
Raymond Robins

by William Hard

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So Raymond Robins is back, back from Russia. He knows Lenin now, and Trotsky. He knows them well. As a colonel in the American Red Cross he had dealings with them day after day and month after month. And people say that he does not think they are German agents. And they say that he regards the Soviets as organs of genuine and active beliefs among the Russian people. And they say that he is opposed to armed attack upon the Soviets. Which is natural, they say, Robins is a socialist.

I know Robins through and through. He is our principal present witness about Russia. What are his qualifications?

Socialism is not among them. He knows more arguments against socialism than any other man I have ever listened to. He specializes on arguments against socialism. And he specializes on saving people from socialism.

]He tapped at my door in Chicago, years ago, at night, late. He had been a resident at the settlement called the Chicago Commons. And he had been head-resident at the settlement managed by Northwestern University. He had refused to be called head-resident. He wanted a "group," a "free" group. All residents should be equal. If, then, of their own free will they followed Robins, well and good. It was well and good. They followed Robins. He was not head-resident in title, but he was admittedly head-resident by merit in fact. And I opened my door and let him in.

He bore a book, a thick book, from Australia. I have it yet, pickled on my shelves. It consists of arguments against socialism, imported and added to his stock. This book he handed to me, and said that he understood I was about to join the Socialist Party. I protested that I had no such intention whatsoever. He

was not deterred. If I did not need a cure, apparently I was due to get a protective vaccine. I gave him a chair, and he tossed his hair back and stretched his right hand out and began.

He is a great orator. A great orator must have incandescence, physical as well as mental. He has it. His enormous physical fighting vigor is as much a part of him as his fighting thought. He thinks, he acts, he speaks with all of him. You feel his whole personality gathered up and hurled at you, instincts as much as ideas, with an impact stunning. And it is always the same, always in violent motion, always at white heat. He needs no audience to fire him. He will orate to five thousand people. He will orate to five hundred. He will orate to five. He will orate to one. His speech on socialism to me, sitting solitary opposite him and trying to look like a mass-meeting, was one of the greatest speeches I ever heard him make.

At about 2 o'clock he ceased. He is the only American I would gamble on to talk a Bolshevik under the table. I was in full and final possession of all conceivable differences between the "cooperative commonwealth" and real "fundamental democracy." I pointed out a couch. He took it. And he called for an alarm clock and set it for 5. And at 5 he rose and went off downtown to open up the Municipal Lodging House, of which he was the public director, and to give his guests there an early morning start on their daily quest for work.

He knew broken men. He knew spent men. Himself unbreakable and unspendable, sleeping when he found a bed, eating when he happened on food, he labored on behalf of the exploited and exhausted; but, in defiance of the suspicion naturally aroused against him in some quarters by such conduct, he is not a

socialist. He supported Hughes prominently in 1916. No, he is not a socialist.

But he is an agitator. He is. And an adventurer. Yes. When Alaska was at its roughest, Robins was in Alaska. When Chicago was the hottest spot politically in America, Robins was in Chicago. When Russia was chaos and a rainbow, Robins was in Russia. He is always following the storm and the arc of promise.

In a certain eastern city not far from New York there is a local statesman who loves to recount his first sight of Robins. He was conducting a campaign, this statesman, against some local evil. I think it had to do with excessive public utility franchises. Into his office one day there came a young man, dark, with hair very black and very straight, and with the tread of an Indian on the trail. There he was. He had come to help. He announced no reason and no origin. Simply, he had come. The statesman took him out to a meeting, a meeting of workingmen, and tried him on them. When he was through, "You can talk all you want to," said the statesman. The stranger talked morning, noon, and night for a couple weeks. Then the campaign was over. And, bag in hand, he rushed through the statesman's office, saying good-bye. "Hold on," said the statesman, "our account. Expenses at least." "No account," said Robins, "I'm off." "But wait," said the statesman, "wait and answer. Who? Why? Whence? Whither?" "I saw about your fight in the newspapers," said Robins, "and I liked it, and I came, and I have enough money, and I'm off to organize a union among the steelworkers in a town in Pennsylvania." And he was off.

In Pennsylvania, in such towns, there were citizens of the professionally respectable sort who tried to get rid of him with guns. But he does not mind guns. In Alaska he got enough dust to be financially independent and enough sand to look at guns familiarly. He looked at them familiarly in Russia. I am told by colleagues of his that in Russia he wore his American uniform and floated his American flag from his motor car at times when even regular army officers in the Allied services were about in civilian's clothes to avoid annoyance. Robins does not mind annoyances. I suspect him of enjoying the gesture of meeting them. He might have been a good "bad man" in Alaska if he had not been a "sky-pilot."

He preached there and, for that matter, he

preaches everywhere. He turned from Chicago politics to the "Men and Religion Forward Movement," and preached all over the United States. And you can never tell when he will preach. He has been known to begin an address on something like municipal ownership with the remark, "I think I will preach instead. My text is the 3rd verse of the 4th chapter of—" And the audience which came to listen to economics and politics listened to exegetics and ethics. But they are all one to Robins. He is always an evangelist, and (in long preparation for his mission to Russia) he has always been an evangelist not merely from the platform, but man to man, man to men, to hundreds and hundreds of men, even I sometimes think to thousands personally, individually, knowing them, knowing their souls.

Even before he ran for United States Senator on the Progressive ticket in 1914, his acquaintance was prodigious, and still, with an unconscious prophetic eye to Russia, it embraced every thinkable variety of progressive, liberal, radical, socialist, syndicalist, immigrant, anarchist. He knew the bourgeois reformers, like Walter Fisher, intimately, and he labored with them for clean aldermen. He is not above the bourgeois virtues. He has them, down to the latest, including not drinking and not smoking. He knew the leaders of the Chicago Federation of Labor intimately, and he labored with them for more self-government in industry. He knew that the bourgeois virtues were not enough, in themselves, to make a just society. He knew his own 17th Ward intimately, precinct by precinct, group by group, Italians, Poles, Russian Jews. He had seen much of Europe before he went to Europe. He was a member of the Chicago Board of Education when it held Jane Addams, Dr. Cornelia DeBey, Mrs. Emmons Blain, Louis Post. Whoever lived through that board knew radical conflicts. He listened to Bolsheviks. The "impossibilist" socialists in convention halls on North Clark were crazy with the precise craziness of Lenin. And he argued with "regular" socialists at the Friday Club. A.M. Simons, who is now in Europe representing the pro-war element of American socialism, was a member. He wrote a marvelous pamphlet on the economic foundation of art. Everything had to be economic for Simons. For Robins everything had to be mystical. He produced at the Friday Club a sudden and eloquent oration on the mystical

foundation of marriage. The enraged followers of the materialistic conception of history assured him that with his talents he could have produced an equally good one on the commission form of government. And I dare say he could have. But he was not thinking of the commission form of government. He had seen Margaret Dreier.

I hear that certain people say that the Soviets were pro-German and that Robins' attitude toward them is fixed by the fact that Robins' wife is of German descent. They thereby say that Mrs. Robins is pro-German. And thereby confess themselves anti-American. Anybody who calls anybody else pro-German, on the ground of German descent, without further inquiry and information, is a lost outcast from the meaning of America. Every German name on our list of casualties on the western front damns him to the nethermost circle of black renegades from the American spirit. We fought England with Englishmen and are fighting Germany with ex-Germans. The fact is that Margaret Dreier Robins is as strong for Pershing's army as Pershing himself.

Arguments from hypotheses are marvelous. Mrs. Robins was born rich, therefore she is reactionary. Only, she isn't. And through her, and through her work in the organizing of trade unions among women, Robins extended his acquaintance further among rank and file workers and among the enthusiasts who gather those workers together, out of the frequent lethargy and even against their frequent reluctance, and lead them. He came to be one of America's most accomplished connoisseurs in cranks. But he also knew a multitude of sane and useful persons; merchants, manufacturers, bankers seem to like to call him in and have him appear before them in the guise of the prophet Nathan saying relentlessly, "Thou art the man." I should guess that he has convicted more industrial sinners of sin than anybody else among us. If he were an artist, which he is not, he could write a stupendous novel of our contemporaneous economic and political struggle. He knows the ideas. But many people know the ideas. Few people know the men, the women, the hundreds of types of men and women, revolution-

ary and counterrevolutionary, who are the typical pivots of the struggle, giving it its human weaknesses and its human strengths and its human destinies. Robins knows them.

With this equipment, with such qualifications, he went to Russia. I do not say that his conclusions about Russia are totally right. For me a good man and a great man, but even for me he is only one man, and Russia is too vast, too mighty, to be reported entire by any one man. What I do say is that Robins is a competent witness, competent by training, and that his testimony must be received as being in the highest degree valuable. And our misery is that our stock of such testimony is so slender.

How many really competent witnesses, competent to tell a Bolshevik from a Menshevik without looking at their labels, have we received back from Russia? You could count them on two hands, perhaps on one hand. Are we determined to be ignorant about Russia? The Germans are not. Are we afraid? The Germans are not. Mirbach is murdered at Moscow. The Germany stay in Russia. Eichhorn is murdered at Kiev. The Germans stay, not only soldiers but civilians, in thousands. The most pitiable spectacle in the world today is the Allies peering over the rim of Russia and bleating about German propaganda, while the Germans adventure themselves to Russia's center. Our best emissary to Russia, if he were not detained by another occupation, would be Woodrow Wilson with his divinations of the flows of democratic thought. It is not given to anybody else to divine as he does, without training of it, and without contact. But we have hundreds, we have thousands, of men and women taught by training and taught by contact to penetrate the radical thought of a radical country. Why not send them? Will they be murdered? How many Americans have been murdered in Russia? How many Americans are being murdered on the line from Belgium to Switzerland?

Till Robins' testimony about Russia is undermined by testimony equally competent and more voluminous, it stands strong.

Edited by Tim Davenport.

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