tearing down the government.

Others said it was a shame that such a good man got off on the wrong foot. He was smart enough. He could have made a good living if he had tried. He would have been all right if he had not been a Socialist, for a more genial, likeable fellow never lived. But, since he was a Socialist—therefore dangerous and undesirable—it was well not to flaunt his citizenship. When he ran for President, in 1912, for instance, there was nothing in the papers about him until the day after the election. Then there was an account of his election rally at the Opera House. It was worth half a column on the inside page.

But he was kind to reporters, even though they could not get their stories published about him. He understood. It was all right to interview him. The old ones tipped off the young ones that they should see Debs, that it was an experience worth having. So two of us, we were the cubs, went calling one fine morning. This was shortly after Debs' return from Atlanta prison.

One thing I remember of what he said: "I could not have done other than I did. I have been an extremely selfish man. I hope it has been an enlightened selfishness." I remember well, however, the kind of conversation we reporters had on the way back to the newspaper office. It was an embarrassed conversation, a futile attempt to build a bridge back to a world of lies. "They say he could have been President if he hadn't been a Socialist..." "He could have gone to Congress instead of Everett Sanders..." "Socialism would be all right if people were as good as Debs..." "The trouble is he just thinks we are better than we are."

"But the way he talks, it all seems so possible, so simple, doesn't it?"

"Yes, he makes you believe in miracles and Jesus Christ."

"And Abou Ben Adem."

We were silent, each thinking of that radiant face . . . one who so loved his fellow-men . . . and remembering that eloquent voice . . . "while there is a lower class I am in it; while there is a criminal element, I am of it; while there is a soul in prison I am not free. . . ."

"I'm glad we saw him. He'll be great some day, maybe."

"I guess maybe he is great now, only we just don't know it. Don't you feel that way about him?"

We had to judge his greatness solely by the impact of his personality, because we had been told little about him except that he was bad for the town. He kept labor dissatisfied.

**H**E has been dead nine years now. His name is in the history books. It is also on the advertising literature of the Terre Haute Chamber of Commerce. It reads: "Terre Haute is the birthplace and home of Eugene V. Debs. He lies buried in Highland Lawn Cemetery on the National road, Route 40."

Now that they think he is safely dead they do as the ruling class has always done with those who fought for the oppressed. Publicly they honor him so that the people will still believe in their kind of democracy, an illusion necessary to their own survival. Privately they meet in their council chambers and organize Fascist bands to "preserve law and order in Terre Haute and thus prevent a recurrence of the labor troubles which have given their city so much unfavorable publicity." So they cloak their lawlessness.

Individually these men are decent people. Collectively, however, they act with calloused cruelty in defense of their class interests. They act with the desperation of the fearful. Have they not seen a ghost, a ghost rising from Highland Lawn Cemetery? Has there not been a general strike in Terre Haute and have they not reason to remember again that Eugene Debs was bad for the town? Yes, he taught too well; the men and women who fought that strike are the ones who claim Gene Debs as their own.

Living among them, as has been my privilege, is like being warmed with a fire kindled by a great and good man. Even if one had never heard his name, one would know from these working men and women that a man had walked among them, a man endowed by nature with great gifts, most memorable of which was his love for humanity. His was an enveloping love which somehow was the most personal kind of love. He had a way of making individuals grow in stature. He expected much, and men and women, in his presence, tried not to disappoint him. It is this quality of his which most impresses one when talking with those who knew him in Terre Haute.

Gene Debs was the close friend of hundreds in that one small community. I have seen letters he wrote on learning of a birth, a marriage, or a death. I have heard fathers tell with pride of taking their children to him, children named for him. I have heard men tell how he helped get them started in business. I have heard a woman tell of his long legal battle in behalf of her bereft family; her

husband, a working man, was injured. Debs was never too busy to attend to his friends' troubles even though he was away from home.

He was the idol of the newsboys in Terre Haute. He set them up to ice cream sodas when he came downtown. The line formed and there were repeaters. This practice was stopped, not by Debs, but by outsiders who protected Gene from himself. He literally, many times, gave the shirt off his back, so they say.

Debs was a loving man, and out of this love he could do what in others might have seemed an affectation. They tell, for instance, of the time he came home to speak at the Grand Opera House, one of those times when he was running for President. As he came on the platform he saw his old friends, and in the joy of his heart, embraced them. They all remember how at the end of his speeches he always bent in an obeisance to the crowd. "He loved us so well," some one described this act, "that he thanked us for the privilege of speaking to us. He had genuine humility."

Because he loved people he shared with them his own rich culture. The "radicals" still meet in an old church which during his lifetime was headquarters for the Proletarian Literary Society. One of his first organizational activities in Terre Haute was the formation of a literary group. And one of his first ventures—it was unsuccessful—was sponsorship of an evening of readings by the Hoosier poet, James Whitcomb Riley, then unknown.

Debs was the one who brought Susan B. Anthony to Terre Haute, likewise an unsuccessful adventure. He was for woman suffrage. The "suffragettes" always had a place in his election parades. "Votes for Women" slogans were interspersed with "Vote Socialist" banners, while the band played the Marseillaise.

He was always telling the people that they must educate themselves. "You need to know that you were not created to work and to produce to impoverish yourself and enrich an idle exploiter," he said in the famous Canton speech repeated in Terre Haute. "You need to know that you have a soul to develop, a manhood to sustain. You need to know that it is for you to know something about literature, about science and about art. You need to know that you are on the edge of a great new world. You need to get in touch with your comrades. You need to know that as long as you are indifferent, as long as you are content, as long as you are unorganized you will remain exactly where you are."

"You need to know that you are fit for something better than slavery and cannon fodder."

The last are the words that sent Gene Debs to prison.

THE portrait of the loving man—the Christlike character, the man who went about doing good—is the one the Chamber of Commerce of Terre Haute would paint today. That is the man they now claim as a distinguished citizen. Let the people forget what he taught. “The most heroic word in all languages is revolution.” Gene Debs, the Socialist, is dead. “We insist that there is a class struggle; that the working class must recognize it; that they must organize economically and politically upon the basis of that struggle; and that when they do so organize they will then have the power to free themselves and put an end to that struggle forever.” The man who wrote those words lies buried in Highland Lawn Cemetery.

Tourist, turn in the gate to that beautiful cemetery in the rolling hills. The ashes of Terre Haute’s honored citizen are there.

But—take care! Let the dead stay dead. Last spring the school board ordered an American flag placed over the inscriptions on a mural in the high school, painted by Gilbert Wilson, young Terre Haute artist. The inscriptions were thus covered because children reading them might think they were sayings from Debs. It mattered little that one of them was from the Declaration of Independence and the other from a speech of Abraham Lincoln. The youth of Terre Haute must be protected from such “dangerous ideas.”

But there are not enough American flags in Terre Haute to keep hidden longer the red flag of world brotherhood brought to the working class of that city by Gene Debs when he lived among them. He left behind him men who were well-taught, a handful of leaders, home-town Reds. Like Shubert Sebree, for instance, rank and file trade unionists, unheralded and unsung, plodding on, leading the struggles for relief, organizing unions, uniting the liberal and the working-class elements of the city in the fight against fascism.

And the workers agree with these leaders, those who carry the Debs’ torch. They preface their remarks by saying, “It’s come out the way Debs said it would.”

And they see now that Debs was right when he told them they would have to fight in one war, the only just and legal war from their standpoint, the war against the capitalists, the war for the liberation of mankind from wage slavery. They practised, because they had no alternative, the tactic he handed down to them: “When capitalists declare war, it is then for us to declare war on them, paralyze industry by the strike and fight every battle for the overthrow of the ruling class.” They answered a fascist attack of their own capitalists with a general strike.

And the headquarters for these fighters are in the only building in Terre Haute which has his name written upon it, the Labor Temple. There is a bronze plaque of Debs at the side of the entrance, the only memorial to the man in the entire city. Here they have been engaged since March in a gallant fight

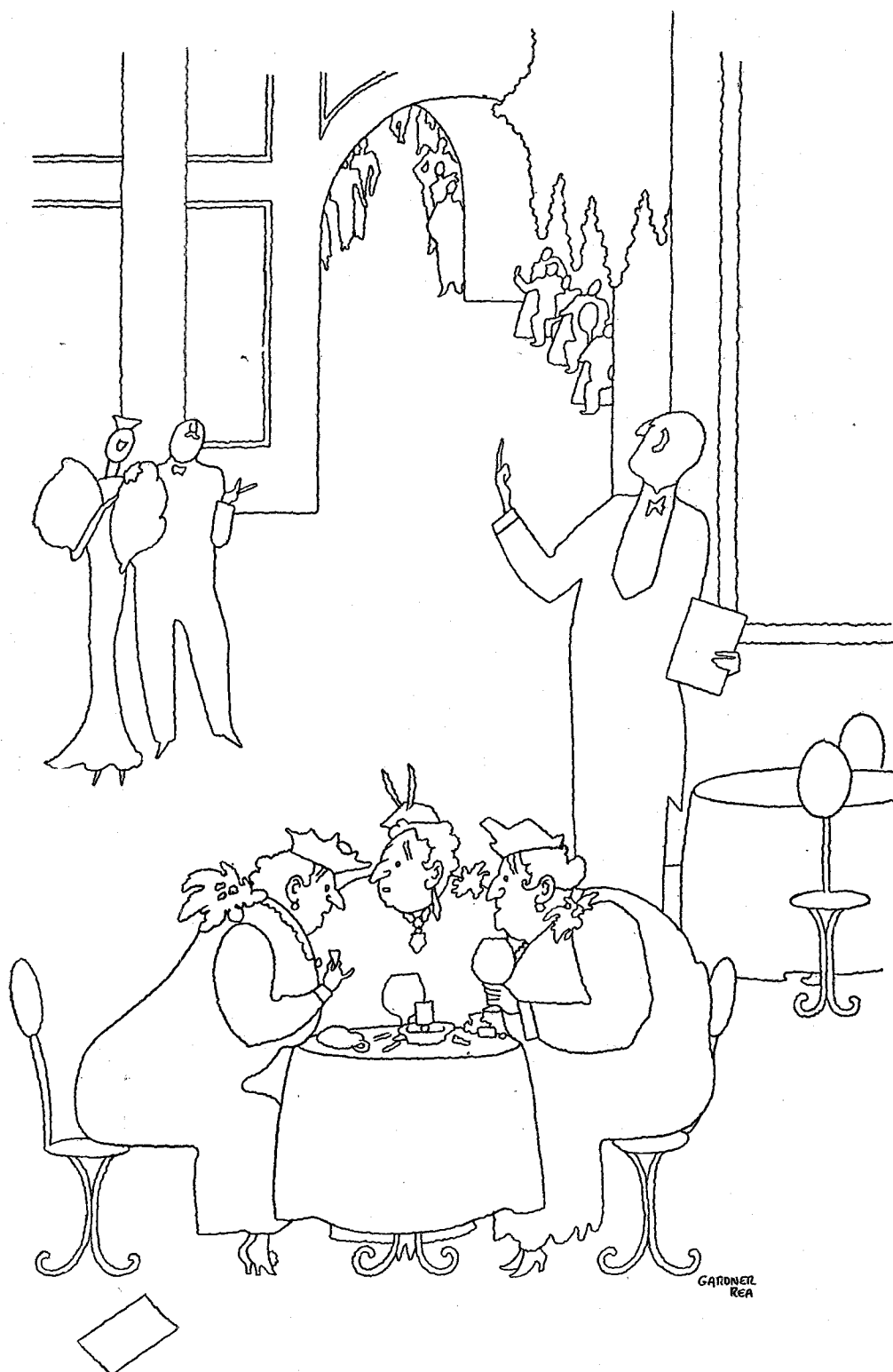
against those whose selfish interests must eventually give way before the victory which Gene Debs visioned.

Out of that fight—the preliminary for a greater struggle—new leaders are coming, leaders made strong in battle, leaders who to the working men and women of Terre Haute are the ones who will carry on. There is Cubby Lark, the coal miner, for instance, one of the general strike leaders. When he was in jail, charged with inciting to riot, those on the outside dubbed him the second Eugene Debs. Thus, to the most militant—the mantle of Gene Debs!

It matters little that Gene Debs, the revolutionist—“I am a Bolshevik from the crown

of my head to the tip of my toes”—it matters not that he has become “respectable enough” for Chamber of Commerce folk to use in an advertisement. Nor does it matter that they put American flags over ideas that might have been spoken by him. He was not theirs.

Those who were his own—those valiant trade-unionist fighters can be trusted to take care of the final and fitting memorial to Eugene V. Debs. That memorial must and will be a society of men and women in which there will be not one Debs, but tens of thousands growing to the stature of that great revolutionist and lover who lived, and still lives, in our town.



“My husband says that what this country really needs is a good strong regency, with Buzzie Dall or Baby Leroy for king.”

Gardner Rea



# The Women's Battalion

MARTIN RUSSAK

IT WAS at the Bamford Mill, the same week, toward the end of the second month of the Great Strike, that the first serious break threatened the ranks of the strikers. The Bamford Mill bosses had succeeded in recruiting a number of scabs, for several successive days the police had beaten the picket lines back from the mill and each day the number of scabs had increased. The Manufacturers' Association was obviously concentrating here in an effort to break the strike mill by mill. The Strike Committee set the morning and issued the call for a mass picket demonstration at the Bamford Mill. It was a critical occasion; the arrival of a head-on test of strength.

That the strikers were able to emerge victorious is due, as everyone acknowledges, to the famous incident of the "Women's Battalion." Many people still ascribe to Margaret Ryan the idea of inspiring this deed of the women. She has declared she had nothing to do with it—refusing, with characteristic honesty, to accept a glory falsely thrust upon her. In fact, the idea can be traced to no individual. It arose among the women, a source beyond which it's hardly possible to go. Frieda Miller and the two Farrell sisters are known to have made some necessary preparations. When you ask them, they say the idea was not theirs. It had been suggested to them, in one form or another, by a number of women. It was one of those things, in a strike, which cannot be announced from the platform if it is to be done, and of which the Strike Committee knows nothing until it is done.

In the deep night, towards four o'clock of the morning set for the picket demonstration at the Bamford Mill, a band of women stood clustered on the sidewalk in the middle of the Main Street bridge. They were between thirty and forty in number, some bareheaded, and all in coats or sweaters, for the night air was chilly. They were waiting, half-awake, nervous, shivering, for several women to arrive. They held in their hands a varied assortment of household utensils. A number of them had a pot and a rolling pin. One had a brass pestle and mill; another, a hand bell; a third, a large baby's rattle. Frieda Miller stood in the midst of them. It was around her that the band was gathered; even Amy and Janet Farrell, tall and dominating in their self-sufficient taciturnity and Rose Krackower, whose bulky and assertive personality was a source of strength, pressed close to her. It was at her suggestion that the middle of the bridge had been fixed upon for their rendezvous. Here, in darkness, detached from the houses of the adjoining streets, with the approach at either bridge-

head illuminated by a street lamp, they could most securely gather for their operations in the Temple Hill section below the Bamford Mill.

Those who knew Frieda Miller at that time recall her as an attractive woman of thirty-one or thirty-two. Full and well-built in stature, though not as tall as the Farrell sisters, her shoulders level, back straight, bosom high and firmly rounded, she still retained in her throat, arms and ankles the slenderness and agility of girlhood. She was hatless and wore her profusion of rich brown hair, on this occasion, in a braid wound up at the back of her head. Her eyes had all the warmth and liveliness they were never entirely to lose, her smile broke with its old quickness, and her teeth, small and somewhat uneven, were still white. The eager naivete of her spirit had grown sober with the rigors of motherhood and adult existence in working class life. Her intimate friends were aware, also, of her deeper thoughtfulness of mood, and a new fortitude in the lines of her mouth, in her more serious bearing and the more direct glance of her eyes. The calamity of the recent past, her own sufferings and those of her husband, had searchingly visited her.

She stood watching the illuminated bridgehead by which the last of her band had to arrive. Only a few minutes lacked of the hour for the bold sortie they had undertaken in secret. Though looking forward to their adventure with quickened pulses and an apprehensive excitement, sleep still weighed upon their eyes, and they conversed in whispers, overawed by the vast repose of the surrounding city. Thick darkness, the darkness before dawn, prevailed. Except for the street lamps, not a light broke the obscurity of the mills and houses on either bank. The river, swollen with spring floods, washed and splashed against the supports of the bridge, its black flow of water reflecting rippled glimmers from the lamps. Upstream, the heights of the Falls protruded a deeper darkness upon the sky. Faint stars gleamed overhead in the misty night. Rose muttered her contentment at the indication of a clear day.

"Here she comes," someone whispered.

The last woman of the band approached from the side opposite the hill. She hurried across the lighted bridgehead, her skirts pulling tight at every stride, and her heels clicked on the pavement with extraordinary loudness.

"It's about time!" "Didn't you bring anything, Alice?" they whispered.

Alice pulled out from under her coat an elongated object. "I sure did—my kid's Fourth of July tin horn!" She held it up

proudly. "I hope I can make as much racket with it as he does."

All turned to Frieda Miller in readiness. A muffled dispute arose as to which street they should start on.

"What's the difference?" said Rose. "Let Frieda lead and we'll follow her. Don't you think so, Amy?"

"Yes," Janet replied. "You go right ahead, Frieda. Just tell us when to begin."

Pushing closely behind Frieda, they crossed the bridge, trembling with nervousness. Instead of turning first into Water Street, as some had demanded, she went straight ahead into Temple Street. Beyond the old Dutch church she led them out into the middle of the road and halted.

She faced them. "If anybody is scared and wants to go home, go now," she whispered.

They looked at her without flinching. No one spoke. Susie Miller, shivering, moved close to her.

"All right. Now remember, we don't stop for nothing and nobody. Stick together and keep right on moving, because we've got a lot of streets to cover."

She lifted her basin in one hand and a wooden ladle in the other. "Are you ready?" she whispered.

"Ready," they whispered back, holding up their utensils.

"Ready, set, go!" she cried in full voice and banged the ladle against the basin.

All together, they whacked their pots and pans. A detonating and clanking din shattered the stillness of the night. Rolling pins banged against pots; the hand bell jingled; the brass pestle clanged in its brass mill; two Polish women, each armed with a pair of large pot lids, crashed them together like cymbals; the woman with the baby's rattle shook it inaudibly—before, when she had shaken it by accident on the bridge, its noise had frightened them; Alice fetched peal after peal on her tin horn, her cheeks distended, until she had to pause for breath. It was a band of music which would have broken Otto Schultz's heart, reminding him of the composers who, he used to sigh, were destroying his beloved art of harmonic melody. Schultz would have forgiven this band, for they were not thinking of music. Their aim was the production of noise, and they achieved an uproarious success. They marched forward in the middle of the road, women who blushed at the thought of committing an immodest or undignified act in the public street; now their heroism in the common struggle made them oblivious of themselves, and as unconscious of dignity and modesty as children.