

An Evening in Girard:
An Informal Speech Among Friends
Following the 1908 Socialist Convention
(May 21, 1908)

Comrades and Friends:—

After all that has been said here this evening, and so well said, I think, indeed I feel sure, that I could well afford to remain silent.¹ There are times when words are mere beggarly sounds; when they express seemingly less than nothing. I am quite sure that no words of mine could begin to adequately express the feeling which possesses me at this hour. I have been in Girard but a little while, and yet I feel as if I had been here many years and if there were to be held here a meeting of the old settlers I should feel slighted if I were not invited to a seat on the platform!

Girard, in some respects, epitomizes the history of the entire nation. When Comrade Wayland first located here the sentiment was such that it could truthfully have been said that he was a resident in a hostile community. The majority of the citizens looked upon him as an intruder. He had the misfortune to be in advance of his time. Since then he has grown into the affections of the people, and were he to give his consent he could easily be the mayor of Girard today. There has been a very decided change of sentiment. The people who were once hostile have become perfectly friendly. The change has been entirely on their part. They now understand the man, his principles, and his mission. Fifty years ago when a man whose soul revolted against the crime of property in human flesh came within the borders of Kansas he was looked upon and a monster of iniquity. The Free Soiler² was put to death and he was buried head first, and upon the soles of his protruding boots there was written the inscription "Mark the fate of the Free Soiler!" The people applauded such monstrous crimes. It is different today. There has been some progress. Kansas, the world, is nearer civilized.

A little while ago a Socialist was looked upon as the enemy of the human race, but Socialists have become very numerous; they have become correspondingly respectable. I have always been proud of being a Socialist and never more proud than I am this evening. Looking into your faces and

catching your spirit I feel myself rising to exaltation. Socialism to us is something more than a mere conviction. It courses in our veins; it throbs in our hearts; it fires and sanctifies our souls; and it consecrates us to the service of humanity.

The convention just closed at Chicago was in my judgment the greatest and most important convocation of men and women in all the history of this nation. Its significance is not yet understood by the people. Fifty years must elapse and it must have its perspective, and then it will have its true proportion. In all that body of thoroughly honest, earnest, and conscientious men and women there was not a single one who was in any sense a self-seeker, not one who had any personal ambition to gratify. All of them were there for the one splendid purpose of perfecting the political party whose historic mission it is to emancipate the working class from the thralldom of slavery. The Socialist Party has a mission different from that of any party that ever existed. It is different — far different — from any other party in organization. Its mission is not to reform the present system, but to absolutely abolish it; to wipe out wage-slavery, to emancipate not only the working class, but the capitalist class; to abolish class rule so that, unfettered, the children of men may begin the march to what may be called real civilization. Competition, the controlling principle of capitalism, vanishes with the adoption of cooperative society. Not that we Socialists are less selfish, but that our selfishness is enlightened selfishness. We shall still compete with each other in socialist society, not for a material advantage, however, but to excel in good works.

How fully, how perfectly, how beautifully the spirit of socialism has been expressed at this festal board this evening! You have all joined in literally loading me with honors that I so illy deserve. I am simply a bit more fortunate than you. Of my own account I amount to so little. It is my good fortune that I have you as my comrades, and because of this fact I have been praised and I have been given credit to which I feel and know I am not justly entitled.

Here we have in miniature the society of the future. How perfectly fine it is! How it touches! How it thrills! How it inspires and how it ennobles all human beings! There is only one cause in all the world, as Comrade Hogan³ has so well said, that is worth living for, worth doing battle for, and, if need be, worth dying for, and that is socialism, and it is coming just as certain as the sun rises. Scattered all over this country there are the thousands and the hundreds of thousands who are keeping step to the inspired

music of the new emancipation, and for the first time in human history there is an international movement and it is spreading all over the civilized and uncivilized world. It is all-embracing. No single human anywhere is excluded from fellowship. We may not live to see the full fruition of our work, nor does it matter; so insidiously can a man feel socialism, so completely consecrated can he be to the cause of socialism that he lives within the realization of it, even now.

I don't wish to make myself subject to the criticism of the gentleman who was invited to say a few words on a certain occasion, and took a long while in saying them, and after adjournment one of the guest remarked that the gentleman could make the best fifteen minute speech in three hours that he ever heard!

I am very happy to be here to take the visiting comrades by the hand. It has been a long while since I have seen Comrade [W.P.] Metcalf. I met him down in Arizona. I remember how eager I was to press his hand. He is a pioneer down in that section and every time I think of New Mexico I can see him, stalwart, erect, and magnificent. He used to stand alone, but he has all that country peopled with socialists. They are almost as numerous as the leaves of the forest. Here is another, at my right, Comrade Dan Hogan, who has been battling valiantly down in Arkansas. I wondered about Dan up in Chicago, in that great madhouse that I escaped from. I had some doubt about my own sanity after I got away from there. The only time in all my experience in Chicago that I felt myself really in a peaceful, quiet state was when they had me locked up. ⁴I found more real fellowship among the so-called "criminals" than I did among the whole body of desirable citizens on the outside. The good people in Chicago they lock up; those that ought to be locked up walk the streets, free. There are two million people and they are packed together, heaps of them; they are total strangers to each other, and they have good reasons for being. They are strangers, not because they don't know each other, but because they do. I don't know what we will do with Chicago when we come into possession of it.

I am more than glad to see all these comrades here this evening. It has been a great pleasure to me to take them by the hand, look into their eyes, and hear their words of cheer and encouragement. I feel we are just barely making our beginning. The campaign just opening is certainly going to be an historical one. Four years ago they were still ridiculing the socialist movement. If it excited any comment at all it was as to its insignificance.

In one breath they said we were bloodthirsty cranks and in the next harmless dreamers, but they have now concluded that the socialist movement has merit enough to be reckoned with. The *Globe-Democrat*, of St. Louis, had an editorial the other day that was more than surprising. The statement was frankly made that the Socialist Party was the coming party in the United States. A number of other capitalist papers have made similar statements. Socialism has grown so rapidly that it is now regarded as a menace to capitalism. They are beginning to pay some attention to us. It is becoming so influential that they can no longer write about it as they used to.

I don't quite feel at liberty to invite you to the White House, but when the invitation can be extended, if I happen to be there, you will all be desirable citizens, I can assure you!

I just want to say a word about my quiet colleague over here. Comrade Fred Warren is entitled to a great share of the credit for the work that is being done here in Girard. He and Wayland were providentially joined, I think. They fit each other exactly; they are necessary to each other. I don't know of a stronger combination. Men of glorious intellect, firm heart, moral courage without question, their chief failing is their extreme modesty. They don't allow their pictures to be taken. I had to have myself photographed often enough to serve the whole combination. Our toastmaster [E. N. Richardson] does the honors on all such popular little occasions as this, and he does them very gracefully, as I am sure you will all bear willing testimony. We have a picture here for memory's wall. We will never all be together again. When we meet somebody will be missing, but we can remember this picture and cherish it, and I am sure that we shall. I wish you all long life and strength and health and inspiration, and for the cause, victory. In the campaign that is now opening you are all going to do your duty, I know. All of you are going to give an account of yourselves and I feel quite safe in predicting that when the polls close on the first Tuesday in November, the returns will be such as to surprise Girard and Kansas, the nation and the world. In this great work we all have our places and we all have our duties. We have the small satisfaction of knowing that we are not working for a personal advantage, but that we are working for the common interests of our common humanity.

He's true to God who's true to man; wherever wrong is done,
To the humblest and the weakest, 'neath the all-beholding sun,
That wrong is also done to us; and they are slaves most base,

Whose love of right is for themselves, and not for all their race.⁵

Published as part of the pamphlet *An Evening in Girard: Just an Informal Incident Following the Return of Delegates from the Chicago Socialist Convention: Camaraderie and Fellowship on Tap: Responses by Visiting and Resident Comrades, Including "Our 'Gene.* (Girard, KS: [Appeal to Reason?], 1908), pp. 29-34.

¹ Debs spoke at a gathering held to welcome home delegates and visitors to the 1908 National Convention of the Socialist Party of America, which was held in Chicago from May 10 to 17. E. N. Richardson served as master of ceremonies and a number of short speeches were given by local and regional luminaries, including J. A. Wayland, Fred D. Warren, J. E. Snyder, and Dan Hogan.

² The Free Soil Party was a short-lived anti-slavery political party of the late 1840s and early 1850s that was a forerunner of the Republican Party. The party experienced some electoral success, sending two senators and fourteen representatives to Congress as a result of the election of 1848.

³ Dan Hogan (1871-1935) was a leading figure in the Socialist Party of Arkansas. A lawyer and political journalist, Hogan was active in the People's Party during the 1890s, entering the socialist movement around the turn of the century. Hogan launched his first socialist newspaper, *The Southern Worker*, in 1901. He was the state secretary of the Socialist Party of Arkansas from 1906 to 1910. Hogan was a member of the committee on war and militarism at the 1917 Emergency Convention of the SPA and served on the party's National Executive Committee from 1918 to 1920. He was a close political associate of Oscar Ameringer and published a newspaper jointly with him in Oklahoma City at the time of his death.

⁴ This is hyperbole. Debs had a short and unpleasant stay at the overcrowded Cook County Jail in January 1895 prior to being transferred at the request of the American Railway Union's attorneys to the McHenry County Jail at Woodstock, Illinois. It was there that he served a six month term for contempt of court.

⁵ Stanza from "On the Capture of Fugitive Slaves Near Washington" (1845) by James Russell Lowell (1819-1891).