NEW MASSES

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JOHN REED NUMBER ★

MARY HEATON VORSE

AT THE MEETIN'*

1

The crowd milled around the speaking stand. A row of men sat on the railway embankment. On the outskirts of the crowd were little families—a man and a woman and several babies playing around. They sat down on the ground. Ma Gilfillin and Ole Mis' Whenck cruised through the crowd, stopping everywhere to ask:

"Ain't Fer acomin'? You seen Miss Irma?"

They were both dressed in long, gray calico dresses, patched and worn but clean. They had no teeth, but they chewed vigorously and spat. They had never had anything as exciting as this come into their experience before.

A heady feeling ran through the crowd, a vibration of excitement. Every one was full of expectation. Talk drifted around of exciting events.

"The boss came to my house. 'When you comin' back to work?' he said—"

"'You git along quicker or I'll arrest you', he tole me. I said, 'Arrest me! I don't keer if you do arrest me!'"

"Did you yere how Mamie Pratt went back to work—"

"They's scabs livin' alongside o' me—"

"Whar you reckon Fer is? You reckon he's been kidnapped again?—"

Dan Marks said to Max Harris,

"Reckon we'd best begin this yere meetin'. Reckon somethin's holdin' up Fer." They gave each other a significant look. They were men in their late twenties and early thirties, powerful, well built, able. They had none of the indirection which assails some crowds of workers when they have no leadership. The two men who had organized the workers in the beginning could carry on meetings and picket lines.

Dan called the meeting to order.

"Our speakers is a little late, friends," he said, "so we may's well begin. An' we cain't begin enny better than to let Brother Williams lead us in prayer."

Brother Williams, whose long hair hung down under his wide hat and mingled with his long gray beard, closed his eyes tightly, raised his head to Heaven, spread his arms out in the form of a cross, and began:

"*Oh,* how these people have suffered, Lord!

"*Oh,* Lord, hear them in their struggle!

"*Oh,* Lord, *oh,* soften the hearts of their employers!

"*Oh,* I never heard anything like how they treat these folks!

"*Oh,* I come from the mountains where folks is free to breathe God's free air!

"*Oh,* I seen women and little, little children aworkin' in the mills whar they wasn't meant to!

"*Oh,* the Lord sent the children of Israel out of bondage!

"*Oh,* the Lord softened Pharaoh's heart!

"*Oh,* ain't Basil Schenk's heart goin' to be softened?

"*Oh,* this ole man ain't never seen nothin' like these milishy with their tear-gas bombs and their baynits!

"*Oh,* they're aprancin' all over the town!

"*Oh,* they're arrestin' girls and wimmin."

He went on with his chant, staccato, exciting, until the meeting swayed in unison with his cry; until there was a low sigh of "Oh," throughout the audience. The old women stood with their eyes tightly closed. The young men and young women watched him intently. The prayer had knit them together and focused their emotion into a flame.

2

Dan said, "We may as well go on and hold our meetin' till Fer and the others git here. Now, here's a sister that's made up song-ballits. She's writ 'em herself. Yuoall mought o' heard her asingin' of 'em up to the relief store some days. Now, I have got Mamie Lewes to sing out loud before all of you folks, though she says she's ashamed to do it."

Old Ma Gilfillin called out:

"Mamie Lewes, don't you be 'shamed. Weall admires fer to hear you sing your song-ballits."

Mamie Lewes was helped on the stand. She had her air of expectancy as though wishing for something pleasant and exciting to happen. She threw her head back and sang easily and without effort. She had a natural voice, untrained but very sweet.

"We leave our homes in the morning,
We kiss our children good-by,
While we slave for the bosses,
Our children scream and cry.

"And when we draw our money
Our grocery bills to pay,
Not a cent to spend for clothing,
Not a cent to lay away.

"How it grieves the heart of a mother
You every one must know,
But we can't buy for our children
Our wages are too low.

"It is for our little children
That seems to us so dear,
But for us nor them, oh, workers,
The bosses do not keer."

They listened to this with moist eyes. It was their own story, put in incredibly simple terms. Every one had lived through this. There was no piece of sentiment; it was the history of every one there put into song.

3

The policemen were there—the "laws" had come. Usually but one policeman stood on the outskirts of the crowd. To-day there were several; prowling through the strikers and seeing nothing especial going on, they started to go away.

Old Ma Gilfillin climbed up on the stand. "I got somethin' to say," she proclaimed. "I seen the laws awalkin' round yere. We didn't ask 'em to come, with their bloody han's thet's been punchin' us an' arrestin' us, to our meetin'. Their hearts is too hard to be softened even ef they yere Brother Williams aprayin'. An' I want to tell Mister Policeman Zober that the only part of him I keers fer to see is the hind sides of him agoin' away from me like they's adoin' now!"

A roar of laughter went up. They were rocking together. Something alive and quick emanated from them. They felt a sense of companionship and power. The crowd had its own powerful vitality. It had a beauty which was also a little dangerous. These people, individually so poor and so weak, were strong. The eyes of the young girls and the young men were bright. They were ready for anything. Danger beckoned them.

While the laughter was still booming and echoing through the crowd and the scarlet-faced policeman was making his way back to the street, Fer came plunging along. Shouts greeted him.

"Fer!" they shouted. "Fer! Fer!"

He took the platform. He felt the weight of their faith, and his own smallness and inadequacy.

4

A big girl, one of Ma Gilfillin's daughters, came up to Mamie Lewes.

"You do sing beautiful, Mamie Lewes," she said.

"Yore abraggin' on me."

"No, I ain't abraggin' on you. It's the truth. You live a piece from yere?"

"Yeah, quite a piece."

"Ma sez come over to our house and rest you and eat a bite."

* Printed on the first anniversary of the murder of Ella May Wiggins in Gastonia—From Strike, a forthcoming novel by Mary Heaton Vorse. (Horace Liveright, $2.00).

She was bigger and stronger than Mamie Lewes, and looked older. "Is yore husband left you too, Mamie Lewes?" she asked.

"He didn't rightly leave me. He just went to git work and didn't come back. I wasn't 'spectin' him to leave me."

"Thet's how they do. My husband and I, I kinda suspicioned he was leavin' me. He says to me, 'Daisy, you take the baby over to Ma's while I'm gittin' work, and git you a job in the Nuren factory ef you kin, and I'll be ascoutin' fer a good place.' Then I never did yere from him no more."

"Yes, my Will was like that.

"I don't think they aim fer to leave us always. They's lots of 'em on the mill hill, they husbands goes, and they don't come back."

"They git discouraged. My husband los' his ambition when the chillen died with diptherey."

"Well, wouldn't you think they would lose their ambition? 'Spect it seems good to be able to use all your wages on yourself. Joe West made fourteen dollars and forty cents—I known him to make up to eighteen, then when I was workin' too, we was right smart well off for a spell, but don't seem like luck lasts long."

"No, luck don't seem never to last long with us mill hands. You only got one chil', Mis West?"

"I hed four. I los' three. How long you been workin' in the mills, Mamie Lewes?"

"I'm jist workin' sence I was ma'ied. I was ma'ied eleven years ago. I'm twenty-nine now."

"So! you was real ole when you begun. How come you was so ole?"

"We was mountain folks, an' come a man from the mills atalkin' how much folks made. Me an' Will thought th' money grew on trees down yere ahearin' his talk, so when we got ma'ied we come down. Seems like they's been nothing but trouble sence. How long you been aworkin'?"

"Huh, me? I was ten when I began workin' in the mill. I'm twenty-six now, and I worked sixteen years. When I begun I worked twelve hours a day for seventy-five cents a week."

"Lawd! that was awful young! Up with us in the mountains we don't have much but they's fresh air. Seems like you could breathe. I got awful homesick for to go back to the hills. We lived beyon' Asheville."

"Why don't you go? What all's keepin' you yere ef you got kin up there?"

"Oh, I got kin. I got Ma and Pappy, but however would I get money nuff to go? Fer me an' my four chillen 'twould cost me all o' eighteen dollars." Daisy West shook her head. They both looked at the impossibility of getting eighteen dollars.

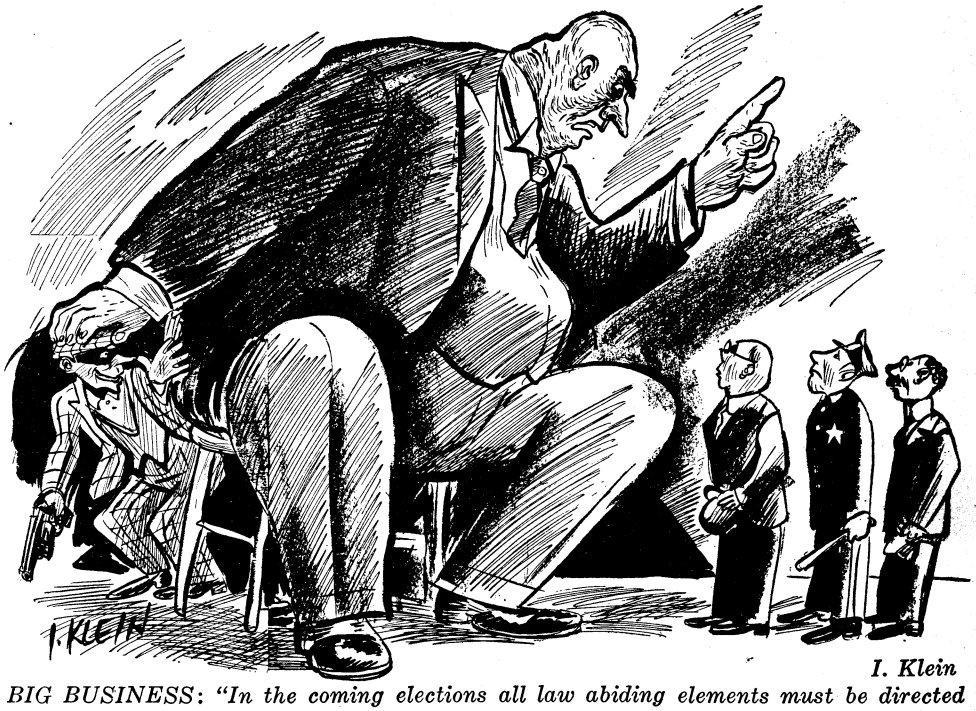
"Ennyhow, I want to stay and help win this strike. I want to see this Union grow so our chillen won't have to work like we done. It's jist about all the things I'll be able to git my chillen. I can't git 'em no school, no clothen, no shoes, but maybe I'll leave 'em a Union."

5

They had got to the house which was placed sharply on a side of the hill. The red ground around it was beaten hard, but there was one tree in back and some flowers at one side.

They went in the house, which had four rooms. Ma Gilfillin, Flora, her youngest girl. Daisy and her children slept in one room, and they rented the two others. One to a married couple with a child. Four boys lived in the front room, Will Gilfillin, who was a boy of eighteen with strong and delicate features. Dewey Bryson, and two other boys who hadn't been there long. The three boys boarded with them, paying five dollars a week a piece for room and board which was a dollar less than they would have had to pay in a regular boarding house. The married couple did their own cooking and were planning on having a house of their own presently when they could pay the installment on their furniture. They were very young. They looked like a high-school boy and girl.

"Every one o' 'em," said Ma Gilfillin, "has jined the Union. Jones didn't want to jine, but I didn't give him no indulgence to scab in. I says 'Jine or git,' so he jined. I reckon he was afeerd that my boy or Wes would bus' his haid fer him ef he didn't."



I. Klein

BIG BUSINESS: "In the coming elections all law abiding elements must be directed against the danger of Communism."

"I wisht I could live in a nice house like this. You got 'lectric lights, ain't you?"

"Yeah, we git lights."

"Is they water?"

"No, they ain't water, weall got to go out to the facet for our water. They say they's goin to let in water but they ain't done hit."

"My, how nice to live in a house where they was water runnin', jist go to your sink and turn on yore water! That mus' be wonderful, and havin' a separate kitchen."

6

"However do you come to think up yore ballits, Mamie Lewes?" Ma Gilfillin asked.

Mamie Lewes clasped her hands around her knees and looked with her clear, alert stare. She was puzzled about the matter herself.

"I can't rightly tell yo.' I was jist ahummin' thet ole ballit to myself and first I know I was singin' the firs' two lines out loud. I was singin':

"We leave our house in the mornin',
We kiss our chillen good-by,'

an' I sung it over an' over, an' the last two lines come and I sung and then I wint and I writ 'em down. I was glad I knew how to write then."

"You went to school, Mamie Lewes?"

"Yeah. We warn't so fur from a school. I went through up to th' fifth grade an' I would 'a' gone more ef Ma hadn't tuk sick with the misery in her back."

"An' huccum you thought the rest of thet ballit, Mamie Lewes? Did it jist come into yore haid?"

"Yeah, jist seems like it comes into my haid. They's other ballits that I'm aponderin' on. Seems like I'll git a line then like it'll slide off from me, most like it was somethin' alive tryin' to git away."

West Elliott came in.

"Why, howdy, Mis' Mamie Lewes," he said. "How did youall git yere?"

'Mis' West, she ast me. I didn't know youall lived yere. 'Twas Wes yere got me to jine up with the Union."

"Yeah, Wes is a great one to bring youall into the Union. If he don't git 'em in by kind words he'll see ef a lump on the haid won't git 'em." Ma Gilfillin laughed, a high, eerie laugh. They sat together, curiously united in their beliefs in the Union.

A strike was dangerous adventure. New and exciting as warfare. They sat in front of Ma Gilfillin's coal stove, while the grits were cooking, and talked about the time when the strike would be won.