
Stories of an Agitator: Albert Parsons

by Ralph Korngold

Published in *The Chicago Daily Socialist*, vol. 4, no. 168 (May 11, 1910), pg. 6.

We were speaking about old-time agitators, and I mentioned Albert Parsons.

“Albert Parsons,” he said, slowly, while his eyes took on that peculiar inward look one’s eyes assume when one gazes into the past. “I knew Albert Parsons.”

“Indeed!”

“Yes, there is a story connected with it — not much of a story, but perhaps you would like to hear it?”

I replied that I was all attentions.

“Well, then, as you know, after that terrible Haymarket affair [May 4, 1886] Parsons suddenly disappeared. During all that time he was hiding on my father’s farm in Wisconsin. Parsons and my father had been friends for many years, so it was natural that he should come to seek shelter under our roof.¹

“My mother prepared a room for Parsons in the upper part of the house, where he would be least disturbed, and we children were instructed not to tell anyone of the presence of our guest.

¹ The identity of Korngold’s interlocutor is never revealed. There is a significant chance that this entire story is apocryphal. If we do accept this testimony as accurate it is clear from context that Korngold’s interlocutor was born in 1873 or 1874 and that his father’s nickname was “Charlie.” Tim Messer-Kruse in *The Haymarket Conspiracy* (2012) refers only to the dying Gerhardt Lizius as “spotted riding in the carriage” with Parsons on his way to his surrender (pg. 25), clearly not the owner of the Wisconsin farmhouse. Henry David, in his seminal *The History of the Haymarket Affair* (1936), has Parsons fleeing to the home of William Holmes in Geneva, Wisconsin before living incognito in the town of Waukesha, his whereabouts known to his wife and lawyer. My own initial guess of the interlocutor’s identity, Algie Martin Simons, although raised on a south-central Wisconsin farm was born in 1870.

“I was about 13 then, and fully understood what happened. I felt a strange attraction toward the tall, dark man who had such an awful fate hanging over his head.

“I slept with a younger brother in a room adjoining the one occupied by Parsons, and often in the night, when all was still, I could hear Parsons pacing back and forth with a slow, measured step. I’ll never forget those nights! The slightest noise, the rattling of a window, would make me sit up in bed with a start, for I imagined it was the police coming to arrest the fugitive. I had heard my father say that they would never arrest Parsons in our house unless it was over his dead body, and I had seen him carefully polish and load his rifle. Sitting up there in bed I expected to hear every moment the loud report of a gun, but all would be quiet again save the slow breathing of my younger brother by my side.

“The newspapers were full of stories about the ‘anarchists’ and about the flight of Parsons. One day it was said that he had been seen in San Francisco, the next day it was claimed that he had boarded a steamer for Hamburg at New York. There was a reward offered of \$5,000 for anyone who would capture him and deliver him to the Cook County authorities.

“About the ‘anarchists,’ it was claimed that they had large stores of ammunition hidden in subterranean passages in Chicago; that they would blow up the city hall; that they had a trained battalion which practiced shooting somewhere in an underground chamber on the west side!

“Parsons would smile at these stories, but when he would read about the predicament of his friends he would grow serious and seem to be much troubled.

“One afternoon, coming into the sitting room, I found there my father, my mother, and Parsons. Father’s face was dark as a thunder cloud, while mother was wiping the tears from her face with her apron.

“When I came in I heard Parsons say, ‘Now, don’t be stubborn, Charlie! I’ve told you; if you don’t do it I’ll go to Chicago anyway. I’m getting tired of this and I want to be with the boys. Now, there’s no reason why we should let the grafters keep that

five thousand. I know you need it, Charlie. You've a mortgage on the place, and it will give the children a start in life. What I want you to do is to go with me to Chicago and deliver me up to the sheriff.'

"Father banged his fist on the table. 'I'll be damned if I do!' he cried. 'I would rather see my wife and children dead than to see them profit to the extent of one penny by that blood money! If you think it is your duty to go, well, then, go! But on one in this house is going to profit by your death. I say death,' he continued excitedly, 'and I mean it. It's the old game — the people were getting up on their tracks, so they cooked this up. Now that they got the people excited they will throw you and the other boys into the arena, and the people will see their best friends murdered, and will think they have destroyed an enemy!'

"The dispute continued for some time, father trying to persuade Parsons to give up all thought of going, and remain in hiding, while Parsons tried to persuade father to deliver him to the authorities.

"At last Parsons said, with a sigh, 'Well, then, I'll go alone tomorrow.'

"On the morrow father ordered me to hitch the horse to the buggy. Parsons came downstairs wearing a slouch hat and holding a satchel in his hand.

"After he had kissed us goodbye he and father seated themselves in the buggy. I opened the gate to let them out, and Parsons once more shook hands with me and patted me on the head. When the buggy was quite a way off, he turned around and waved to me. I wanted to call out a goodbye, but it was as if a hand was clutching at my throat and I could not utter a sound.

"I can still see the buggy slowly receding down the road and the two dark forms against the luminous sky.

"Several hours later father returned alone.

"I guess the rest of Parsons' story you know."

Edited with a footnote by Tim Davenport

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