Labor Agitator

The Story of Albert R. Parsons

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CHAPTER I. TEXAN BOYHOOD

ALBERT PARSONS' ancestors fought for religious liberty in England and were among the pilgrim fathers of Massachusetts. In the seventeenth century, five brothers of the family name landed on the shores of Narragansett Bay. In the centuries that followed, their descendants helped to establish and build the American nation.

The first Parsons to attain renown was "Uncle Jonathan," he was reverently, and affectionately, called. He was an old Puritan, strong-minded and passionate, second only to his friend, George Whitefield, among the revivalist ministers of the day. Like Albert Parsons of Haymarket fame, old Jonathan was something of a traveling agitator: his preaching tour, on which he delivered sermons to eager audiences, horrified the conservativ-minded clergymen of New England.

Liberty-loving Jonathan could not endure British tyranny. According to one story, he denounced the English oppressors from his pulpit and, in the very aisles of his church, mustered a company which marched to Bunker Hill where another Parsons lost his arm in the famous battle of the Revolution.

Jonathan's son was Major-General Samuel Parsons, the first members of the Patriot party and the revolutionary Committee of Correspondence in Connecticut. As early as 1773 the General despatched a letter to Agitator Sam Adams, urging that a continental be held. 'The idea of inalienable allegiance to any prince or state," he wrote, "is an idea to me inadmissible; and I cannot but see that our ancestors, when they first landed in America, were as independent of crown or king of Great Britain, as if they never had been its subjects."

General Parsons fought in a number of Revolutionary battles. He helped plan the expedition which led to the capture of Fort Ticonderoga by Ethan Allen and the Green Mountain boys. He saw heavy fighting at Long Island, and then at Harlem Heights and White Plains. He served under General Washington in New Jersey. Later the commander-in-chief placed him in charge of the entire Connecticut front, depending upon him for the defense of the state. He gave battle to the British at Norwalk, forcing them to retire in confusion.

After the war, General Parsons was appointed first judge of the Northwest Territory. Although he was past fifty, he became a frontiersman, traveling back and forth. One day his canoe overturned in the rapids of the Big Beaver river and he was drowned.

Samuel Parsons, a namesake of the Revolutionary general, left New England early in 1830. He married Elizabeth Tompkins, and together they trekked down the coast to Alabama. They set up a shoe and leather factory in Montgomery. Here Albert R. Parsons was born June 20, 1848, just after the Mexican war. His father was one of the outstanding figures in the community and was highly respected as a public-spirited citizen; he led the temperance movement in the state.

Albert's mother also came of pioneer stock. One of her ancestors had been a trooper in General Washington's bodyguard, serving under him at Trenton and Brandywine, weathering the privations of Valley Forge, and helping to drive the Hessians out of New Jersey. Like her husband, she was a devoutly religious person, loved by her neighbors as well as by her ten children.

At least this was the picture which Albert's eldest brother, William, gave him of his parents. He retained only the flicker of an impression of his mother, who died when he was still a baby. And before Albert was five his father followed.

Albert went to live with his brother's family, whose home was on the Texan frontier. In later years he treasured the remembrances of his boyhood, spent near the border. Life on the Texas range during the eighteen- fifties was an adventurous affair. Indian raids and out-law attacks were things of the present. Buffalo and antelope ran over the plains. While still a boy, Albert became an expert rifle-shot; he always remembered the praise he had won for his marksmanship and hunting, as well as his skill in riding the fiery Mexican mustangs. He thought often, too, of days spent on his brother's farm in the valley of the Brazos river, so far from the next house that he couldn't hear the barking of their neighbor's dog or the crowing of the cock.

When he was eleven, Albert was sent to Waco, city, to live with his sister's family and to get some schooling. He was soon apprenticed to the Galveston Daily News. It was an honor to be employed by the biggest and most influential paper in the state, his brother wrote to him; espicially, he added, when it was edited by Mr. Willard Richardson. His brother, who had run a small paper of his own in Tyler city, always spoke with reverence of Richardson, the leading Texan editor of the time.

Albert worked on the paper as a printer's devil and as carrier. Running through the streets of the town, making new friends and acquaintances every day, he changed from a frontier boy into a city youngster.

CHAPTER II. WITH THE CONFEDERATE ARMY

A FEW Years later the Civil War broke out. Albert and the people he knew were greatly agitated. The city whirled with excitement. Meetings were held, speeches were made. Civic spokesmen called for action.

Albert's employer, old "Whitey" Richardson-who looked like a conventional Portrait of the Southern gentleman was a leader of the secession movement. He carried on a vigorous campaign against his political enemy, Sam Houston-conqueror Of Santa Anna and father of the Texan Republic. Houston hoped the civil conflict could be averted and the Union Preserved. but when Texas joined the Rebels, he was deposed as governor of the state.

All of Albert's friends were rabid Confederates. They got together to make Plans-they wanted to get into the fighting before it would all be over. Carried away by the war fever, the Young Texans immediately organized a local volunteer company, which they named the Lone Star Grays. Albert was only thirteen, and was very short compared to the rangy natives, but he wiggled his way into the infantry squad.

Of course the whole thing was nothing more than an exciting adventure to him. He was too young to wonder about the real reasons behind secession and, besides, if he did have any ideas about it they were merely carbon copies of "Whitey" Richardson's opinions. Everybody Albert knew was a hot partisan of the Confederacy; his circle of acquaintances did not include any of the followers of Sam Houston, nor did he know any of the numerous German abolitionists who populated the state and who valiantly opposed the slaveowners.

When the war started, Federal garrisons withdrew from the Texas forts and fled toward the sea coast at Indianola, intending to embark for Washington. They were immediately pursued by the local Confederates. Albert's company, the Lone Star Grays, converted the Morgan Passenger ship into a cotton-clad and joined the chase. Protected by the breastworks of cotton piled on the deck of their improvised gunboat, they formed into the Gulf and cut off the escape of some Union troops.

Texas however, was far removed from the center of hostilities. Many of the young men thought they would never get into the fight if they stayed at home; so they formed independent companies and proceeded eastward to the battle zone.

Albert decided he would join the Rebel army, too; he made up his mind to leave for Virginia and serve under Lee. But when he asked his guardian's permission, old "Whitey" took hold of his ear and ordered him to remain at home.

Looming over young Albert, Richardson lectured his apprentice. "It's all bluster, anyway," he told him. "The war will be ended in the next sixty days, and I will be able to hold in my hat every drop of blood that's shed."

That settled it. Albert just had to get into action before it was all over. He had no way of traveling to Virginia, but he took "French" leave and joined his brother, Richard, who captained

an infantry company at Sabine on the Texan coast. Albert drilled with the soldiers and served as a powder monkey for the artillery.

One day he learned that the Federals were sending a transport army to invade Texas by way of the Pass. The Federal fleet, led by two gunboats, came up the channel, bombarding the Rebel fort. Holding their fire until the enemy was about twelve hundred yards away, the Texans opened a counter-attack. The third round of shot penetrated the steamdrum of the leading gunboat and she hoisted the white flag. The guns of the fort were then trained on the other: a shot carried away the tiller rope; the vessel grounded. The transports turned around and went back to New Orleans. Not a man had been lost on the Confederate side.

When the Union army invaded once more, it was under the command of General Banks, who made for the mouth of the Rio Grande. He landed on the coast and hoisted the Union flag on Texan soil. Meanwhile, Albert had joined a cavalry detachment stationed on the west bank of the Mississippi. Albert became a member of the renowned McInoly cavalry scouts. He was with his brother's brigade when General Bank's forces, retreating down the Red river, were attacked by Parson's dismounted cavalrymen who, armed only with rifles, charged the ironclad gunboats of the Union fleet at Lane's Landing.

By the time he was seventeen, after serving four years in the military, Albert took part in the last skirmish of the Civil War, occurring just before news reached the state of Lee's surrender at Appomattox.

CHAPTER III. SCALAWAG

AT the close of the war, Albert returned to his home in Waco. All the property he owned was a good mule- but it proved to be quite a valuable possession. He ran into a man who had to get out of the state in a hurry; the man had forty acres of corn in his field standing ready for harvest; Parsons traded the mule for the corn.

Then he rounded up a number of Negro slaves and offered them regular farmhands' wages if they would help him reap the harvest. They jumped at the opportunity, for it was the first salary they had ever received.

He made enough out of the sale of the corn to pay for half a year's tuition at the local university, which he had long dreamed of atending. There he studied moral philosophy and political economy.

His instructors, and everybody else who knew him, liked Albert. He was wild as a buck when he returned from the front — but so were all the young Texans. He moved in the best society and was welcome wherever he went. To his neighbors he was a clean-cut, gritty, pleasant and — considering everything — a well-mannered young man.

By the time he was twenty, however, something happened which was to suddenly end his popularity. He had begun to think for himself, and he found it impossible to accept many Southern conventions that he had formerly taken for granted. Working as a typesetter didn't give him much of a chance to tell people about his new convictions — but it did increase his desire to do so. Since these new beliefs were decidedly unorthodox, there was no place where he could put them into print; so he started a small weekly paper of his own, calling it the Spectator. In it he advocated the support of the Reconstruction measure granting civil rights to the Negroes.

Part of the reason for arriving at this conclusion was very personal. "I was strongly influenced in taking this step," he later wrote, "out of respect and love for the memory of dear old 'Aunt Easter,' then dead, and formerly a slave and house-servant of my brother's family, she having been my constant associate and having personally raised me, with great kindness and a mother's love."

In the main, however, his new, humanitarian convictions had grown out of his reading and independent thinking, based on what he saw and heard during the years after his return from the war. He had found that in spite of the defeat of the Confederacy, the old slaveowners — thanks to President Johnson's proclamation of amnesty and pardon — were back in power. Things hadn't changed very much. Many of the Negroes continued to work for their former masters; most of the landowners even believed that slavery would be perpetuated. During this period, Negro suffrage was shelved. At first Parsons had more or less accepted the situation, but he was shocked by several incidents in which Negroes, demanding their freedom, were hounded by his neighbors.

When the Radical Republicans were victorious in the Congressional elections of '66, drastic changes took place. As in other rebel states, the conservative government of Texas was swept away. General Sheridan, appointed commander of the "Fifth Military District" which included Texas and Louisiana, set up Radical-Military rule. Carpetbaggers as well as native loyalists orga-

nized the Negroes into Union Leagues. Radical Republican papers, usually edited by Southerners who were sneeringly called scalawags, sprang up in the state and clamored for Negro rights.

This was the wave which caught Parsons; his paper was started in Waco for this purpose. The Spectator appeared in 1868, during the tensest moment of the Reconstruction struggle in Texas, after Sheridan had been forced out by President Johnson and succeeded by General Hancock, a Democrat whose sympathies were with the Southern planters. The latter organized guerrila gangs terrorizing the new freedmen and intimidating the Republicans. Out of these early groups rose the spectre of the Ku Klux. Bands of giant horsemen, shrouded in white, raided Negro settlements, whipped and even murdered their victims.

It was during this critical time that Parsons first tried his talents as an editor. He became a Republican, went into politics. He took to the stump, upholding the rights of Negro suffrage. The Reconstruction acts had been passed and the Negroes had their first chance to vote in Texas. The enfranchised slaves came to know and idolize Parsons as their friend and champion.

Naturally these new activities cut Parsons off from most of his former friends. His army comrades cursed and threatened him. He was branded a heretic, a traitor, a renegade. His life was endangered. Since his arch enemies made up most of the reading audience in Waco, there was no chance of continuing with the Spectator, and it soon expired.

Nevertheless, he continued his newspaper work. He became a traveling correspondent for the Houston Daily Telegraph, which had been a conservative paper before the Republicans carried the state. This new job took him on a long trip through northwestern Texas, on horseback.

While he was in Johnson county, where he had once lived with his brother's family, he met an attractive young girl of Spanish-Aztec descent. She lived in a beautiful section of the country near Buffalo creek with her uncle, a Mexican ranchero. Parsons lingered in the neighborhood as long as he could; three years later he returned to marry Lucy Eldine Gonzalez.

Shortly before his marriage he became a minor office holder under Grant's administration. He served as reading secretary of the Texas State Senate, of which his brother William was a member, and later as chief deputy collector of the U.S. Internal Revenue at Austin. In 1873, when the Republicans were defeated in the state elections, he resigned and joined a group of Texan editors in a tour which took him as far east as Pennsylvania. In the course of the trip he decided to settle in Chicago. He wrote to his wife, who joined him at Philadephia, and together they reached the Windy City late in the summer of 1873.

CHAPTER IV. CONVERSION

JUST as Parsons and his wife reached Chicago, the crisis of ’73 struck the nation.

Ever since the war, huge factories had been changing the urban skyline. Industrial capital was on the make. Armies of workers streamed into manufacturing centers. Mass production became the order of the day. Trade unions expanded. Profits skyrocketed. Prosperity soared.

Then came the crash. Early in the fall of ’73 — financial panic! The price of securities, which had risen to new highs during the boom years, suddenly collapsed. The wave of feverish speculating and inflation was over.

Old houses folded up. In September the firm of Jay Cooke, monetary pillar of the states, shut its doors. There was consternation in Wall Street. After seven wild days the Stock Exchange closed down. Meeting with financiers, the President urged a moratorium to stem widespread disaster. There was a run on the Union Trust. Banks were besieged by frenzied deposirtors. In Chicago, on a “black Friday,” five big banking institutions — beginning with the Union National, largest financial concern outside of New York — were suspended. Life savings were swept away.

Economic distress spread through the land. Bewildered workers straggled out of factory gates. They hung disconsolatley around public squares. The spectre of unemployment drifted along the streeets of American cities.

Layoffs. Wagecuts. Strikes. Evictions. Breadlines. Starvation. Street demonstrations against poverty — met with clubs and bullets.

Parsons, however, was lucky enough to land a job as soon as he got to Chicago. After subbing for a while on the Inter-Ocean, he became a regular typesetter for the *Times*. He joined Typographical Union No. 16.

It was a hard winter. In Chicago, tens of thousands who had helped rebuild the city after the great fire, were thrown out of work. Along the wide avenues, swept by the freezing winds of the lake, children cried for bread, for shelter. Meetings of unemployed workers formed spontaneously. They paraded through the streets holding ragged banners, with BREAD OR BLOOD scrawled in big black letters. Public attention was directed toward the needs of the poor.

A procession marched on the Relief an Aid Society to appeal for help, but a committee elected by the demonstrators was refused an audience. Several yeares before, over a million dollars had been contributed to the Society for the victims of the fire. Labor organization now began to agitate for an accounting of the large sums collected. They charged the Society with speculation and misuse of funds.

Parsons followed the case in the newspapers. He was puzzled by the campaign of abuse directed against the protesting labor groups: they were denounced in the daily press as “Communists,” “Loafers,” “Thieves,” “Cutthroats.”

He wondered what was behind the whole thing. He decided to look into the matter; what he found convinced him that the complaints were justified. Then why did the press and pulpit vilify the labor bodies that made the charge of corruption? He was quick to see the parallel between the Chicago situation and the way his Texan neighbors had treated the Negroes. It was the rulers

against the slaves, whether wage or chattel. In his own way, through his own experience, he was beginning to glimpse the shape of the modern class struggle.

Parsons stopped at street corners to listen to the "agitators." He went to labor meeting. He wanted to understand the new problems which the crisis was pushing forward. He found that the small band of Socialists in the city were the only ones who seemed to know the answers to the problems he wanted to solve. They seemed to know exactly why and how poverty could root itself in the middle of great wealth and plenty.

But he found it hard to understand the Socialists. Most of them were Germans. He couldn't read their paper, couldn't get hold of more than a pamphlet or two in English. These were hardly enough to solve the new problems cascading through his mind.

For several years, as the depression slid downward, he became more and more concerned over the "labor question." One of the new products of he crisis was the emergence of "tramps" as they were called, not hoboes but educated men, skilled workers looking for jobs. He encountered legions of them in the streets of the city. And police squads guarded the depots, turning away new "vagrants" who migrated from other centers in search of work.

One spring evening, near Market street, Parsons was given a handbill. It announced a mass meeting at the Turner Hall on West Twelfth street. P.J. McGuire, of New Haven, it said, who was making a lecture tour under the auspices of the Social-Democratic party of North America, would be he leading speaker and would discourse on the crisis, its cause and remedy.

When Parsons reached the hall, it was packed. Someone was talking, but Parsons recognized him as a local agitator.

Just before eight o'clock, a group of men walked briskly through the hall. People in the audience clapped. The main speaker had arrived. Tired and dusty, he stepped to the platform.

Parsons listened to a moving address, delivered with the warm, lyrical eloquence of the Irish.

"We have come together without bands of music or waving banners," McGuire began, dusting his sleeves as he got under way. "We have no money to hire polisher speakers or to prepare great demonstrations. But we have come with something more than these — we have come with the truth in out hearts, and the truth must surely prevaill…

"Shall I recount all the wrongs against the workingman? I could as well describe the separate stones which compose the Alleghanies or the number of sands on the ocean beach…

"The workingman labors with all his strength, not for himself and those rightly dependent upon him, but for every mean despot who has money in his pocket and no principle in his heart.

"I am a stranger to many of you, but one cause has made us brothers. Together we must lift the burden of poverty and oppression from the shoulders of the working class…"

His earnestness stirred the crowd. Parsons listened intently.

At the end of the meeting McGuire got up and urged them to join the party. As Parsons passed out of the hall he turned in his name.

The affair was so successful that McGuire spoke again the following day, in the old Globe Hall on Desplaines Street. He talked for only a short while, so there was time for questions and discussion. This was Parsons' chance. Perhaps he would now get an authoritative answer to some of the problems consuming his thoughts.

He jumped up. His clear, ringing voice cut through the hall. Everybody turned toward him. He was well-dressed, distinguished. His long, black hair brushed back, his waiscoat buttoned high, his body slim and wiry, the eyes alert and smiling, the long curve of his moustache neatly trimmed — Parsons commanded attention.

"Do I understand, sir," he said, with a certain dignity, "that in the cooperative state, so ably outlined by the speaker, all persons will share and share alike regardless of what they produce?"

A ripple of voices spread through the hall. It was an important question. Others must have been wondering about it.

"Do I understand," he continued, his tone sharpening, "that your party is for a whack-up-all-around institution, in which the parasite will find a loafers' paradise at the expense of the industrious worker?"

He sat down. Spots of applause broke through the audience. People talked to each other excitedly. They waited with impatience for the answer.

It was a stock question for McGuire. It had been asked of him so many times, he had explored the issued so often, that his reply by now was nearly flawless. Atracted by Parsons' striking voice and confident bearing he phrased his remarks with particular care, directing his answer straight to Parsons, speaking as if they were alone in a room together.

The Social-Democratic party, he pointed out skillfully, wished only to nationalize the land and the instruments of production and exchnge. Such a reorganization of society was in the interests of the workingman, who would be rewarded with the just value of his labor. As for the idler, and that included the capitalist, he would have to pitch in and do his share-or starve.

McGuire handled the whole thing adroitly. Parsons was fully convinced. And it won the approval of others in the audience. From that time on, the English section of the Social-Democratic party in Chicago thrived.

CHAPTER V. SOCIALISM IN THE SEVENTIES

PARSONS joined the Social-Democratic party during a period when unity was the central issue of the labor movement. In the spring of ’76 the party sent delegates to a congress which was called for the purpose of consolidating all the labor forces in the country. The conference was also attended by other socialist groups and by members of the Knights of Labor. However, the gathering was split largely between socialists on the one side and greenbackers, with their money-reform schemes, on the other. They couldn’t agree on a program and, when the sessions were over, unity had not been accomplished.

Nevertheless, the get-together did a lot of good: it paved the way for uniting the various socialist factions, including the Social-Democratic party to which Parsons belonged, into a single organisation. During the summer, this fusion was effected. Radicals of various brands–made up chiefly of followers of Lassalle (political reformists who were indifferent to trade union action) and members of the old First International (who stressed the importance and need of trade union organization which, they pointed out, was the way in which the proletariat as a class carried on its daily struggle against capital)–met in Philadelphia and organiaed the Workingmen’s party of the United States.

“Political liberty without economical independence being but an empty phrase,” the constitution adopted at the congress read, “we shall in the first place direct our efforts to the economical question.” Participating in politics was not to be thought of until the movement was “strong enough to exercise a perceptible influence, and then in the first place locally in the towns or cities, when demands of a purely local character may be presented.”

This stand was largely a victory for a small group of First Internationalists, headed by Marx’s friend, Sorge. However, McGuire, who led the Social-Democratic party delegates, won a concession for his adherents: he moved that the executive committee be given the power to permit local election campaigns wherever advisable.

It was decided that the executive committee should be located in Chicago; and Philip Van Fatten, who lived in the city and whom Parsons knew, was later elected national secretary. Candidates who belonged “to no political party of the propertied class” were admitted into the Workingmen’s party, although it was decreed that “at least three-fourths of the members of a section must be wages-laborers.”

Parsons followed the news of the convention in the pages of the *Socialist*, edited from New York; by decision of the “Union” congress, held at Philadelphia, this newspaper was now changed to the *Labor Standard*, and became the English organ of the new Workingmen’s party. One of the treats in the paper was the poetic efforts contributed regularly by John McIntosh. Parsons, who was very fond of verse and could recite reams of it from memory, soon added McIntosh’s long “socialistic ballad” on “The Tramp” to his repertoire:

We canvassed the city through and through,
Nothing to work at–nothing to do;
The wheels of the engines go no more,
Bolted and barred is the old shop door;
Grocers look blue over unpaid bills,
Paupers increase and the poorhouse fills.

He was overjoyed to find an English paper which saw things through the eyes of the workers, especially since the Chicago sheets continued to castigate the Socialists, dubbing them "Robbers," "Loafers," "Tramps, "Bandits."

The capitalist press angered Parsons beyond endurance. As he walked home from work, he felt an overwhelming desire to shout to the workers on the street to tell them the truth about the class struggle, to carry to them the message of the Workingmen's party. Outside of John McAuliffe, there was no decent English mass speaker in the Chicago section and, while Parsons admired his impetuous rhetoric, McAuliffe was inclined to be a bit wild and incoherent.

Soon Parsons was making use of the experience he had gained on the stump in Texas. His resonant voice and his good presence quickly made him one of the very best agitators in the city. He spoke whenever and wherever he could: in parks, in vacant lots, on street corners, in halls and private houses. But the crowds were rather small. Often, after putting up posters and handing out leaflets, and speaking, he had to give his last nickel to pay for the hall rent and, late at night, walk all the way home-and to work early the next morning.

Just before the Philadelphia "Union" congress was held, and the Social-Democratic party merged into the Workingmen's party, Parsons helped to work out an excellent idea for their local July Fourth picnic. Parsons was was unable to be there himself–he had to speak at a meeting sponsored by Knights of Labor in Indianapolis –but the idea worked out very well.

After parading through the Chicago streets, the Socialists gathered around the platform at Ogden Grove, their picnic grounds. Later in the day Van Fatten arose and, on the hundredth anniversary of the American Revolution, read the Chicago Workingmen's Declaration of Independence, paraphrased after the original:

"…We hold these truths to be self-evident: that all men are created equal, that they are endowed with certain inalienable rights; that among these are life, liberty and the full benefit of their labor…"

It was a good stunt. After the new Declaration was read, in both English and German, the three thousand listeners, with cheers and loud applause, adopted it unanimously.

As Parsons became more active, he was perplexed by the squabbling which took place among the Socialists, who had all joined the Workingmen's party. There seemed to be two groups of extremists. Merging into one party had evidently not dissolved the differences between the warring factions. One still demanded immediate participation in politics, while the other, which had come out on top at the "Union" congress, was against such activity. However, the former refused to give up its aims and soon took its first political steps.

In New Haven, the political activists won Van Patten's permission to nominate local candidates. Their example was followed in other cities. Early in 1877, a Chicago group decided to enter the city spring elections. Without consulting anybody, they held a mass meeting and passed a resolution to that effect. Although angered by this highhanded move, their opponents decided not to oppose it, because they wanted to avoid a split in the party. Only one candidate was nominated — Parsons, for alderman of the fifteenth ward. The party ticket stressed chiefly demands of an

immediate local character, such as abolition of the contract system on city works, better hours and wages for city employees, etc.

Concentrating upon the fifteenth ward, which was in a working-class section, the party "imported" canvassers from other parts of the city, worked day and night and, when the count was taken, polled four hundred votes — one-sixth of the total cast in that ward. It was something of a moral if not a political victory.

CHAPTER VI. THE RAILROAD UPRISING

JULY, 1877. The great depression nosed downward, hit rock bottom. Even employed workers got barely enough for food. They grew sullen, desperate.

The railroads posted a notice of another wage cut. Accumulated resentment rose, brimmed over. Spontaneous protests broke out; a "striking mania" sped along the railway lines of the nation.

A running battle took place in Baltimore. With fixed bayonets, troops marched to the depot. Beleaguered by an indignant crowd, the soldiers fired volleys into the throng, shooting workers straight through the heart.

In Pittsburgh, factory hands turned out to help the railroad men. They took over the switches; the trains couldn't move. Almost the entire city supported the strikers. "Butcher" Hartranft, governor of the state, sent "hussars" from Philadelphia. They attacked the people: scores were killed and wounded. The enraged citizens drove the troops into a roundhouse, seized arms and ammunition and counter-attacked. The besieged soldiers had to shoot their way out of the city.

A regiment in Reading, made up almost wholly of Irishmen, fraternized with the strikers. "The only one we'd like to pour our bullets into is that damned Bloodhound Gowen," they said, referring to the notorious coal and rail magnate, who had smashed the miners' union.

U.S. regulars swept through strike-ridden Pennsylvania. Marines were landed. Troop trains with gatling guns — mounted on gondola cars in front of locomotives — pushed through the state. "Give the strikers a rifle diet for a few days and see how they like that kind of bread," were the instructions of "King" Scott, railroad president. The press howled, raved, ranted; the pulpit ran a close second with its abuse. Only after weeks was the strike smashed, the state blockade broken.

The strike wave rolled westward. Huge demonstrations moved through the streets. Men marched at night with torchlight flares to show the rags on their backs and the hunger in their their faces. BREAD OR BULLETS read their banners.

"It is impossible to predict how or when this struggle will end," said the *Labor Standand* editorially. "End as it may it will accomplish more for the cause of labor than years of mere oratory." "It is life or death with us," said one of the rank-and-file leaders, "and we'll fight it to the end."

Traffic was almost wholly paralyzed from the Atlantic to the Mississippi, from the Canadian border to the Virginia line and the Ohio river. In St. Louis the situation developed into a general strike. It was led by the Workingmen's party. Committees marched into the mill and factory: laborers downed tools. Mass meetings raised the demand for the eight-hour day. Steamers on the Mississippi were halted until the captains agreed to increase wages. Business houses closed down. The city was in the hands of the workers for almost a week. Finally the rich St. Louis merchants, recovering from their panic, raised an army, equipped it with muskets and raided labor centers, putting down the strike by force. The Socialist leaders were seized and charged with conspiracy against the government. "Order" was restored.

Chicago was ignited too. On Sunday morning, July 22, Parsons learned that Pittsburgh was in the hands of the strikers. An emergency conference of the party was called and a mass meeting ar-

ranged for the following day. They issued a leaflet which began: "Workingmen of Chicago!...Will you still remain disunited, while your masters rob you of all your rights as well as all the fruits of your labor? A movement is now inaugurated by the Money Lords of America to allow only property-holders to vote! This is the first step toward Monarchy! Was it in vain that our forefathers fought and died for Liberty?..."

About twenty thousand spectators gathered at the Workingmen's party demonstration, held on Market square near Madison street. Workers marched from various sections of the city, converging at the meeting place with torchlight processions, carrying slogans reading WE WANT WORK NOT CHARITY, WHY DOES OVER-PRODUCTION CAUSE STARVATION? and LIFE BY WORK OR DEATH BY FIGHT.

George Schilling introduced Parsons, the main speaker of the evening. Parsons was developing into a remarkable agitator, was learning how to speak to the masses, to hold the attention of multitudes.

He looked over the seething square. It was the largest assembly he had ever addressed. The listeners seemed tense, rigid, straining toward him. He mounted to new peaks of oratory; his gestures and his inflexions were flawless. At last the tension snapped, waves of approbation crashing through the crowd.

"Fellow workers, let us remember that in this great republic that has been handed down to us by our forefathers from 1776 — that while we have the republic, we still have hope. A mighty spirit is animating the hearts of the American people today...When I say the American people I mean the backbone of the country (*loud cheers*), the men who till the soil, who guide the machine, who weave the fabrics and cover the backs of civilized men. We are part of that people (*from the crowd — "We are!"*), and we demand that we be permitted to live, that we shall not be turned upon the earth as vagrants and tramps.

"While we are sad indeed that our distressed and suffering brothers in other states have had to resort to such extreme measures, fellow workers, we recognize the fact that they were driven to do what they have done (*"They were!"*)...We are assembled here tonight to find means by which the great gloom that now hangs over our republic can be lifted, and once more the rays of happiness can be shed on the face of this broad land."

He turned next to an attack upon the press, which he said filled its columns "with cases of bastardy, horseracing and accounts of pools on the Board of Trade." It never saw fit, he said, "to go to the factories and workshops and see how the toiling millions give away their lives to the rich bosses of the country."

At last he wound up: "It rests with you to say whether we shall allow the capitalists to go on or whether we shall organize ourselves. Will *you?*" he shouted to the crowd, and many answered. "Then enroll your names in the grand army of labor — and if the capitalists engage in warfare against our rights, we shall resist them with all the means that God has given us."

McAuliffe, who followed, was even more emphatic. "If the nation must go to a monarchy," he roared, "it must go over the dead body of every workingman in the country. I am not in favor of bloodshed. But if the Fort Sumpter of the workingmen is fired upon, I register a vow, by all that is high and holy, that my voice, my thought and my arm shall be raised for bloody, remorseless war...

"Let there be peace if we can, and war (*a voice in the crowd- "if necessary"*) -if necessary."

When he reached home Parsons was drenched in sweat. After a hard day's work in the composing room, mass speaking was no lark. He was sunk in exhaustion; but he couldn't get to

sleep. His throat ached, and mental excitement kept him wide awake. He saw the excited faces lifted toward him, the roar of the crowd in his ears, their acclaim rushing through his body, their applause echoing through his brain.

CHAPTER VII. “LEADER OF THE COMMUNE”

As usual, Parsons reported for work early next morning. The story of his speech, however, had already appeared in the press, one of the papers denouncing him as the “Leader of the Commune.” When he got to the composing room, the foreman told him to clear out, he was fired. And he was soon to learn that he had been blacklisted in his trade.

He shuffled out of the Times building in a daze. He wandered down the street, walking mechanically homeward; but he soon caught hold of himself and decided to report at the party center on Market street — he wanted to check on the progress of the strike and see what he could do to help.

The strike had started in the city the night before, when the switchmen of the Michigan Central Railroad walked out. Now it spread to the firemen and brakemen and moved from yard to yard, and even to shop, factory, mill and lumber company.

Before the day would be over, not a train would move out of Chicago, Van Fatten told Parsons exultantly.

They worked together at the office all morning, making plans for another open-air rally, and signing up strikers who wanted to join the Workingmen’s party.

About noon, two hard-looking men came in, and told Parsons that the mayor wanted to see him. Puzzled, Parsons accompanied them to the City Hall, where he was ushered into a room filled with a number of well dressed citizens and police officials. In spite of his protests, Parsons was grilled by Chief of Police Hickey, who probed into every corner of his life. Hickey insulted and browbeat him, trying to make him say that the Workingmen’s party had started the strike.

Parsons had been through an excruciating twenty-four hours. He was almost entirely spent. He gripped his chair, answering quietly, straining to keep his reserve. Every time he denied responsibility for the strike, the spectators buzzed and muttered.

“What’re we waiting for,” he heard one say. “Let’s lock him up and get it over with.”

For two hours he parried questions. Finally, Hickey gave up, turned around, and consulted with several of the civilians in the room. They talked for a few minutes, arguing with each other. Then Hickey turned back.

“All right,” he snapped, “you can get out of here.” He pushed Parsons to the door. “I’m giving you some advice, young man,” he said. “Your life is in danger. Those men in there belong to the Board of Trade and they would as leave hang you to a lamp-post as not. You’d better get out of town and get out quick.”

He shoved Parsons into the corridor, slammed the door. The place was dark and empty. Somehow he got into the street.

Feeling tired and depressed, he stumbled downtown. Later, when he passed the Tribune building, he decided to see if he could get a job on the night shift. As he reached the composing room,

he met Manion, chairman of his union, and they talked for a while. All of a sudden somebody grabbed him from behind and swung him around.

"Come on, get the hell out of here." Two men held his arms and another began shoving him to the door.

Parsons tried to get away. "I came in here as a gentleman and I won't be dragged out like a dog," he shouted, twisting to break loose. Then he felt the barrel of a gun against his head.

"You'd better keep quiet or we'll throw you out the window." Parsons stopped struggling.

They jostled him down the five flights of stairs. "One word out of you and we'll blow your brains out." They knocked him into the street.

"Next time you put your face in this building you'll get what's coming to you."

Parsons barely caught his balance and ran down the street. He felt sure they were going to send a bullet through his back. His utter helplessness made him half-mad with rage.

As he moved down Dearborn street, his anger began to subside and he recovered his normal mood, The weather was not too warm and the night was pleasant. But the streets seemed hushed, deserted. When he turned west on Lake to Fifth avenue, he saw soldiers sitting on the curb. Muskets leaned against the walls of the huge buildings that lined the street. A regiment of National Guards idled around; they seemed to be waiting for orders to march. Lucky they didn't know him. He passed by and reached home.

Later that night he went over to Market square where the party was holding another meeting. He stood in the crowd listening to the speakers. An ex-soldier came up to the platform and showed the wounds he had received "while fighting for this glorious country." All at once Parsons heard the clatter of hoofs, the crack of pistols, screams of pain. Mounted police charged into the gathering. They mowed a wedge through the mass of flesh. A tremendous roaring cacophony rose, swelled, ebbed. The throng broke, the listeners scattered. A tumultuous rush of feet drowned out the thud of descending clubs…

Next morning, Wednesday, was misty; vapor clouds hung over Lake Michigan and the city streets. Blood splashed on the Black Road, near the McCormick Reaper Works. Everywhere the strikers gathered, leaderless; everywhere they were shot, clubbed, dispersed. On the Randolph street bridge a crowd of spectators ("Rioting Roughs" the Chicago Tribune called them) were brutally attacked.

Later, Parsons learned from a German comrade that the police had swooped down on the Furniture Workers' meeting at Turner Hall, breaking in the door and shooting directly into the assembly; caught in the unexpected onslaught, the cabinet makers had stampeded like cornered animals, clambering up the pillars, hiding behind the stage, jumping out of windows, or breaking out of the hall and running the gauntlet of more cops stationed on the stairs.

A pitched battle took place at the Halsted street viaduct immediately after, with charge and counter-charge, until a body of cavalry, with drawn swords, rode through the massed workers, leaving many dead and wounded on the bridge.

By this time the Board of Trade had mobilized a formidable army. Infantry regiments patrolled various districts, firing on the slightest pretext. Thousands of special deputies, "citizens' patrols" and bands of uniformed vigilantes like the Boys in Blue and Ellsworth Zouaves, smashed down upon parades of silent strikers, marching with set faces. Troops of cavalry clattered through the streets at a sharp trot, their bridles jingling the horses' hoofs kicking against the cobblestones. In great panic, the Board of Trade had despatched couriers to General Sheridan, who was campaigning in the Sioux country; and by Thursday several companies of veteran Indian fighters, bronzed

and grizzled and covered with dust, rode into the city, their repeating rifles slung over their shoulders. They were quartered in the Exposition building and sent marauding groups through the murky streets to end any sign of protest. With the frenzy of a holy crusade, the Chicago strike was suppressed.

As in the other cities, the Workingmen's party, the Socialists, suffered most. Their halls were demolished, their leaders arrested, their membership shot and beaten. Ruling class violence attained its worst excesses in Chicago and created a tradition of bitter hatred which was to shape the future course of the radical movement.

CHAPTER VIII. POLITICAL ACTION

LONG after the strike, Parsons couldn't find work. He tried every newspaper in Chicago, but it was no use, he couldn't get anywhere near a composing room. He was blacklisted. He and his wife went hungry.

Soon he was spending most of his time in party work. Before he knew it, he was drawn into the top leadership of the Workingmen's party and was made an organizer. He became a "professional revolutionist," giving all his energies to his job. It became his daily routine and his diversion, his food and lodging, his conscious existence and even part of his dreams. His life and experience merged into the history of the party.

Parsons began his new duties at the beginning of a period of extreme ferment in the labor movement. The great strike wave of '77, broken by relentless terrorism, and coming after four years of devastating crisis, lifted thousands of workers to class consciousness. Having learned the lesson of solidarity, they banded together for mutual protection. Then they pushed slowly ahead to take the offensive.

Hard times still hung over the country. The protests of the workers against wagecuts and layoffs, their efforts to build and strengthen their trade unions, were ruthlessly crushed by local, state and national government. The lesson of this armed suppression seemed too obvious to be overlooked: strikes could not be won, living conditions could not be bettered, if the armed forces of the government stood in the way. So the workers turned toward independent political action. They wanted to nominate their own candidates, to elect their own representatives, men who would not side with the employers but would fight for the demands of their own class.

The political-minded faction in the Workingmen's party was quick to see the new trend of labor. Particularly in Chicago, where the extremity of conditions had leveled away the barrier between jobless Yankees and foreign Socialists, a large English-speaking branch of the party was being built, under the leadership of Tom Morgan, a hard-working, conscientious organizer. In the fall of '77 they nominated a county ticket, with Parsons for Clerk and one of his comrades, Frank Stauber, who ran a hardware store on Milwaukee avenue, for Treasurer. They polled about seven thousand votes. And in other cities, the elections were also very encouraging.

It was to be expected, then, that at the congress of the Workingmen's party — held in Newark during December of the same year — the political wing would come out on top. Parsons, who was the only delegate from Chicago, participated in the convention proceedings, which were designed to clear the deck for political action. The constitution, with its obstacles to immediate election campaigning, was completely revamped. The structure of the party was overhauled — sections were divided into wards and precincts, and united into the State organizations. Even the name was changed — to the Socialistic Labor party. The executive committee was removed to Cincinnati — where the Socialists had just polled nine thousand votes — while Van Fatten was reelected national secretary.

In the spring city elections of '78, the Chicago Socialists, under their new name, the Socialistic Labor party, made history. By this time they had rigged up a real political machine. Concentrat-

ing upon the working-class districts, they mapped out a thorough campaign, holding one mass rally after the other. Stauber received 1416 votes, nearly as many as the combined count of his Democratic and Republican rivals, and was elected alderman of the fourteenth ward. Parsons and another comrade, running for similar positions in two adjoining wards, lost by the slimmest margin, and were undoubtedly counted out of office. "We shall contest the election in the fifteenth and sixteenth wards," wrote a Chicago correspondent to the *National Socialist*, new organ of the party, "where the most shameful tricks were resorted to, in order to count out our candidates."

One of the chief reasons for this political victory was the cooperation of the trade unions, which stood solid behind the party ticket. "On election day, hundreds of members of the newly amalgamated Trades Unions, left their work and helped us," wrote a labor reporter from Chicago.

But how did the party win the support of the trade unionists, many of whom were hostile at this time to the use of political measures? The key man in effecting this coalition was Parsons. He belonged to the English branch, which led the political movement in the Chicago section of the Socialistic Labor party; at the same time he was an active unionist. In fact, he was elected president of the Amalgamated Trade and Labor Union of and Vicinity, which he helped organize. He was also on the central committee of the International Labor Union, a nationwide movement to organize the unorganized, led by George E. McNeill and backed by the *Labor Standard*- which opposed the political ventures of the party and was no longer an official publication.

Many of the trade-union Socialists in Chicago were German immigrants, who were very suspicious of the native-born members of the party. Nevertheless, Parsons was able, through his organizing his eloquence and his personal charm, to overcome this distrust and to win their complete confidence. Thus he was able to swing their support behind the party ticket.

Throughout the spring and summer of '18, the Chicagoans prepared for the coming state elections. Parsons was not so busy in this campaign as he had been in the preceding ones, for he was spending most of his time in trade union work. Among other things, he brought McNeill to Chicago to speak at a trade union picnic just before the local Fourth of July celebrations. After a morning spent in dancing and singing, at the inevitable Ogden Grove, the comet player — as one worker-correspondent described the occasion — "called the great assembly together, and Comrade Parsons after a few appropriate remarks, introduced Mr. George E. McNeill of Boston, president of the International Labor Union," who spoke on the eight-hour day.

"Just as soon as we recover from the fatigues of the glorious Fourth," wrote another reporter, "the engineering minds of the party must go to work and break ground for the coming fall campaign."

As election day drew nearer, Parsons spoke with Morgan and McAuliffe at several large open-air gatherings. Occasionally he also covered these meetings for the *National Socialist*. Of one rally he wrote:

"The broad street, from side to side up and down for nearly a block, was filled with an immense throng of earnest and intelligent workmen. The 'Cause and Remedy of Poverty' was discussed from the Socialistic standpoint, showing that destitution, ignorance and crime, was an unnatural condition…and that universal poverty among the masses was the penalty inflicted by nature for the crime of violating her laws…"

In the same despatch, Parsons outlined his general point of view at this time, which favored both economic and political action. By organizing trade unions and by working through the party at the polls, the workers would "ere long," he said, "call a halt to the increasing power of

aggregated wealth which is surely turning out once fair America into a land of paupers, tramps and dependent menials."

But if Parsons was so confident of the future of socialism during this period, his optimism was far surpassed by his fellow speaker, John McAuliffe. "Pass the word down the line," the rhetorical Socialist shouted at one public gathering, "Forward march! Onward, to perfect organization and the independence of Labor from class servitude! Ho! all ye oppressed, ye weary and heavy laden, come gather under the protecting shelter of the banner of *Socialism*…under whose folds the wage workers, the masses, shall be inspired to deeds of heroism and drive the fell monster — *poverty* — from off the earth forever."

CHAPTER IX. "THE BALLOT THE MISSILE"

SCIENCE THE ARSENAL, REASON THE WEAPON, THE BALLOT THE MISSILE.

Under this flamboyant slogan, which was now the guiding principle of their party, the Socialists moved from one success at the polls to another. The slogan was probably the creation of John McIntosh, labor bard, who now edited the party newspaper. Besides contributing a topical poem to almost every issue of the *National Socialist*, he often embroidered the aims of the party in ornate prose.

"We desire to inflict upon men a Promethean agony," he declared, in an editorial note, "chaining them to a sense of misery, feeling the vulture of harrowing, harassing discontent forever preying upon their peace. We want them to be victims of a fierce, gnawing, intolerable conviction of a personal injury — a withering sense of infernal outrage, so utterly absorbing as to stop up all avenues to enjoyment cultivating a thirsting, savage longing for relief — *but, remember, through the ballot box*. No murder, no arson, no violence of any kind; unless insisted on by combining bosses — then up and at it like a whirlwind."

Parsons' trade union work tended to draw him away from the *National Socialist*. The paper was edited from Cincinnati under the supervision of Van Fatten, who now lived there and who had steered the Socialists in their present political direction. The unionists in the party favored the *Labor Standard*, and there was a feud between the two papers. Because he was immersed in trade union organization, Parsons found the *Labor Standard* more receptive to his interests; he acted as reporter for it and even became its Chicago agent. He also began to develop differences with the *National Socialist*, and was denounced in its pages.

However, the *National Socialist* was running into financial trouble; factional struggles had almost completely destroyed the Cincinnati section of the Socialistic Labor party and the newspaper could get no local support. Meanwhile, the Chicago section was proceeding with plans for an English paper of its own. In view of these circumstances, Van Fatten made several trips to Chicago and, after threshing the whole matter out with Morgan, Parsons and others, he patched up the split and effected a plan whereby the new local paper, to be called the *Socialist*, would become the national English organ of the party. Parsons was appointed assistant editor.

In preparation for the coming state elections, the new paper was launched early in the fall of '78. September and October were busy months for the Chicagoans. Their campaign apparatus had been improved a great deal. They held a convention late in September and nominated a complete state ticket.

One of the high spots of the campaign was their election rally songs, composed by their "untamed troubadour," W. B. Creech. He had a new tune for almost every occasion. At large meetings the crowd would usually listen to the pyrotechnics of John McAuliffe, who was running for Congress. "Let us yank, and thunder, and roar, and storm, and charge, at the ballot box," he would declaim, "and having thus peaceably, yet boldly, won the victory, we *will* enjoy it, or *know the reason why*...Fellow workers," he would end, "be true to yourselves, desert the enemy, and the

morn following election, Labor's sun will rise radiant with glory!" Then the crowd would yell for Creech; he would step sprily to the platform and in his strong, clear voice, sing:

Then raise your voices, workingmen,
Against such cowardly hirelings, 0!
Go to the polls and slaughter them,
With ballots, instead of bullets, 0!

Or, after a less fiery address, he would chant:

Let us rally once again;
We must work with might and main;
Bear a hand, Old Politics to throw away;
Stand for Socialistic light,
And each man demand his right–
Shorter hours to work and for us better pay.

His lyrics were printed on the front page of the *Socialist* and were sung wherever the workers assembled. At an election rally held during a Sunday afternoon on the corner of Larrabee and Crosby streets, Parsons opened the meeting by singing Creech's "Socialist Wagon":

…So come, my friends, and join us,
And you'll never rue the day,
For we'll change this present system
To the Socialistic way.

He read the local platform and urged the spectators not to vote for the old parties because they were "simply the agencies by which the possessory class would mislead, divide and then plunder the worker of the fruits of his labor." A little later he introduced McIntosh, who had come to Chicago; and the "poet laureate" of the Socialistic Labor party helped out by reciting some new verses, which were boisterously applauded.

The last weeks before election, meetings multiplied. Torchlight parades, brass bands, calcium-lighted platforms for the speakers-were nightly events. On vacant lots, in the open street, with a wagon or beer barrels for a speaking stand — wherever a spot could be found, Parsons and his comrades electioneered.

November 5 was bright and clear. Men standing on wagons and waving the Union and the red flags, drove through the streets. VOTERS, DO NOT VOTE AS HERETOFORE FOR CORRUPTIVE POLITICIANS AND OFFICE SEEKERS — read one of their banners. Socialist voting was heavy in working-class sections, in the fifteenth and sixteenth wards, especially in the evening when the laborers came from the shops to cast their ballots. In spite of all sorts of tricks and interference, the party elected three representatives and one senator to the state legislature.

The evening after election, the Socialists celebrated at their headquarters, which was lighted up brilliantly, the entrance illuminated with Chinese lanterns. What a contrast it presented to the office of their rivals, the Greenbackers, for the latter had made a very poor showing. "Notwithstanding the Greenback party sought to bargain with everybody willing to sell out to the highest

bidder," the *Socialist* declared gleefully, "the Socialists, who stood firm and unwavering, have by far outnumbered them in votes."

Celebrations lasted for more than a week and culminated in a large mass meeting where the elected representatives spoke. In the center of the stage stood a life-size portrait of a prominent European Socialist, guarded by pictures of Lincoln and Washington, and surrounded by a sea of emblems and red flags. From the gallery were suspended the trade union banners, and pyramids of Stacked guns were in the background. Creech was ready with a stirring song, and everybody joined in the chorus:

> *Raise aloft the crimson banner,*
> *Emblem of the free,*
> *Mighty tyrants now are trembling,*
> *Here and o'er the sea.*

Alan Calmer
Labor Agitator
The Story of Albert R. Parsons
1937