
How I Became a Socialist Agitator

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My earliest memory is of a Kansas ranch, of the wide stretches of prairie, free herds roaming over the hills and coulees, of cowpunchers with rattling spurs and wide hats, free and easy of speech and manner, but brave and faithful to their friends, four-footed or human; of the freedom and security and plenty of a well-to-do rancher's home.

Those were wonderful days and I shall never cease to be thankful that I knew them. Days that laid the foundation of my whole life, gave me health and strength and love of freedom, taught me to depend on myself, to love nature, to honor rugged strength of mind and body, and to know no shams in life. Everything is very real, very much alive and in close touch with nature on the broad sweep of the prairie amid the longhorns.

The Wolf at the Door.

Then comes the memory of a Kansas drought, followed by one of the periodical panics which sweep over our country. Days and weeks of hazy nightmare when father's face was grey and set, when mother smiled bravely when he or we children were near, but when we sometimes found tears upon her cheeks if we came upon her unexpectedly. A horrible something that we could not fathom had settled down over our lives, but the day when the realness of it all was forced home came all too soon. The stock was sold, the home dismantled, and one day father kissed us goodbye and started away to the city to find work. He who had always been master of his own domain, who had hewn his destiny barehanded from the virgin soil, forced to go out and beg some other man for a chance to labor, an opportunity to use his hands. Though I could not comprehend it then the bitterness of it

all was seared upon my memory and I never see a strong man vainly seeking and begging for work that my whole soul does not revolt.

Goes to the City.

Then came the day when we left that ranch and went to the city to take up the life of a wage-worker's family in the poverty-cursed section of the town. For, of course, no other was possible for us for father's wages were only \$9.00 a week and \$9.00 is not much to support a family of five. Of that long, wretched winter following the Panic of 1887 the memory can never be erased, never will grow less bitter. The poverty, the misery, the want, the wan-faced women and hunger-pinched children, men tramping the streets by day and begging for a place in the police stations or turning footpads by night, the sordid, grinding, pinching poverty of the workless workers and the frightful, stinging, piercing cold of that winter in Kansas City will always stay with me as a picture of inferno, such as Dante never painted.

Of the years that followed when father had regained to some extent his economic foothold and poverty no longer pinched as though it encompassed us all about like a frightful dream that could not be shaken off, it is hard to write intelligently.

I, child-woman that I was, seeing so much poverty and want and suffering, threw my whole soul into church and religious work. I felt somehow that the great, good God who had made us could not have wantonly abandoned his children to such hopeless misery and sordid suffering. There was nothing uplifting in it, nothing to draw the heart nearer to him, only forces that clutched and dragged men and women down into the abyss of drunkenness and vice. Perhaps he had only overlooked those miserable children of the poor in the slums of Kansas City, and if we prayed long and earnestly and had enough of religious zeal he might hear and heed and pity. For several years I lived through that Gethsemane we all endure who walk the path from religious fanaticism to cold, dead, material cynicism with no ray of sane life-philosophy to light it.

Temperance Work.

I saw drunkenness and the liquor traffic in all the bestial, sordid aspects it wears in the slums, and with it the ever-close companion of

prostitution in its most disgusting and degraded forms. I believed, for the good preachers and temperance workers who led me said, that drunkenness and vice caused poverty and I struggled and worked, with only the heartbreaking zeal that an intense young girl can work, to destroy them. But in spite of all we could do the corner saloon still flourished, the saloonkeeper still controlled the government of the city, and new inmates came to fill the brothel as fast as the old ones were carried out to the Potter's field, and the grim grist of human misery and suffering still ground on in defiance to church and temperance society and rescue mission.

Gradually I began to realize that the Great Creator of the universe had placed us here to live under fixed natural laws that were not changed at the whim of God or man and that prayers would never fill an empty stomach or avoid a panic. I also learned that intemperance and vice did not cause poverty, but that poverty was the mother of the whole hateful brood we had been trying to exterminate and that the increase of her offspring was endless. Dimly I began to realize that if we would win we must fight the cause and not the effects, and since poverty was the fundamental cause of the things I abhorred, I began to study poverty, its whys and wherefores, and to try to understand why there should be so much want in such a world of plenty.

Becomes a Mechanic.

About this time my father embarked in the machine shop business and I added to my various experiences that of a woman forced into the business world there to have every school day illusion rudely shattered, and forced to see business life in its sordid nakedness. Possibly because I hated ledgers and daybooks and loved mechanics, and possibly because I really wanted to study the wage-worker in his own life, I made life so miserable for the foreman and all concerned that they finally consented to let me go into the shop as an apprentice to learn the trade of machinist. For more than four years I worked at the forge and lathe and bench side by side with some of the best mechanics of the city and some of the noblest men I have ever known. The work was most congenial and I learned for the first time what absorbing joy there can be in labor, if it be a labor that one loves.

Even before my advent into the shop I had begun to have some conception of economics. I had read *Progress and Poverty*, *Wealth vs. Commonwealth*, *Caesar's Column*, and many such books. Our shop

being a union one I naturally came into contact with the labor union world and was soon as deeply imbued with the hope trade unionism held out as I had been with religious zeal. After a while it dawned upon me in a dim and hazy way that trade unionism was something like the frog who climbed up to the well side two feet each day and slipped back three each night. Every victory we gained seemed to give the capitalist class a little greater advantage.

Meets “Mother” Jones.

One night while returning from a union meeting where I had been severely squelched for daring to remonstrate with the boys for voting for a man for mayor whom they had bitterly fought four months before in a long, hard strike, I heard a man talking on the street corner of the necessity of working men having a political party of their own. The man's words were balm to my ruffled spirits, for I had been unmercifully ridiculed for daring to talk politics to a lot of American Voting Kings; “a woman, the very idea!” I asked a bystander who the speaker was and he replied, “a Socialist.” Of course, if he had called him anything else it would have meant just as much to me, but somehow I remembered the word. A few weeks later I attended a ball given by the Cigar Makers' union, and Mother Jones spoke. Dear old Mother! That is one of the mileposts in my life that I can easily locate. Like a mother talking to her errant boys she taught and admonished that night in words that went home to every heart. At last she told them that a scab at the ballot-box was more to be despised than one at the factory door, that a scab ballot could do more harm than a scab bullet; that workingmen must support the political party of their class and that the only place for a sincere union man was in the Socialist Party.

Here was that strange new word again coupled with the things I had vainly tried to show my fellow unionists. I hastily sought out “Mother” and asked her to tell what Socialism was, and how I could find the Socialist Party. With a smile she said, “Why, little girl, I can't tell you all about it now, but here are some Socialists, come over and get acquainted.” In a moment I was in the center of an excited group of men all talking at once, and hurling unknown phrases at me until my brain was whirling. I escaped by promising to “come down to the office tomorrow and get some books.” The next day I hunted up the office and was assailed by more perplexing phrases and finally escaped

loaded down with Socialist classics enough to give a college professor mental indigestion. For weeks I struggled with that mass of books only to grow more hopelessly lost each day. At last down at the very bottom of the pile I found a well worn, dog-eared little book that I could not only read but understand, but to my heartbreaking disappointment it did not even mention Socialism. It was the *Communist Manifesto*, and I could not understand what relation it could have to what I was looking for.

Finds a Friend in J.A. Wayland.

I carried the books back and humbly admitted my inability to understand them or grasp the philosophy they presented. As the men who had given me the books explained and expostulated in vain, a long, lean, hungry-looking individual unfolded from behind a battered desk in the corner and joined the group. With an expression more forceful than elegant he dumped the classics in the corner, ridiculed the men for expecting me to read or understand them, and after asking some questions as to what I had read gave me a few small booklets. *Merrie England* and *Ten Men of Money Island*, *Looking Backward*, and *Between Jesus and Caesar*, and possibly half a dozen more of the same type. The hungry-looking individual was Comrade Wayland, and the dingy office the birthplace of the *Appeal to Reason*.

For a time I lived in a dazed dream while my mental structure was being ruthlessly torn asunder and rebuilt on a new foundation. That the process was a painful one I need not tell one who has undergone it, and most of us have. At last I awoke in a new world, with new viewpoints, and a new outlook. Recreated, I lived again with new aims, new hopes, new aspirations, and the dazzling view of the new and wonderful work to do. All the universe pulsed with new life that swept away the last vestige of the mists of creed and dogma and old ideas and beliefs.

Marries a Fellow Student.

For some time I worked with our group in Kansas City, and seven years ago when Walter Thomas Mills opened his training school for Socialist workers in Girard, Kansas, I was one of its students. There I found not only a congenial group of comrades, the best and most forceful teacher I have ever known, but that crowning, finishing

touch of human life, love. In the school as a fellow student I met my husband. Of our marriage at the home of Comrade Wayland at the close of the school and our life since that time little need be said. All who are at all acquainted with the Socialist movement know more or less of it for our story has been the story of the Socialist movement, it has been our life.

Life of an Organizer.

Taking up the work of traveling speakers and organizers the next day after our wedding we have followed the stony, roughhewn path from that day to this, from the coalfields of Pennsylvania and West Virginia and Indian Territory, to the farms of Kansas and Iowa and Missouri, through the plains of Texas and into the cotton fields of Oklahoma and Arkansas and Tennessee, from the ghetto of New York to the Rocky Mountains, we have gone wherever and whenever the economic pressure has made men and women receptive to the philosophy of Socialism. We have stood on the street corner and in the pulpit, at the shop door and in the college assembly room, in the country schoolhouses and trade union halls, in the legislative chambers and temples of justice, in all manner of places and appealing to all manner of men. We have worked and have seen the Socialist movement grow from a handful of men and women sneered at, derided, and ridiculed, into the mighty force it now is.

Twice in the seven years my work in the field has been interrupted by the cares of maternity and now a curly-haired boy of five and a brown-eyed girl of two share our hearts and make the fight seem all the more worthwhile.

Seven years, yes, seven long, weary, toil-worn, travel-tired years. Years when the path was often dark and the road rough; when the heart grew sick and the soul faint because the world is deaf and dumb and blind, has eyes that see not and ears that do not hear, hearts that do not feel either their own needless suffering or that of their fellow men. Yet they have been glorious years, years of battle with the forces of ignorance, years that have tried men's souls, that have left many a noble comrade lying by the wayside, dead upon the field of battle for economic justice, yet years of such achievement as the world has never known, years filled with success still unmeasured, of revolutionary forces we cannot even guess. Our thought in so short a time has dominated the thought of the world, our literature setting the stan-

dards, our philosophy shaping the political forces of the nations and round the world glows the spark of human brotherhood, ready to spring at our call into living flame.

Edited by Tim Davenport

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