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Nellie Bly In Jail

Chats with Eugene Victor Debs, the Imprisoned Labor Leader

How He and Comrades Pass Time

They Lead Rather a Jolly Life Telling Stories, Reading and Enjoying Good Meals

Debs Glad That He is not Rich

He Would Rather Be an Orator than to Be a Millionaire,
For He Thinks the Wealthy Are Objects of Pity

Chicago, Ill., Jan, 18 – Eugene Victor Debs says he makes only one sacrifice by being in jail. That is the absence from his family circle in their Sunday evening reunions.

It has been the invariable custom of the Debs family to spend their Sunday evenings together. As children it was the unbroken rule and as the sons and daughters grew up and got homes of their own, they still came back on Sunday evenings with husbands or wives and children to their parents' fireside.

"All days are alike to one in jail," Mr. Debs said to me. "I forget whether it's Monday or Wednesday, but intuitively and without effort I know when it's Sunday. I suppose one would say it was due to some occult influence, for then the family are together and my chair is vacant."

While I attended the strikes at Pullman last summer I did not meet Mr. Debs, who as the leader of the A. R. U., became so widely known through them. So I was rather glad to take the tiresome trip to Woodstock, Ill., to see Mr. Debs.

Woodstock is a small country town. The jail is a very small affair in the rear of the Sheriff's house, and adjoining the court-house.

The reason Mr. Debs and his seven fellow-sufferers are in Woodstock is because the jail in Chicago is overflowing with prisoners, guilty and innocent, and, unlike the street cars, it cannot squeeze in another one. They have at present four men in every small cell, and the entire place is crawling with vermin and deep in filth. So Mr. Debs and his companions have good reasons for congratulating themselves that there was no room for more.

There are no signs of a jail about the front of the sheriff's house. It is a plain brick, with unbarred windows. I rang the bell, and was admitted by a young girl, who stared at me wonderingly.

"I would like to see Mr. Debs. Can I do so?" I asked.

"I guess so," she said, and then added, hesitatingly, "the Sheriff's in court and won't be out till 12, so I guess I'd better ask mother."

She disappeared after telling me to be seated, and presently a woman came in and I made known to her my wishes.

"Are you his wife?" she asked, curiously.

"No;" I replied, "merely a friend."

"I guess you can see him. Come this way," she said.

I followed her through the dining room to a hall in the rear and along this hall to where iron bars, newly painted white, shut off the jail from the house.

Glancing through the bars I could see a number of men sitting in a sun-lit corridor. They all sat in perfect silence, deeply interested in the books they are reading.

"Here's a friend of yours, Mr. Debs," the woman called, and Mr. Debs came close to the gate.

I did not want everybody to know who I was, so I whispered through the bars.

"I am Nellie Bly, Mr. Debs, and I would like to have a talk with you."

"I am glad to see you, Miss Bly," was the quiet reply, and then he addressed the woman.

"Can you let me come out for a little while, Mrs. Eckert?" he said.

"I'll let you out alone," she replied, and taking a huge key from her pocket endeavored to unlock the door.

The lock stuck.

"Push on the door, Mr. Debs," she ordered, and Mr. Debs lent his aid to undo the stubborn bolt.

His Own Jailer

"The other night I had to lock myself in," Mr. Debs observed dryly.

In another moment the bolt shot back, the door swung open and Eugene Victor Debs stood in the corridor before me.

For an instant we looked at each other, his tall figure looming up before me, and then simultaneously we stretched out our arms.

"I am glad to meet you," said Mr. Debs.

"And I am glad to meet you," I replied.

Side by side we walked through the corridor, through the dining-room and to the sitting-room which I had first entered.

There we sat down facing each other.

"They don't seem much afraid of your getting away," I observed.

"They know we are on our honor here, and they can trust us." Mr. Debs replied, "The day we were brought here I was to appear in court at 10 o'clock. I had been in St. Paul, and when I arrived in Chicago it was almost 10 o'clock, so I ran all the way to court and arrived there just one minute to 10. I was on my honor, and I would not have been a minute late for anything in the world. Several persons said to me that I was the first man they ever saw run to get into jail."

"Do you find your imprisonment very hard to bear?" I asked.

No, the only thing I miss is the separation from my family. It has always been the custom of our family to have a reunion Sunday nights, and to miss them is the only cross I have to bear. My father and mother are old, my father being seventy-five, and it is hard to miss even one night that I could be with them."

The Debs family is a very happy and lucky one. There are four daughters and two sons, and there has never been a death. The daughters married and the sons married, and it only

increased the family circle. Even the very slightest of family quarrels or strife has never come among the Debses.

Eugene Victor Debs says the most perfect harmony and affection have always existed in his home, even with those who have married into his family.

He has been married ten years, and he has never had even one cross word with his wife. She is a daughter, fond and loving, to his parents, and she is in the family circle these Sunday evenings that he spends in jail.

Until within a short time the family all lived in Terre Haute, Ind., but now one married sister lives in New York and another is on a visit to Paris, while Mr. Debs is in jail, making a break in the home that the parents feel deeply.

"Don't you think it is rather hard to be in jail on the silly charge of contempt of court, when Carnegie is at liberty?" I asked.

Mr. Debs smiled.

"Everybody understands what makes the difference." he answered. "You know," he added, "they declared me guilty under the bill known as the Interstate Commerce Law. This bill was supposedly enacted for the protection of small farmers and producers. Before the law was passed the small farmers were crushed to the wall by combines and large companies, who could get low rates because of the quantity they shipped, and consequently were always able to undersell the small farmer.

"Since the Sante Fe Railroad has been in the hands of receivers, Expert Little, who made an examination of the company's books, finds that J. W. Reinhardt, president of the company, paid out, within a year, $8,000,000 in rebates to favored shippers, the very thing the Interstate Commerce Law was designed to put a stop to. No one was ever prosecuted. Mr. Reinhardt was permitted to resign his position, and the matter ended there. Notwithstanding the Sante Fe Company was in the hands of a receiver, therefore in the custody of the court, the court took no judicial knowledge of the crime, and nothing has been said of it from that day to this. Had it been a labor leader guilty of this crime, the press would have insisted on his being prosecuted and published by fine and imprisonment, and there would have been no end until this was done."

Compared With Millionaires

I looked at Mr. Debs as he sat before me and compared him with two millionaires—Pullman and Carnegie.

Mr. Debs is unusually tall—an inch or two over six feet, I should judge. He is well built, slender, but not thin. His shoulders are broad and there is a look of strength about him.

His face is rather long, beardless and smooth cut. He has the strong, large nose of a successful man. His mouth is small and pleasantly shaped, and he smiles frequently, a fleeting but pretty smile that shows two rows of strong white teeth.

His eyes are blue, and at present have slightly reddish rings about them, as though from too much reading. Gold-rimmed glasses that run behind the ears he wears constantly.

Mr. Debs' forehead was originally high and broad, and much thought has placed four lines across it, with a short one above the right eye. There are evidences that in a short time Mr. Debs' forehead will be still higher. His hair is very thin on top.

There was no sign of the prisoner about Mr. Debs' clothes. He wore a well-made suit of gray tweed, the coat being a cutaway, and a white starched shirt with a standing collar and a small black and white scarf tied in a bow-knot.

There was a plain gold button in his shirt front, a gold chain crossing from buttonhole to vest pocket and an agate ring upon the third finger of his left hand.

"You don't seem very fond of jewelry," I observed.

"No; I've had a great deal given to me, but I do not like it….I only wear this ring, and I've worn it for fifteen years, for one reason. You can see why."

He took off the ring and handed it to me, and I saw inscribed on the inside—"Mother to Eugene."

Eugene Victor Debs' parents were born in France, but all their children were born in America. Mr. Debs, Sr., was a grocer in Terre Haute. His son, Eugene, was born Nov. 5, 1855, and attended the public schools until he was fourteen years old, when he went to work in the Vandalia Railroad paint shops.

For a year and a half he earned 50 cents a day, until ill-health forced him to stop. Afterwards he "fired" on a locomotive for the same company for three years and a half. He was passionately fond of railroading, and might have been working at it yet had not a wreck occurred in which two of his comrades, the engineer and fireman, were killed. This affected his mother so strongly that she insisted upon his leaving the business.

So Eugene Debs left railroading for the grocery business. There is a wholesale grocery house in Terra Haute that is considered the most complete in America. In this the young man worked for five years, and held one of the most responsible positions in the house, when he became ambitious politically. He was successful in his first campaign, and in 1880 became city clerk. Five years later he was elected to the legislature.

This, he says, settled all his political aspirations. He saw that if he expected to accomplish anything he must adapt himself to the existing methods, and this he could not do and retain his self-respect.

Since 1876 Mr. Debs had been a member of the Brotherhood of Locomotive Firemen, and when, some four years later, the secretary was found to be a defaulter, the order being bankrupted and demoralized in consequence, Mr. Debs was called upon to fill the unexpired term.

Refused A Trip

This he did with great success, and in a short time had succeeded in paying off the debt of $8,000. After that he was appointed editor of the Locomotive Firemen's Magazine, and held that position until 1888. He resigned then, though unanimously re-elected, with the privilege of fixing his own salary. The order also voted him $3,000 and a six months' vacation, but Mr. Debs refused to take the money, and it still remains in the treasury of the Brotherhood.

Mr. Debs' reason for quitting the paper was that he might lend his aid to the order in other ways. He thought he had a mission to perform, and he set out to do it. He had recognized the fact that all the railroads were secretly coming together, and that they meant to reduce wages, not everywhere at once, but quietly, first one place and then another, until a wholesale reduction would result.

This is what Eugene Victor Debs wanted to work against. And if his records are anything, I don't know of any man who would make a better leader for any class of people. Eugene Debs has been in labor organizations for twenty years.

While success invariably creates enemies, and the most malicious of all enemies, failure also produces enemies, but Eugene Debs has never had a candidate named against him nor a vote cast against him in all these twenty years.

That says a great deal for the man.

In addition to this, it was plain to everybody that his motive must be an honest one, since he never tried to make money from his position, but on the contrary at every convention has always asked to have his salary reduced from one to two thousand dollars.

He gave up a yearly salary of $3,000 to work for the Railroad Union at $75 per month, and when the trouble broke out the convention voted to raise his salary to $3,000. But he decided the order needed the money, and he stopped his salary and has not received any since.

"How have you managed to live?" I asked, impertinently perhaps, but curiously.

"Through my family," he replied. "Whatever one has is for all. There is not a discord in our entire connection, and whatever the others have is at the command of any who may need it."

"Are you worth any money?" I asked.

"The extent of my worldly possessions is a house and lot," he answered. "I owe no man a dollar and no man owes me. You might say that I am square with the world."

"Have you no ambition to get rich?"

"Not the least. If I had to take my choice between being extremely rich or extremely poor, I would choose the later. I think the very rich deserve pity instead of censure, just as Oscar Wilde says in his latest essay we ought not to be severe with the very rich, they as well as the poor are entitled to our commiseration. Money-getting is a disease as much as paresis, and as much to be pitied."

"What is your highest ambition?"

"All my life, from my earliest recollection, my highest ambition has been to be an orator," he answered, his earnest blue eyes looking steadily at me. "I have always thought the personality or power to move people was the greatest on earth. If I had my choice of the gifts that come to men, I would choose that. If a woman, I would want to be the most beautiful singer."

When Mr. Debs was "firing" he worked all night, slept in the forenoon and attended school in the afternoon. He has heard all the orators with any pretensions to greatness and power.

Fond Of Music

Mr. Debs is passionately fond of music. His wife and her sisters and his own are all musical. The piano, banjo, mandolin and guitar are all played in his house.

Mr. Debs understands French and speaks German. He doesn't care much for novels, except for those of Hugo, Sue and Dumas. Lately he reads only economic works.

He smokes, is temperate, but enjoys a good dinner and is fond of pets. He has two—Fay, an Irish setter, and a canary named "Sweetie."

He is passionately fond of children, and one can readily believe him when he says all the children at home know him.

He told me of a little incident that happened just before he left his home this last time, and which warmed his heart to endure the trial before him.

On the morning of the day he left there came a timid knock upon his door, and, opening it, he saw two little tots, a boy and a girl, on the step. Each carried a little red savings bank.

The little boy was spokesman.

"I got $13," he said, "and sister's got two in her bank, and we're going to give it to you to pay those men so they won't take you off to jail."

They had evidently heard their parents discussing Mr. Debs' fate and had made up their baby minds to save their favorite.

Mr. Debs has no children of his own.

There is much of a poetic nature in Eugene Debs. He has a soft pleasing voice, a voice that is soothing and caressing. His manner is most mild and gentle. For some reason which I cannot explain he reminds me of James Whitcomb Riley. He and Riley are warm personal friends.

"Riley says every man lives his life in a circle," he said to me during our conversation. "A man starts here (drawing an imaginary circle upon his knee), a farm lad. He drifts out to a city to make wealth, but after a while he tires of his money and the hurry and bustle of the world, and he buys a farm, and after a while his friends go out to see him and find him happy at work among his cattle, just where he began as a boy. So he completes his circle."

"I know how my life is to be," he continued, in a dreamy fashion, his blue eyes gazing out through the window, where everything glistened with snow. "I am going to die in perfect quiet on a farm. I know just what that farm is like, though I have never seen it. A winding creek cuts through it and there is an immense orchard."

He stopped suddenly as if he thought he was too confidential, and smiled, "You see," he explained, "I want a little poetry in it. I always considered a farmer's life should be the freest and best in the world. If any man knows liberty, it should be the farmer. If any man is wise, it should be the farmer. It is a perfect life. I never pass a farm-house that I do not envy the inmates. In the country one does as one likes: In the city one does as others like. The country is the only place a man can be true to himself."

In the lapel of his coat Mr. Debs wore a very brilliant pink. He evidently thought I noticed it.

"I suppose people might think this seems out of place—a carnation on a convict!" he observed with a merry smile, "and that I should wear weeping willow or something like that. It was among a box of flowers which the wife of one of my comrades sent all the way from Ogden, Utah. They came in a beautiful condition: just as fresh as if newly out."

Mr. Debs is a class student of Shakespeare, and always carries a volume with him. He can repeat Romeo and Juliet and Julius Caesar almost entire.

He is getting pretty well used to the newspapers now, but once found untruthful stories hard to bear. Now he tries to be philosophical and believes truth will live and lies die. He says everybody in Terre Haute knows him, infirmities and all, and he is sure old and young, black and white, rich and poor, can say nothing against him.

"A man hasn't anything, after all, but his reputation," he observed, "and if he won't defend that it's because it isn't worth defending."

"Don't you think you could do labor some good by lecturing through the country?" I asked.

"There are two things I won't do," he replied promptly. "I won't write a book or lecture for money. I think it would be disreputable to thus take advantage of the notoriety I gained through workingmen's trouble. If I can survive all the talk, then I think I can do some good. If it's temporary notoriety then I shall, as a New York paper suggested, go into that obscurity from which I emerged.

"If I ever get time," Mr. Debs said, earnestly, "I want to devote some study to prisoners. During the heat of the excitement over the last strike I was arrested and spent eight days in the Chicago jail. I would not give up that experience for any consideration. There were fifty women and five hundred men in that jail and it was marvelous to see the bond of comradeship that existed among them. All the time I was there I was deluged with food and flowers. I distributed them among the other prisoners, and if I gave a man a cigar, he would cut it in two or three and divide with friends. There was more fellowship among them than I have ever seen elsewhere in my life. Poor fellows! They are confined four to a small cell, and they are in that cell twenty-two out of the twenty-four hours. It is horrible.

"I became very friendly with all the men," he continued, "and I am willing to believe that if I had put them on their honor and let them out for so many hours every one of them would have returned at the appointed time.

"I had a funny letter from one of the prisoners after my conviction," Mr. Debs said, smiling. "He began it 'Dear Brother—I am glad to hear you got six months,' he wrote, 'and that you're coming back to us. You'll be welcomed with open arms.' "

Woman's Rights

In a little while I changed the subject by asking the convicted labor leader what he thought of woman's rights.

"Woman's suffrage is one of my hobbies," he said enthusiastically. "I believe in women having all the rights men have. Until they do, I do not think we are civilized. I firmly believe every social condition will be improved if women have the right to vote. Women have more integrity, more honor than men. A woman's vote couldn't be bought with a drink of whiskey. If I have done any good I owe it entirely to the influence of my mother, my wife and my sisters.

"Marriage is another hobby of mind," he added, earnestly. "I think it is brutal for a woman to take a husband merely for the sake of getting married or being supported. I think this alleged reproach for a woman staying single or being an old maid, is wrong. All honor to a woman, I say, who stays single because she does not find a congenial mate and is courageous enough to refuse anything else. I call it brave and deserving credit instead of reproach.

"My brother and I always declared our sisters should never marry unless they loved. Without any prompting from any one we secretly vowed that one of us would never marry while our sisters were single and by so doing, possibly force them to consider marrying for the sake of a home. And we didn't. My three sisters were married and the fourth engaged when I became engaged."

"Are you religious?" I asked. "I think I have heard you called an infidel."

"I don't subscribe to any creed," he replied gravely, "nor do I profess any religion. I am not an unbeliever. I accept the Christ standard as the highest standard of morality, I believe in the religion of the golden rule. I wouldn't if I could disturb the religion of any human creature. Whatever a man's creed may be, if he sincerely believes it, it is the right creed. As for another world, I haven't time to think about it. I am interested in doing all the good I can in this."

"But don't you think it comforting to believe we'll meet those we love in another life?" I asked.

"It would be horrible not to think so," he answered, quickly. "I hate death; I never allow myself to think about it. It is enough to set one crazy. We've never had a death in our family. If I

believed as Christians profess I would look on death as a benediction. I go to the extent of hoping, if I cannot believe, in an afterlife."

One of Mr. Debs' unbroken rules is not to receive presents or banquets. He says he does not think it right to let men give him what they can't afford to have for themselves, and that when he reads of managers and presidents of corporations receiving gifts as testimonials of esteem, he knows it is more a testimonial of slavery.

His Greatest Compliment

"The greatest compliment I ever had in my life was after we won a strike on the Great Northern for the section men. We got their wages raised from 80 cents a day to $1.25. The men wanted afterwards to give me a banquet, but I didn't think it right to look as if rejoicing over our victory. I would have no public demonstration. As my train drew out of the station the conductor asked me to come out on the platform, and there, lining either side of the railroad, were the section men, bent and worn from exposure, each man leaning on his shovel with his hat in his hand. It touched me deeply."

"Do you ever get blue."

"Sometimes; but I was never discouraged an instant in my life."

"How do you feel about the future for labor?" I asked.

"Very cheerful," he answered. "Government ownership of railroads is looming up in the distance. That will mean mutualism. I don't think we will ever have another great railroad strike, though there will be other strikes in other departments of industry.

"It would be foolish," he added, seriously, "to strike again. We know inevitably what the results will be. Courts will enjoin, authorities reprove them. With all the organized forces of society against them as well as the powers of government, failure is inevitable."

I asked Mr. Debs if I might stay and share his prison dinner, and he said he would be delighted to have me and wanted to have extra fare provided for me. I could scarcely make him understand that it was his fare I wanted to share.

Sheriff Eckert came in at 12.30 and Mr. Debs introduced me and explained my mission. The sheriff is a pleasant man and seems to think his prisoners are a well-behaved lot. We told him I wanted a photographer and he kindly offered to send for one.

It is a country jail and town and things are not conducted just as they might be in cities. Three prisoners at a time are an event in Woodstock, so it is easy to understand the commotion raised by eight.

The only other thing that has ever happened in Woodstock was a hanging. A man killed an alderman in Chicago some years ago, and the man was taken to Woodstock and hanged. A pump now stands where the gallows stood, about fifteen feet from the jail window.

There are two prisoners in jail besides the labor leaders. One is a simple fellow, who could not get the wages due him from a niggardly old farmer, and so threatened to burn down his barn. The other is a German boy who stole silverware from his uncle.

At 1 o'clock Mrs. Eckert told us dinner was served and Mr. Debs and I went into the dining-room, where I was introduced to his seven comrades—William Burns, Sylvester Kellher, G. W. Howard, L. W. Rogers, R. M. Goodwin, James Hogan and M. J. Elliot.

The table was neatly spread and a bowl of soup stood at every plate. After the soup we had roast beef and boiled potatoes, Mr. Debs carving, and after that lemon pie for dessert. Everybody had a large cup of coffee.

The hour spent at dinner was most enjoyable. Everybody was in a good humor and everybody had a healthy appetite.

Then we went out into the sunlit corridor of the jail, where these men, if not admitted to bail, will spend most of their six months.

The corridor is long and narrow, with huge bars on one side and three large barred windows on the other. There were two tables strewn with books and papers, a shelf around the windows, also covered with books, and eight chairs, one of which was a barber's chair.

On the table was a small bunch of flowers, to which the men proudly called my attention. Above the table was the picture of a bunch of violets.

The Prison Rules

Upon the wall were pinned the rules these men made and live up to. They rise at 6.30, have breakfast at 7.30. Breakfast consists of meat, potatoes, bread and coffee.

From 8 until 12 the men sit in the corridor in absolute silence, reading and studying. They have been active men, and stillness was a trial, so they impose a fine of 10 cents on every man who forgets and speaks aloud. This fine is given to the good, for, as Mr. Debs says, if wrong-doing be punished, it follows that goodness shall be rewarded.

So far four men have been fined, and Mr. Goodwin had the best record for goodness, so he won the reward—40 cents.

But that spoiled him and amid much laughter they told me that Mr. Goodwin had since then been fined twice!

Mr. Goodwin by the way is a relative of Nat Goodwin, the comedian, and the resemblance, except that Mr. Goodwin is more youthful, is very strong.

From 12 to 1 the men have what they call indifferently a "cake walk" and a "dress parade." At one they have dinner. At 2 o'clock they go into session again, and for the rest of the afternoon a pin could be heard drop.

From 6.30 until 7 they have supper, and afterwards they devote an hour to discussion, or as Mr. Debs says, "to good fellowship."

Someone proposes a subject, and they discuss it or what they have read during the day.

"We did tell stories at first." Mr. Debs said with his quick smile; "but we find after we've been in jail a week or so that we begin to repeat the same story four or five times. Then it isn't so funny."

At 9.30 sharp the solitary lamp, a hanging one, is put out, and everybody goes into his cell, and the good sheriff locks his prisoners up for the night.

The cells are small, with two cots to a cell, and two men are in each cell. There are only two tiers, comprising ten cells in all.

Each man makes his own bed. It is an iron cot fastened to the wall, and has a mattress, sheet, blanket and pillow.

Sometimes the men forget to make their beds, and then they are fined. One man had forgotten the day I was there, and he rushed into his cell hoping to escape notice until his work was done. But someone saw him, and amid great laughing he was pulled forth and made to pay his fine, which he did, blushing like a schoolboy.

The men have basins to wash in, three towels are provided the ten prisoners, and they have to last for two days.

Four men smoke and four do not. They may smoke when they wish.

I took a glance at their books. There was not a light work of fiction among them. The books were brought by the men from their homes.

"Intellectual Development of Europe," by Draper; "Social Problems," by Henry George; "Harvey's Coin Financial School," "Civilization Civilized," by Stephen Maybell; "Holy Bible," "Text-Book of Rhetoric," "Our Destiny," by Gronlund; "Better Days," by Fitch; "The Co-operative Commonwealth," by Gronlund, and volumes of Hawthorne and Shakespeare. That is only a small list, but it gives some idea of the style of reading enjoyed by these men who are fighting for workingmen's rights.