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CENTRALIA

It was one of those cold, gray, overcast autumn days. There were about a hundred of us in the hall in Seattle, mostly timber beasts like myself in our stag overalls and caulked boots, but a few harvest stiffs too. In the wintertime there were always more slaves in the Wobbly hall, because it was a place to go to keep warm and out of the wind and rain.

It happened on Armistice Day, November 11th, 1919, just four days after my fourteenth birthday. But I felt it was more like ten years since I'd left home than only five months ago, considering all the travel and varied experiences I'd had in those few months. When I left home I was a boy. But now, only five months later, I felt like I was a real man—as capable of getting along in the world as anyone twice my age. And now I had a religion too.

It was about mid-afternoon when the news came in to the hall. The secretary suddenly came and stood up on the little stage at one end of the big room and asked for everyone's attention. His face was white as a sheet. Struggling for words, he told us what had happened: Earlier in the day, during an Armistice Day parade, American Legionnaires had attacked our hall in Centralia, 120 miles to the south, and three of them had been killed. Dozens of Wobs had been jailed, and some of our boys were now being hunted by posses in the woods. It was urgent that we go to their defense.

For a moment after he stopped speaking you could have heard a pin drop. You should have seen the looks on the faces of the fellow workers there. At first stunned astonishment—then anger, outrage, compassion, fear—almost any emotion you could name. But mostly a fierce determination to rush to the aid of our fellow workers in need. Some of our boys burst out in tears. Wild shouts went up, suggestions about what we should do.

To calm the clamor for a few minutes, the secretary led us in singing a couple of Wobbly songs: "Hold the Fort," "All Hell Can't Stop Us," and "Workingmen Unite." After that it didn't take five minutes before our plans were laid to take the first rattler south to Centralia. We all had that "wild Wobbly dream" in our hearts, and we weren't about to stand idle and give it up when our fellow workers were in need.

We gathered up our bindles and rushed like an army troop advancing on the run down to the railyards. We saw a couple of bulls, but when they saw the size of our outfit and the looks on our faces they just slunk away into the shadows.

After a few minutes we found one of the shacks we knew who carried a red card. He told us there was a freight heading south in about fifteen minutes. It wasn't a long train, but fortunately it had three or four empty boxcars on it and a couple of empty flatcars. I ended up with a group of twenty or so who jumped into a boxcar back near the caboose. The first thing we did was all hide our Wobbly cards in our shoes, in case the bulls grabbed us.

It seemed like forever until that train got up steam and took off. We were all mad as hell and, at the same time, afraid for both ourselves and our fellow workers in Centralia. But most of all we were in a hurry to get there and get through whatever hell or salvation awaited us.

The wheels started going clickety-clack. For a while, nobody said much. We all just sat against the walls of the boxcar looking at each other occasionally, like men trapped in a mine or a sinking ship. A few of us knew each other, but there were also a lot of Wobblies from different areas who were strangers to one another.

Gradually the men began to talk. One bloke, trying to sound an optimistic note, told of being in the strike for an eight-hour day in 1917, when the lumberjacks finally carried the strike onto the job and simply pulled the whistle and walked off the job when the eight hours were up. It worked—they won the eight-hour day.

Then some of the men began telling stories about the terrible persecution the IWW had undergone because Wobblies had opposed the war, and because many people mistakenly lumped them in with the Communists.

One man told of how the delegate in his town, after many Wobs had been tarred and feathered, got word that he was next. He slit a pillow open and put it in his front window which faced on the street, with a note to the effect he was ready for them and would gladly supply his own feathers to be sure they were of good quality. He was left alone.

Then the horror stories began. One guy told how he had been on the steamer *Verona* in 1916 when hundreds of Wobblies had sailed up to Everett to help the AFL shingle-weavers on strike. Five of his Wobbly pals—a Frenchman, a German, an Irishman, a Jew and a Swede—had been killed by vigilantes as they came in to dock. It had shown the international nature of the IWW.

Another guy told of being in Sedro Woolley the year before, when he and the other Wobs had been whipped with rope ends and then had hot tar poured on their bleeding flesh. He unbuttoned his shirt to show us his scars: "So you can see why I'm going to Centralia—I have a little score to settle."

Then another fellow worker, who was from Centralia, told of being there the year before when the Wobbly hall was raided. The secretary was taken out into the woods, made to run the gauntlet and almost beaten to death. The mob had completely wrecked the hall, even ripped the planks off its walls. Then they'd lifted the Wobs by their ears onto some trucks one by one, knocked them unconscious, and hauled them out and dumped them at the county line.

Others told of Wobs they knew who had been hanged out in the woods. Another Wob who had also been in Centralia told of how a few months before, the local newsie, who was blind, was kidnapped and dumped over the county line for selling the IWW paper. What a coincidence, I thought, because back at the hall in Seattle I had just been reading a brilliant essay by Helen Keller about why she had joined the IWW—maybe that's what had made that blind news vendor pro-Wobbly.

After a while, as the train rolled south, we began singing again to try to bolster our spirits: "Solidarity Forever," written back in 1915 by one of our members, Ralph Chaplin; and some of Joe Hill's songs like "Mister Block" and "Pie in the Sky" and "Get the

Bosses Off Your Back." We were a bunch of singing fools in those days. It was the glue that held the IWW together.

As the train slowed coming in to Tacoma, we all braced ourselves and prepared a plan of action in case the bulls tried to grab us or dump us off the train. But fortunately we didn't see any bulls.

Just before we pulled out, a few Wobblies from Tacoma jumped into our boxcar. One was a guy in his late thirties who had a look on his face like he'd just been taken on a guided tour of hell. Some of the Wobs in my car knew him and gathered around him in the center of the jolting boxcar. He'd just come up from Centralia to round up more fellow workers to go down there, and he filled us in on what had happened. He had a far-off look in his eyes, like he was still in a state of shock.

He had been in the Arnold Hotel earlier that day, right across the street from the Wobbly hall, and he had seen the whole thing. The Legionnaires had come marching along and stopped right in front of the hall. Some of them were carrying Wobbly neckties, others carried clubs or pipes. This time the Wobs were ready for them. They were good and fed up with having their halls wrecked all over the state. Their lawyer, Elmer Smith, had advised them the day before that they had the legal right to defend the hall. "A damn good shyster, Elmer Smith," our informant said with reverence in his voice. "You know what the plutes say: 'A lawyer with a heart is as dangerous as a working man with brains.'"

"So there they were in front of our hall. All of a sudden a whistle sounded and somebody yelled, 'Let's go! At 'em, boys!' And then all hell broke loose. A bunch of the marchers rushed for the hall. Some of 'em busted the door down and glass was flying everywhere. Then one of our boys—Wesley Everest, still in his army uniform—yelled out: 'I fought for democracy in France and I'm going to fight for it here!'

"And then as the Legionnaires busted in and the shooting began, one of the attackers keeled over right in the entrance. Then two more of them fell. Then the shooting stopped and the rest of the marchers swarmed into the hall. And a couple of minutes later I saw Wesley Everest hightailing it down the street with a mob behind him, down toward the river.

"I sneaked out the back way from the hotel and ran out into the woods to wait for a freight. By the time one came along, the whole town was like an armed camp."

The newcomer paused, catching his breath, the look of fear still in his eyes. Then he advised us, if possible, to jump off the train outside town and hide in the woods until we could size the situation up.

We discussed what to do as the train jolted on south. But we couldn't come up with any plan better than what he'd suggested. Finally, after the conversation subsided, I just sat listening to the clack-clack of the wheels on the rails, hoping it would all turn out all right.

We got into Centralia a little before dark. But the train didn't slow down enough for us to jump off until we were almost into town. Maybe a few of our boys managed to escape out into the woods, but most of us didn't have a chance. The whole town was patrolled by hundreds of Legionnaires and the plug-uglies of the lumber barons. As soon as I was yanked out of the boxcar I heard someone yell, "Let's lynch 'em here, boys!" And I could see that at least one of the hooligans was carrying a Wobbly necktie over his arm. Then three or four of the scumbags grabbed me at once. I managed to slip loose and deck one of them, but then something hit me on the back of the head and I passed out.

Next thing I knew, we were being herded downtown to the jailhouse. And all along the route those hoodlums kept yelling profanities at us, throwing stuff at us and trying to break through the cordon of vigilantes to jab something at us or punch us out.

We finally got to the jail. I could see at once that the local bulls weren't in control: The Legionnaires and other cat's paws of the lumber trust had taken over. Legionnaires were strutting around everywhere, barking orders at the cops and the poor stiffs in the slammer. The jailed Wobblies were a sorry-looking lot—their clothes all ripped, bruises where they'd been hit or jabbed or clubbed, but they stood there peering out as defiant and unbeaten as if they had the world by the balls.

I was thrown into a cell with several other men. At first we newcomers just stood there numb-like, looking around us, hearing the yells and curses and threats of the mob outside.

Maybe because I was the youngest, this red-haired fellow about thirty came up to me and put his arm on mine. "Don't be afraid, son," he said. "We'll be outside and they'll be in here before this shebang is over."

Then he introduced himself. I was surprised to learn that he was our lawyer, Elmer Smith, who had advised the local Wobs they had the right to defend their hall.

Like a fool, I asked him what he was in for. He gave a grim smile. "We call it self-defense. They call it murder," he said. Then he added: "Just for advising the boys of their constitutional rights, apparently."

It was a cold November day, and the jails provided no blankets in those days. Elmer Smith was one of the few who had any blankets, and he insisted on giving me one. And shortly after that, he gave his last blanket to another young Wobbly who didn't have one.

A little before dark we heard a deafening clamor—even louder than the clamor that had been going on outside the jail all along. It must have sounded like this in the early days of Rome when they brought in the Christians to be eaten by the lions, I thought. Through the high barred window we could barely see the crowd parting as a big party of men dragged somebody down the street toward us by a leather strap around his neck. Hundreds of people kicked and beat the prostrate form as it was dragged along.

As the crazed mob got closer, the Wobblies about me in the jail suddenly fell silent. We could see that the form being dragged along the street was in uniform. "Wesley Everest," somebody gasped. We watched speechless as the body was dragged closer. Some of the men had tears running down their cheeks.

Then, when the mob was only a few dozen yards away, we could see that the bleeding figure being dragged along still showed signs of life. He was twisting and turning, being dragged by the neck, constantly kicked and slugged, his protruding eyes peering out helplessly like those of a dying dog run over in the street.

When they got to the front of the jail they yanked him to his feet and slammed him against the wall. Several voices clamored to hang him on the spot, and somebody slipped a noose around his neck. Then we heard from that form which most people would have thought too near death to think—let alone talk—a high, ringing, vibrant voice yell out: "You haven't got guts enough to lynch a man in broad daylight!"

Then someone smashed the muzzle of his rifle into Everest's face, and all we could see was a mass of broken teeth and blood where his face had been.

A moment later, to everyone's astonishment, a solitary woman stepped through the mob and accused them of being a gang of cowards and criminals to treat anyone like that. And she calmly stepped up to the bloody hulk and removed the noose from Wesley Everest's neck.

Next thing we knew, the front door of the jail opened. They dragged Everest's body in and slammed it down onto the concrete floor of the corridor between the cells—for all of us to see as an example, I guess. Everest just lay there bleeding, apparently almost unconscious now, and we were helpless to do anything but watch.

Night came on. The furor in the street grew even louder. Through the bars we could hear snatches of the Legionnaires' conversation, about sending posses out to search for Wobblies in the woods, of breaking into all the homes in town to look for IWW literature, of lynching all of us.

Elmer Smith filled me in a little on what had happened. A few days before, when they heard rumors of the impending raid, he had asked for protection from the local police and even traveled to Olympia to ask the governor for protection. Nothing had worked. Then he pointed out to me, in adjoining cells, the men who had been captured in the hall: Bert Faulkner, Ray Becker the former minister, Britt Smith the stocky secretary, Mike Sheehan, and James McInerney. They all had the cool but defiant look of strong, intelligent men who knew they had done the right and the moral thing. Smith told me they had been taken one by one all afternoon into an adjoining room, brutally questioned, threatened and assaulted.

As he was saying this I heard a scream. Smith told me that must be the youngest of the captured men, Loren Roberts, whom they'd been questioning for hours. Roberts was finally brought out and thrown into a nearby cell, trembling from head to foot. He sat up on the cell floor, sobbing. We could see the men about him try to comfort the youth, but he just sat there talking to himself. And it gradually dawned on everybody that his mind had snapped.

A few minutes later some of the mob suddenly rushed in, grabbed James McInerney, and dragged him out to the street. I don't know why they singled him out. When they got him out in the street, the mob howled like hogs at feeding time. They put a noose around his neck and threw it over some kind of crossbar. Then one of the chief tormentors asked McInerney to confess that the Wobblies had shot before the Legionnaires rushed the hall.

McInerney replied, "Go to hell." And so they yanked on the rope and lifted him off the ground by the neck—and after a minute, lowered him again. They asked him again to confess. Again he said, "Go to hell." So they jerked him up again. The same process went on and on for maybe twenty minutes. Finally the mob gave up or got bored and threw him back in his cell.

About nine or ten at night suddenly all the lights in the town went off. You can imagine how terrified we were. This is it, we thought. The howling of the mob outside grew louder. Then we could see the headlights of three big expensive automobiles coming slowly through the crowd.

The front door of the jail opened and a crowd of men surged in, foaming at the mouth, yelling and cursing at all of us. It was soon evident what they wanted. The one in the lead kicked at the body of Wesley Everest, and the prone figure seemed to come to life faintly. Then, as they began to drag him toward the door, one last glimmer of life force seemed to rise in him, and he gasped out to us in a hoarse voice: "Tell the boys I died for my class." Then we saw them dump him in the back seat of one of the cars, and they sped off into the night.

Several times later in the night the lights went off again and the mob came in and dragged someone out. We never saw any of those Wobblies again. They must have dragged eight or ten of us out that night. Rumor had it later they had been burned alive in the big incinerators at the mills.

I don't think anybody slept that night. We were too afraid the mob might break in at any minute and lynch us all. And every so often they dragged in some new Wob they'd captured to join us.

Along towards dawn a Wobbly was thrown in jail who knew what had happened to Wesley Everest. When Everest first escaped from the Wobbly hall, he said, they had chased him down to the banks of the Skookumchuck River. Everest had waded out into the river, but found the current too strong and turned back to face the mob. "If there's a bull in the crowd, I'll submit to arrest," he said. "Otherwise, stand back." But a Legionnaire named Dale Hubbard, a nephew of the owner of the lumber trust, rushed for Everest. Everest shot him dead. Then the mob was on him, beating him almost senseless. Many wanted to hang him on the spot, but instead they tied the leather strap around his neck and dragged him to jail.

When they dragged him back out of jail after the night lights went out, Everest was put in the back seat of one of the big cars, between two men. One of them, a doctor, castrated him on the way to the river. Then they hung him from a trestle. They seemed to have trouble getting the rope tied right, and they threw him off the bridge three separate times. Then they played the headlights of the cars on his dangling body and spent a long time filling his body with slugs.

The new inmate, finishing his story, sat down on the concrete cell floor and sank his head in his hands, tears running down his cheeks. The howling of the mob outside went on and on, and I felt like my head was about to split open. Finally, about dawn, I wrapped myself in the blanket Elmer Smith had given me and managed to get a little sleep sitting against one wall of the cell—there were no bunks in the jail at all.

When I woke up, things had calmed down a little. The jailers begrudgingly gave us a little food—if you could call it that. It was the worst chuck I ever tried to swill down. Slumgullion would be much too fancy a term to describe it.

There were still a few dozen Legionnaires and other people milling around outside the jail. Occasionally we could hear what they were saying. At one point somebody rushed up to what appeared to be some big shot and said: "Everest's body has disappeared. I was just down at the river, and somebody's cut it down." A look of alarm came over the big shot's face. "We've got to get that body," he said. "Or the Wobs will find it and raise hell over its condition." They immediately began organizing search parties, and they all rushed off toward the river.

A few hours later they brought Wesley Everest's body—or what was left of it—back to the jail and dumped it in the corridor again, for all of us to see. It was an almost unrecognizable, bloody mess. And they left it there for two days, within a few feet of us, before they finally took it out and buried it in an unmarked grave.