The defiance of August Spies

Delivered in Chicago, November 11 1910. Manuscript, *Labadie Collection*, University of Michigan.

'If Death is the penalty for proclaiming the truth, then I will proudly and defiantly pay the costly price. Call your hangman! Truth crucified in Socrates, in Christ, in Giordano Bruno, in Huss, in Galileo, still lives; they and others whose number is legion have proceeded us on this path. We are ready to follow.'

I think the soul that in those words breathed its indomitable conviction to the man about to sentence him to death, and twenty-three years ago today stepped from the summit of Chicago's Calvary out upon the pathway of Great Ghosts, had in the moment of their utterance a greater vision than the narrow court-room, lined with human hate, the damning jury, and the bitter-lipped Judge. I think that in that superb moment of defiance, the doomed man looked far through the girdle of faces, the girdle of stone, the girdle of time, and the girdle of death, and saw the immemorial procession whose 'number is legion,' marching, marching unflinchingly up the human *via dolorosa*, and fell into line with them, and went upon the path with the rhythm of immortal footsteps in his ears, the sounding of immortal echoes in his brain.

The figure that he and his comrades saw before them—towards which they marched, into which they were soon to merge— the figure and the face upon the Hill of Sacrifice— was it the figure and the face of Christ? of Bruno? of Galileo? or that of the forgotten man lost in some unknown fight of yesterday? Was it not rather the great face that Swinburne saw, and cried as he saw:

O sacred Head, O desecrate,
O labor-wounded feet and hands,
O blood poured forth in pledge to fate
Of nameless lives in divers lands:
O slain and spent and sacrificed
People, the gray-grown, speechless Christ.

Aye, I think that was the vision of the time-old slaying of the common man—the man who has stood up to question the masters as to their handling of the world.

For they were *common men*, who had risen to ask why the *common wealth*, and the *common things* of the earth, were not the

common use and the common upbuilding of life? And they spoke in the *common speech* that was easy to understand, and as it was said of Christ 'the common people heard them gladly.' They stood on the street-corners and spoke the gospel of self-salvation-the gospel of direct expropriation of natural and social wealth, which by the operation of existing law has become the possession of a limited class. And that was their crime—that they had told the people to act directly, and not through the intervention of political powers, which could never be trusted. They had told the people that the cause of their involuntary idleness, and the inadequacy of their wages to buy back their products, lay in the system of property, entrenched behind the moral law of the Church and the force-sustained law of the State, but more than all behind the ignorance, the humility, the dog-like submissiveness of the workers themselves, who cringe and kneel and kiss the hand that smites them, believing in their own slavery. They had tried to waken in these cowering souls some consciousness of their true condition, some sense of what changes they might make in it, some question why starvation and privation should exist, some vision of a society wherein it did not exist, some realization of who is the enemy, some desire to dislodge that enemy from his seat of power, some knowledge of how their would-be saviors in political ranks buy and sell, and cheat them, always, some resolution to depend no more upon roundabout salvation from someone overhead, but upon their own direct, united action.

This was their crime: let no one every suppose that it was less than this. The historians of this affair, wilfully or ignorantly—I believe in most cases wilfully—have taught the generation that has risen since that the five men done to death by the State of Illinois 23 years ago were executed becase they had been proven guilty of conspiring to throw a bomb at a meeting on the Haymarket. But this was never their crime, as those who managed the trial very well knew; the bomb was never anything to Grinnell and the men whose tool he was but the excuse whereby they might crush the movement of the laboring people towards direct revolutionary action. In his speech demanding their execution, the State's Attorney came openly out, dropping the technical lies upon which the prosecution was

supposed to be based, and plainly said: 'Anarchy is on trial.'

That was the one truthful word he said: Men were to be hanged, not because they had thrown a bomb, or had aided, abetted, or suggested that any one else throw it, or had even known who threw it; but because they had said, 'Workingmen, you can never live as men, working at will, and commanding the result of your work, until you socialize wealth—disregarding the law which robs you of it; brushing that law aside as a dead letter. And know that when you are ready to do this, force will be used against you; be prepared to use force in return.'

Now from the standpoint of the possessor, such speech is always a crime; and of this crime they were really guilty. The social revolt that they were dreaming of, the social overturning which would have 'put down the mighty from their seat and exalted them of low degree,' was in the eyes of the Masters of the World a crime beside which the Haymarket bomb was like the snapping of a pop-gun in a boy's hands. A world full of people not one of whom was hungry! not one of whom was naked! or shivering! or ill-sheltered! or idle against his will! Wherein they themselves could no longer have the power to say this man 'Work' and he works; or 'Stop' and he stops; or 'This is mine; you maybe need it and I do not; but it's mine; touch it and you go to prison!'—What! they should no longer have the power to starve any one! to freeze any one! to clutch the wealth they do not need! What then would become of Civilization! Ruination, disorder, chaos would follow!—Oh, to be sure, men might put such things in pretty books if they liked, print them in gold and blue on deckle edged paper, and bind them in fancy leather—give them to their friends, and dawdle over them before an after-dinner nap! It would while away an hour! But talk them to the common people, the people who might listen to it seriously, the hulking brutes who might take it into their heads to act—Oh, there could be but one answer to such a criminal against the public peace: 'Away with him: Crucify him, crucify him.'

The terrible common people! The 'sewer-rats,' they called us, then—rats that had been driven into their holes! The common people, who bear the burdens of the world, but are not to stretch out their unlovely hands to take the thing that they have fashioned;

the common people who are so rude, and so indelicate, and so incapable of fine feeling, and so unable and unworthy to enjoy the art and the glory of life; the common people who are not fit to come among sensitive souls where high ideals are discussed because they are dirty, and coarse, and low. O yes: it is always dangerous to talk to us.

I remember—yes as if it were yesterday though it is twenty years ago, and more—the memory rankles yet of the delicate disgust of a would-be reformer who came to me saying 'Some striking miners came to the club last night, and really *they smelled.*' No doubt they smelled, and the choke-damp, of the eternal night of the mine and all that the mine means—the grime, the body-reek, the unwashed clothes, and vile food, the vile tobacco, and the viler whiskey—no doubt they smelled of it all—that is how coal is paid for—by the common man who mines it! Creature of all disgust is the common man to those who do not pay the price for their little niceties.

He is dirty! yes, he is dirty—very, very dirty; the vomit of the engine and the fire-pit is on him; the grease of the machine; the splatter of the gutter and the distillation of the sewer; the ashes of the city dump heaps, the slime of rotting refuse; every parasite and every germ that ever crawled and spilled its venom on humanity has crawled upon him; just as there is no foul and filthy hole above or underground into which it has not crawled.

Yes, he is dirty.

He is hulking and ill-shapen and ungainly. Yes. His figure is unhandsome; he has crept on it too much—crept into vicious places where Life stared Death in the eyes and both clutched at him—and sometimes he left a piece of his body in Death's fingers; when his shoulders bend together you go through a narrower aperture; when your right arm swings all day doing one work, you become one-sided; when familiarity with the machine breeds contempt your boss is in a hurry you feed your fingers to the machine sometimes; when you wait the pleasure of bailing iron, it occasionally explodes and peppers you with sparks, and leaves something that looks like leper spots upon the skin. Yes, the common man is ill-shapen, and deformed, and unhandsome.

He is diseased with vile, unnamable diseases. O yes: he has

sweated in our social slaughter-pens till every vein ran fire instead of blood, and then in raging thrist he has drunk—drunk evil drinks that filled him full of alcoholic indifference and villainous lusts. And he has infected himself with the taint that has taken him to the hospital, a thing for the worms to feed on before he was dead. Yes; all that, all that.

He is coarse, and loud-mouthed, and dull-eared, and squint-eyed—and his speech is loathsome. Yes: he is coarse; he is the digger in the dung-heaps; the dung-heap doesn't make people fine—but it has to be dug.

Yes: he is loud-mouthed; he speaks across the roar of engine and growling wheels, above the sound-chaos of the city streets— he speaks of work, loud-sounding work, in coarse work tones, as men speak who have to do with imperative, primal activities.

Dull-eared: O yes; sometimes he cannot distinguish a preference between a symphony orchestra and the slash of a rip-saw; the saw has trained him, not the violin.

Squint-eyed? Yes: he has squinted at micrometers in the semi-darkness of the shop till he cannot open his eyes wide any more; he has squinted at gauges till his sight is narrowed to a gauge; he has squinted down the throat of red-hot furnaces, till he has singed the very nerve of sight; dazzled and blinded, he drops his lids, and looks at the green world outside, and sees it with a wide red flare over it—the burnt-in image of the furnace throat reflected.

His speech is loathsome. Yes, very loathsome. Full of coarse and obscene images, vulgarities for which he does not blush, boisterous curses and vapid laughter. For the worst of all the robbery that has been done upon him is that his soul has been robbed away too; and if the beauty and the strength of the body have been twisted and malformed and sapped away, so too dimmed down the light of the Inner Man-that-might-have-been till it is but a faint spark glimmering through a junk-heap of broken possibilities, twisted and perverted passions.

Yes, the common man is all that—rough, uncouth, misshapen, dull, vulgar, vapid, unfit to grace a social festivity, to bow and scrape in a dance-salon, or carry a lady's fan.

But also—but also, he has dug, he has mined, he has burrowed, he

has tunneled, he has blasted, and smelted, and forged, he has ploughed, and planted, and gathered, and piled, and shipped, and fetched, and carried; he has built—and torn down, and rebuilt, and cleaned and scoured and repaired; he has woven, and cut, and sewed, and clothed; and *Man's world cannot stand without him*—not for a day, not for an hour. Without the dancing master and the fan-carrier, it still could spin right merrily; without the miner and the farmer and the 'sewer-rat'—never.

And seeing this, and understanding this, and feeling all the wrong and shame of our disinheritance—both of the body and the mind—it happens sometimes that a figure steps from the sullen or indifferent ranks, and a voice arises crying in the wilderness. And this too is the Common Man; the man who is something more than all this rest I have been saying; for he is also the man who goes to unbury his fallen comrade when the mine crushes him, though he knows the chances to save are few, and the chances that he also will be crushed are many; the man who goes down into the sewer-gas to save his reeling companion, and falls by his side; the man who springs into the jaws of the sea to save from it what stranger he knows not, and drowns together with the stranger; the man who thrusts a heedless fellow-craftsman from a danger-track, and is ground to pieces for his generosity; and the Man-who-cries to all these weak, atrophic, opiated souls: 'Comrades, *it is wrong.* The earth is as much ours as theirs—those people who are shutting us out from its free use. The conquests of the dead are as much ours as theirs—those people who claim them as their sole inheritance and will not let us use them. Life can be arranged otherwise. We do not need to be hungry because there is too much food, nor shelterless because we have built too many houses, nor naked because we have made too many clothes. We do not need to be idle because some one has made so much profit, that it pays him for us to be idle. We can all work, and all have leisure to straighten our backs and unbend our muscles and train our brains. We can do this thing; and we can do it ourselves; and we alone can do it. No one can do it for us; no one will do it for us; no one should do it for us. If we are great enough to make these things we are great enough to use them, great enough to manage their making and their dividing; and if anything is made by us now,

which we in freedom would not make, the labor of which is too costly in human life for free men to make, then let those who wish to use it, make it; or *let it not be made.* The purpose of society should be to enable men to live more freely and more fully than in single combat with nature; the purpose of work should be to build the workers' lives—not to rack, enslave, and destroy them. Come then, announce your will to be free men, to take full hold on life, and make it yours. No longer be the ball for politicians to toss back and forth; they will all betray you. Be your own Saviors.'

So our comrades cried, a quarter of a century ago—and like the self-forgetting swimmer, died for it.

And they too were *common men.* For this, likewise, is among the sacrifices that are laid on them—that now and again they go up to Golgotha.

They went, these five men, 'proudly and defiantly', believing in no after reward, knowing there would never be any justice done to them; but hoping and believing that their deaths would bear their message farther and wider than their lives had done.

In Waldheim you may read the stone-cut prophecy: 'The time will come when our silence will be more powerful than the voices you strangle today.' There it stands, a death-defying conviction, waiting its fulfilment. And whether the years be many, or whether they be few, till the people waken and take their own, the surety waits.

Farther and wider indeed the words have already gone; the breath over the gallows blew them on all the winds of heaven. And men remember and commemorate tonight in London, in Berlin, in Paris, in Rome, in Madrid, in Barcelona (seething Barcelona), in Melbourne, in Cape Colony, what an American commonwealth did on on this day, 23 years ago—lined itself together with the tyrannies of Europe, proved government to be what our comrades had said (always and ever a tool of the propertied class no matter what its form) and did men to death by false witness, an acknowledged prejudiced jury, and a hangman-judge—not for anything they had done, but for *what they had said,* in the name of what some one else had done.

All over the world their words are repeated. But still the day of awakening seems far off; still the people with their ox-like eyes look

patiently on at their own undoing while the yoke remains upon their necks. And their deliverance taking seems far away. Maybe it will come sooner than it seems; there are sudden darkenings in the social sky at times. In the meantime, 'lest we forget,' and lest our enemies think that we forget, we keep the hangman's day—the day they make corpses of men whose will in the world had been to make it a better place, the day they baptized the cause of human freedom once again with blood.

Through the receding years I see the ghost figures rise—the luminous face of Adolph Fischer shining while crying 'This is the happiest moment of my life,' the mutilated lips of Louis Lingg yet whispering 'Hoch die Anarchie,' the homely sturdy resolute features of Engel saying 'Long live Anarchy,' the ringing prophecy of Spies, and the clear, sweet voice of Albert Parsons pleading till the moment of strangulation 'May I speak Sheriff Matson. Let me speak. O Men and Women of dear America, O—.'

We never knew what he wanted to say. The figures pass along—others and others rise behind them—and later—here in the 20th century—the great figure from the ditch of Montjuich[21]—he, too, done to death for the word of liberty in the name of the deeds of others.

How many more are to pass into that dusky column of the Martyr-Ghosts? Very, very many yet. There will be no end, till there is an end of the belief that ideas can be killed by killing men, or an injustice made acceptable, a dissatisfied people by putting a mailed hand upon the crier's mouth. Until then the lot of the rebel will be to speak and to die for it. So we keep the 11th of November that we may remember what was done, what may be done again, and if the lot comes to us that we too may know how to die.