

HOW I BECAME A SOCIALIST



BY
FANNY BIXBY

*Read by Mrs. Bixby
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WITH the great joy and triumph of the political emancipation of women in California, came to each, individually, the equally great duty for serious and conscientious choice in party affiliation. My people had been Republicans from the birth of the party, in the beginning supporters of Lincoln, and later, with the new generation, staunch allies of the old guard wing of that party. Having always been in the habit of forming my own opinions and deciding my own questions, it was hardly expected that I would respect family traditions in the letter of politics, but few thought that I would be so bold as to venture the step which I took two months after my enfranchisement in becoming a dues-paying member of the Socialist party of America. However, it was really no more radical than the action of my maternal grandfather, a minister in a New England village, who was such an ardent anti-slavery man that he made his home a station for the underground railway. My mother tells me how she remembers, as a little child, seeing strange black faces at the family breakfast table—fugitive slaves who had been brought in during the night and were to be carried the following night by my grandfather to the next station on their route to Canada.

So, with this humanitarian inheritance, I began when quite young to observe and ponder upon the conditions of social life that appeared within my world—a world limited by the inertia of abundance, and the proprieties of a young ladies' boarding school! It is not easy for a girl under such conditions to realize the material hardships of others. I gladly gave my tithe to charity, not with understanding, but with an abstract sympathy that was true.

When I was nineteen I went to Italy, and here was a field for observation more appalling than any I had yet encountered. Perhaps it was because it was in a foreign country, or perhaps because it was less covered, that the poverty on the streets of Naples and Rome struck my heart with such depressing force. When I came home I began to study social questions, and a book of Tolstoy fell into my hands. I have been reading his wonderful message ever since.

As a student at Wellesley, I studied economics and sociology from the time honored academic standpoint, but at the same time, I found in the college a strong spirit of social service. In the corridor of the building where I lived, there was a marble slab bearing this inscription, "Dedicated to the higher education of women, for their more efficient service in the world." This tablet offended the aesthetic tastes of some of the students, on account of its size and prominent position in the hallway, but to me it was a

milestone in life. It gave me the suggestion that my sphere, as a woman, was the world unlimited, and that my mission was to humanity at large.

After leaving college I started enthusiastically upon the quest of social redemption. The south of Market street district in old San Francisco was my first field of action. Living at the settlement house and mingling with the people of the neighborhood, I looked upon the face of living poverty as I might look upon a whirlpool in the ocean. It confused me and distressed me unspeakably, in its terrible, perpetual reality. I finally realized that it was not a disease to be cured by charity, but an integral part of the social order. I slept in a clean bed, in a ventilated room and ate good food, even on Tehama street, where within a stone's throw of me, people were huddled together in filth, besotted, degraded, living on scraps, born into wretchedness, dying in darkness. I saw the contrast. What I did for the poor of San Francisco I do not know, but I know what they did for me. Perhaps I learned my first lesson in humility at the death bed of an old woman there in the slums.

My life in Boston the next winter was more hope-inspiring. I began to learn the way out from the people who carry on their broad shoulders the burden of race subsistence—the skilled laborers of the world. In San Francisco I had known the poorest of the poor, the unskilled, the outcast, the pitiful dregs of fate. In Bos-

ton I came in contact with the true laboring class, the bone and sinew of society. I attended meetings of the Central Labor Union, which were more instructive than college lectures, and I joined the Woman's Trade Union League. Through the latter, I met girls from the garment workers', bookbinders', and tobacco strippers' unions, and during the summer I stayed at the working girls' vacation house at the beach, just out of Boston. I was a girl, too, or not much past that period, but I did not have to crowd my vacation into one short week and then go back to a roaring machine for eight or ten hours a day during the rest of the year and for indefinite years to come. Again the realization of the inequality of opportunity came to me with vital force.

At this place I became well acquainted with some young Russian Jewish women who were well versed in socialism, and for the first time I grasped its principle—the social ownership of the great industries, the means by which are produced the things that are necessary to all. I saw the profit system in the light of tribute to Caesar, rendering to Caesar that which is not his, tribute in the lives of the workers, who are paid less than full value of their labor, and out of their small receipts must pay more than full value for the material necessities of life, in order that the manufacturer, the middleman and landlord may harvest their profits.

For example, a girl who makes shirtwaists buys a shirtwaist for three dollars,

a small portion of which represents the price of material, another small proportion the price of labor; the rest is interest on the investment of the capitalists. A girl must make many shirtwaists before she can buy one, while the employer's daughter, who has never seen the inside of a factory, is wearing gowns from Paris. The girl in the factory is paying for the other girl's frivolity with her life energy. In order to be a paying proposition to her employer and incidentally to make a living wage for herself, she must speed up to the highest tension her nervous system will permit. If she lags she will lose her job and not be able to buy any shirtwaists, and then she will come to the crossroads, which she must face as a desperate fact—starvation or vice. She may work till her nerves snap and she is a complete wreck, unable to work any more, or she may work until she becomes a machine, her mind dulled to any thought but speed.

One of my Russian friends had been a skirt maker since she was a very little girl in the old country. "I am mostly a machine," she said, "but there is one part of my mind that still thinks. I support my mother and myself with the machine part, but the live part rebels every day." Her hollow cheeks and her bent form gave echo to the machine, but in her keen eyes was the spark from which the blaze will come which will change the aspect of the world and the workers will come into their own.

The socialist movement is a world-wide awakening of the working class. It means revolution, but a revolution to be accomplished by the force of intelligence and will, without bloodshed or devastation. It is not reformative, except as reforms will tend to bring about a complete change in the industrial system, which is its uncompromising goal.

A woman who enters the movement from the side of the leisure class, as I do, must go through a mental and moral experience to do so, but when she once sees the vision her soul is one with the workers and their cause is hers. She cannot turn back. The path to liberty, equality and brotherhood shines clear before her, and she sees in it the emancipation of her sex and a new era for humanity.

For several years I have been doing philanthropic work in various branches, including work as a special probation officer for the juvenile court of this county, and the more I see of the conditions of human life, the more deeply is my conviction grounded that there must be a complete change in the social system if we wish to reach a higher race development. The human race is bound together by ties so strong that the moral or physical deterioration of any part of it is a menace to the whole.

Food, clothing and shelter are necessary to all of us, so long as the human body is the dwelling place of the immortal soul. In order that these may be the birthright of all, the means by which they are pro-

duced must be owned collectively and operated democratically; the laborer must receive the full value of his labor, and whatever profits accrue, let them enrich the state for the good of all. At present they create a class of idle millionaires on the one hand and human machines on the other, with a residue of social waste doomed to misery and sin. Among the unemployed who walk our streets today are men of calibre and ability, thrown out of employment by over-production and the inability of the people to buy back what they have produced. So the fine timber must rot with the drift-wood until we will unite and change the current of the times. Socialism is the practical application of the commandment of Christ to love thy neighbor as thyself.

Can I feast while my neighbor goes hungry?

Can my raiment be warm, he unclad?

Can I sleep through the cries of his children,

Though my own be sheltered and glad?

Can I sing when the gray world engulfs him?

Can I dance while he faints by the way?
Oh, great God of the humble and mighty,
Give us power to bring forth the new day.