

A photograph of a clothing store interior. On the left, there are racks of dark-colored clothing. In the center and right, there is a glass display case or window. The background shows a bright, modern interior with recessed ceiling lights and a clean, white wall.

***EUGENE
V. DEBS***

***LABOR AND
FREEDOM:
THE VOICE
AND PEN
OF EUGENE
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Eugene V. Debs

Labor and Freedom: The Voice and Pen of Eugene V. Debs

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Introduction

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I think if I had been asked to name this work that comes to us from the rare mind and tender heart of 'Gene Debs, I would have called it "The Old Umbrella Mender." It was this tragic, touching tale that I first read in the manuscript; and it is the memory of this that will always return to me when I think of the book. It is the perfect painting from the artist's brush—the sculptured monument from the master's chisel—that makes one lowly, loyal soul to live forever in the hearts of humanity's lovers.

Not but that every line in the book is a treasure, and every sentiment brought forth an appeal to all that makes for justice, and equality, and freedom; nor will it detract from, but rather add to, the beauty and inestimable value of the entire collection if others, likewise, carry with them the image and memory of the old umbrella mender, as they travel with Debs the struggling, storm-tossed way of Labor and Freedom.

HENRY M. TICHENOR.

St. Louis, March 1, 1916.

MISCELLANY

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THE OLD UMBRELLA MENDER. Coming Nation, March 1, 1913.

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It was on a cold morning late in November last, just after the national election, and I was walking briskly toward my office. A stiff wind was blowing and a drizzling rain was falling. The threads in one of the ribs of my umbrella snapped asunder and the cover flew upward, as it has a way of doing, and I was about to lower my disabled shower-stick when I ran slapdash into an old itinerant umbrella mender with his outfit slung across his back and shuffling along in the opposite direction. He had noticed the ill-behavior of my umbrella. It snapped from its bearing even as he had his eyes upon it. Perhaps it understood. Anyway he had not a cent in his pocket and he had not yet breakfasted that cold and wet November morning.

He was about 65. His clothes had evidently weathered many a storm and besides being worn and shabby were too light for that season. Overcoat he had none. Nor gloves, nor overshoes. Mine embarrassed me.

His hat had been brushed to a standstill. His shoes were making their last stand and a protruding toe, red with the cold, seemed to have been shoved out as a signal of distress.

The outfit of the old fellow, carried on his back, was sorry enough to fit his general makeup, and if he had offered himself for sale just as he stood, including his earthly belongings and his immortal soul, he would have found no bidder nor brought a cent.

The face of the old umbrella mender lighted up with a kindly smile as he commented on the strange conduct of my umbrella in slipping a cog just as he happened to come along. I asked him by what evil magic he did the trick and he laughed in a half-hearted way just to be polite, but it was plain that he had long since forgotten how to laugh.

As we stepped into the shelter of an adjoining store he sat down on the steps and drawing a threaded needle from beneath the lapel of his thin and faded coat, he began to sew the cover back into its proper place. His fingers were red and numb. A discolored nail partly hid a badly bruised thumb.

He had difficulty in doing this bit of sewing, and it plainly distressed him. His eyesight was failing and his fingers were stiff in the joints. Yet he strove eagerly and intently to master their dumb protest. And he hoped, as he remarked, that he would be able to make an extra bit of money to provide himself with a pair of spectacles, now that favorable weather had set in for his trade.

Poor human soul, I thought to myself, as I looked down upon the weatherbeaten brother at my feet! A vagabond dog among his kind would fare better than this worn-out old umbrella mender in a civilized human community.

The warm clothes I had on made me uncomfortable as I saw him sitting there in rags mending my umbrella. The

overcoat I wore made me ashamed of myself. Every time the umbrella mender looked up out of his rags I winced.

What crime had he committed that condemned him to go through the world in tatters to be lashed by the merciless blasts of winter and tormented by hunger-pangs, and of what rare virtue was I possessed that entitled me to wear the best of clothes and eat the choicest food!

Dared I call him brother? And could I call him brother without insulting him?

These were the reflections that agitated my mind and troubled my heart.

"Good morning!" was the cheery greeting of a man who passed on the sidewalk, calling me by name.

The old umbrella mender fairly started at the mention of my name. He had just completed his bit of sewing and the threaded needle fell from his fingers.

"Excuse me!" he said timidly, "is this Mr. Debs?"

"Yes," I answered.

"Eugene V. Debs?"

"Yes, brother."

"Thank God," exclaimed the old umbrella mender as he fairly bounded to his feet and seized my extended hand with both of his. There were tears in his eyes and his face was flushed.

"Of course I know you now," he went on. "This is your home and I have often seen your picture. But this is the first time I have ever seen you and if it hadn't been for your umbrella snapping just as I came along, I would have passed you by and the chances are that I never would have

seen you. God must have tipped off your umbrella to give me a stop-signal."

"Say, Gene," he continued, still holding me with both hands, "I am pretty well down, ain't I? About all in and making my last stand before shuffling off."

"But say, Gene, I never scabbed. Look at these hands! I'm an old rail and I followed the business for twenty-seven years. I broke and ran a freight train most of that time. Never got a passenger run because I was too active on grievance committees and called a firebrand by the officials. I wouldn't stand for any of their dirty work. If I'd been like some of 'em I'd had a passenger train years ago and been saved lots of grief. But I'd rather be a broken down old umbrella-fixer without a friend than to be a scab and worth a million."

A gleam of triumph lighted up his seamed and weatherbeaten countenance.

"Did you belong to the A. R. U.?" I asked.

"Did I?" he answered with peculiar and assuring emphasis. "I was the first man on our division to sign the list, and my name was first on the charter. Look it up and you'll find me there. My card I lost in Ohio where I was run in as a vag. The deputy that searched me at the jail took my card from my pocket and I never saw it again. It was all I had left. I raised a row about it and they threatened to lock me up again. I was told afterwards that the deputy had scabbed in the A. R. U. strike."

"Did I belong to the A. R. U.? Well, I should say I did and I am proud of it even if they did put me on the hummer and pull me down to where I am today. But I never scabbed. And

when I cross the big divide I can walk straight up to the bar of judgment and look God in the face without a flicker."

"We had the railroads whipped to a standstill," he said, warming up, "but the soldiers, the courts and the army of deputy United States marshals that scabbed our jobs were too much for us. It was the government and not the railroads that put us out, and it was a sorry day for the railroad men of this country. Mark what I tell you, the time will come when they will have to reorganize the A. R. U. It was the only union that all could join and in which all got a square deal, and it was the only union the railroad managers ever feared."

And then he told me the melancholy story of his own persecution and suffering after the strike. His job was gone and his name was on the blacklist. Five jobs he secured under assumed names were lost to him as soon as he was found out. Poverty began to harass him. He picked up odd jobs and when he managed to get a dollar ahead he sent it to his family. His aged mother died of privation and worry and his wife soon followed her to the grave. Two boys were left, but whatever became of them and whether they are now alive or dead, he could never learn.

The old fellow grew serious and a melancholy sigh escaped him. But he was not bitter. He bore no malice toward any one. He had suffered much, but he had kept the faith, and his regrets were at least free from reproach.

He was a broken down old veteran of the industrial army. He had paid the penalties of his protest against privately owned industry and the slavery of his class, and now in his

old age he was shuffling along in his rags toward a nameless grave in the pottersfield.

Had he been an obedient corporation lackey; had he scabbed on his fellow-workers; had he been mean and selfish and cold-blooded, he would have been promoted instead of blacklisted by the corporation and honored instead of hounded by society. His manhood and self-respect cost him dearly, but he paid the price to the last farthing. His right to work and live, his home, his family and his friends were all swept away because he refused to scab on his fellowmen.

The old umbrella mender stood before me proud and erect and looked me straight in the eyes as he finished his pathetic story.

The shabby clothes he wore were to him capitalist society's reward of manhood and badge of honor.

There was something peculiarly grand about the scarred old veteran of the industrial battlefield. His shabbiness was all on the outside, and he seemed transfigured to me and clad in garments of glory. He loomed before me like a forest-monarch the tempests had riven and denuded of its foliage but could not lay low.

He had kept the faith and had never scabbed!



THE SECRET OF EFFICIENT EXPRESSION. Coming Nation, July 8, 1911.

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The following was written for the Department of Education of the University of Wisconsin, under whose direction there is being conducted an investigation of the subject of "Distinguished Contemporary Orators or Lecturers—With special reference to fertility and efficiency of expression. What is the key to their ability as masters of language? What school subjects, or what kinds of training have entered into their lives that have given them power to express themselves effectively?"

The secret of efficient expression in oratory—if secret it can properly be called—is in having something efficient to express and being so filled with it that it expresses itself. The choice of words is not important since efficient expression, the result of efficient thinking, chooses its own words, moulds and fashions its own sentences, and creates a diction suited to its own purposes.

In my own case the power of expression is not due to education or to training. I had no time for either and have often felt the lack of both. The schools I attended were primitive and when I left them at fourteen to go to work I could hardly write a grammatical sentence; and to be frank I am not quite sure that I can do so now. But I had a retentive memory and was fond of committing and declaiming such orations and poems as appealed to me. Patrick Henry's revolutionary speech had first place. Robert Emmet's immortal oration was a great favorite and moved me deeply. Drake's "American Flag" stirred my blood as did also Schiller's "Burgschaft." Often I felt myself thrilled under the spell of these, recited to myself, inaudibly at times, and at

others declaimed boldly and dramatically, when no one else was listening.

Everything that was revolutionary appealed to me and it was this that made Patrick Henry one of my first heroes; and my passion for his eloquent and burning defiance of King George inspired the first speech I ever attempted in public, with Patrick himself as the theme. This was before the Occidental Literary Club of Terre Haute, Ind., of which I was then a member, and I still shudder as I recall the crowded little club-room which greeted me, and feel again the big drops of cold sweat standing out all over me as I realized the plight I was in and the utter hopelessness of escape.

The spectacle I made of myself that evening will never be effaced from my memory, and the sympathetic assurances of my friends at the close of the exhibition did not relieve the keen sense of humiliation and shame I felt for the disgrace I had brought upon myself and my patron saint. The speech could not possibly have been worse and my mortification was complete. In my heart I hoped most earnestly that my hero's spiritual ears were not attuned to the affairs of this earth, at least that evening.

It was then I realized and sorely felt the need of the education and training I had missed and then and there I resolved to make up for it as best I could. I set to work in earnest to learn what I so much needed to know. While firing a switch-engine at night I attended a private school half a day each day, sleeping in the morning and attending school in the afternoon. I bought an encyclopedia on the installment plan, one volume each month, and began to

read and study history and literature and to devote myself to grammar and composition.

The revolutionary history of the United States and France stirred me deeply and its heroes and martyrs became my idols. Thomas Paine towered above them all. A thousand times since then I have found inspiration and strength in the thrilling words, "These are the times that try men's souls."

Here I should say, for the purpose of this writing, that from the time I began to read with a serious mind, feeling keenly as I did my lack of knowledge, especially the power of proper expression, both oral and written, I observed the structure and studied the composition of every paragraph and every sentence, and when one appeared striking to me, owing to its perfection of style or phrasing, I read it a second time or perhaps committed it to memory, and this became a fixed habit which I retain to this day, and if I have any unusual command of language it is because I have made it a life-long practice to cultivate the art of expression in a sub-conscious study of the structure and phrasing of every paragraph in my readings.

It was while serving an apprenticeship in a railroad shop and in later years as a locomotive fireman and as a wage worker in other capacities that I came to realize the oppressions and sufferings of the working class and to understand something of the labor question. The wrongs existing here I knew from having experienced them, and the irresistible appeal of these wrongs to be righted determined my destiny. I joined a labor union and from that time to this the high ambition, the controlling purpose of my life has been the education, organization and emancipation of the

working class. It was this passionate sympathy with my class that gave me all the power I have to serve it. I felt their suffering because I was one of them and I began to speak and write for them for the same reason. In this there was no altruism, no self-sacrifice, only duty. I could not have done otherwise. Had I attempted it I should have failed. Such as I have been and am, I had to be.

I abhorred slavery in every form. I yearned to see all men and all women free. I detested the idea of some men being ruled by others, and of women being ruled by men. I believed that women should have all the rights men have, and I looked upon child labor as a crime. And so I became an agitator and this ruling passion of my life found larger expression.

In the clash of conflict which followed and the trials incident to it I grew stronger. The notoriety which came in consequence enlarged my hearing with the people and this in turn demanded more efficient means of expression. The cause that was sacred to me was assailed. My very life and honor were on trial. Falsehood and calumny played their part. I was denounced and vilified. Everything was at stake. I simply had to speak and make the people understand, and that is how I got my training in oratory, and all the secret there is in whatever power of expression I may have.

In reading the history of slavery I studied the character of John Brown and he became my hero. I read the speeches of Wendell Phillips and was profoundly stirred by his marvelous powers. Once I heard him and was enthralled by his indescribable eloquence. He was far advanced in years, but I could see in his commanding presence and mellow and