
Ben Hanford — A Song and A Sword

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Note:— Saturday, January 24, 1920, was the 10th anniversary of the death of one of the finest souls that ever served the working class, Ben Hanford. Hanford was more than a Socialist agitator. He was a living flame, his soul was on fire every moment of the years from his conversion to Socialism to the time of his death. Since that day, in January, 10 years ago, a whole new generation of Socialists has entered the movement who did not know Hanford; and too many things have happened in the world and in the Socialist movement that 10 years ago seems like another age. But he was such a great man, his devotion was so fine and loyal and beautiful, his spirit is so much needed now that it is well to pause for a moment and consider his services to our cause.

Ben Hanford, whose life and great services are being commemorated now on the 10th anniversary of his death, was one of the most devoted souls who ever made himself happy by serving in the Socialist movement. He was a writer, an orator of rare powers, and indefatigable worker in the party, a man who deliberately gave his life — with full knowledge of the fact that he was giving his life — to the working class movement.

But he was more than that.

He was an inspiration; his life was a sword and a song. He was a living flame, and those who came into contact with him, those who felt the touch of his hand upon their shoulders, those who knew his clean, fine

life, can never forget him, will never lose the influence that that wonderful personality exercised over them.

Hanford was a plain workingman. He had no particular education. He never went to school. He was a wanderer, a rolling stone, for the first 30 years of his life., Everything in this life militated against him. But

there was something that came into his life when he had nothing to live for, there was a light that penetrated the emptiness that hitherto had dwelt in his soul, that made the last years of his life singularly sweet and wonderful.

He became a Socialist. That was all.

Ben Hanford (no one could ever call him Benjamin) was born in Cleveland in 1861, of pure American stock. His mother died very early in his life, and after several years his father married again, and he attributed much of his love of books and of truth to the

teaching of the fine woman whom he always knew as Mother.

He early learned the printers' trade, the same trade that Franklin professed, and William Dean Howells, and Mark Twain, and other lovers of liberty and haters of sham. At the age of 17, he went to work in the office of the Marshalltown (Iowa) *Republican*, and after a few years he moved to Chicago.

His life was that of a journeyman printer until the early '90s, when the invention of the linotype threw many printers out of work. That, together with the



industrial crisis of the period, gave him ample time to think. He was working in Washington then; he once attended an open meeting in the Typographical Temple on G Street, and took part in the debate after the lecture. After the adjournment of the meeting, someone said, "Why, Hanford, I never knew you were a Socialist!" Hanford denied it. He was not — until he met two great men who changed the course of his life.

They were Fred Long, of Philadelphia, another printer, and Abraham Cahan. Cahan made Hanford a Socialist, and Long finished the job. And from that time he definitely made up his mind that he belonged to the Cause, his whole life was changed.

"I was in the gutter," he used to say, "when Socialism came and gave me something to live for." "Socialism is life," he said, "next to having Socialism, the greatest thing in the world is to work for Socialism."

And it was true. There wasn't anything he would not do. He would tour the country for Socialism. He would write articles and leaflets. He would sit in committees and conventions. He would lug the platform. He would erect the street stand.

And he wrote the story of Jimmie Higgins, that glorious comrade who was to Hanford what Hanford was to the movement.

Hanford was a great orator. There never was a man, with the exception of Gene Debs, who so captured the imagination of the workers. He was clear, and logical, and burning. His slight figure, his physical frailties would be forgotten as his piercing eyes would bore through you, as his eloquent words would ring out, "The working class, may it ever be right, but right or wrong, the working class," were the words with which he would close his greatest speeches.

It was in 1896 that the comrades heard that over in Brooklyn there was a little union printer who was making pretty good Socialist speeches at union and forum meetings. It was Julius Gerber, one of his closest friends, who found him. He was fetched across the river. The comrades soon realized that his mind was as sound as his enthusiasm was great. He was nominated for Governor of New York in 1898, and then he impressed the whole Socialist movement with his worth.

He joined the dissenters from the destructive DeLeon policies, and helped organize the Socialist Party in 1899 and 1900. In 1900 and 1902 he ran for Governor again, and in 1904 and 1908, he was candi-

date for Vice President, both times with Eugene V. Debs at the head of the ticket. In 1901, he was candidate for Mayor of New York.

In 1904, he toured the country again and again, and broke down in California from the excessive work that he set himself to do. From that time, it was a race with death. In 1908, although on the national ticket, his principal campaigning was done through the medium of letters to the comrades, written from a hospital cot.

It was about 1900 that he began to write. His Jimmie Higgins will live as long as there are Socialists. Thousands of comrades who never heard of Ben Hanford know all about Jimmie Higgins. His booklet, *Railroading in the United States*, comparing the piker methods of the James boys, Jesse and Frank, with the larger methods of the Hills and Harrimans, was a masterpiece of ironic reasoning. His *Class War in Colorado*, written after a visit to the strike fields in 1904, was a historic booklet of real value. And the book of articles, letters, leaflets, gathered together and entitled *Fight for Your Life* is a Socialist masterpiece. And there were many more.

In 1908, the New York comrades established the *New York Call*, and in that work Hanford threw every ounce of his waning energy; in its first years of its life it was known that it might pass away for lack of support at any time, and Hanford determined that it should live, if it cost him his life. He knew that he had but little more strength. He knew that he could nurse that strength along for a few years — or spend it at once. He deliberately elected to spend it at once. He used up every ounce of life in his appeals for *The Call*. He taunted the workers; he urged them; he ordered them to keep *The Call* alive.

His latest effort was a one day's wage fund for *The Call* in November 1909. His appeals, written literally with his last heart's blood, with a pen tipped with glorious fire, netted \$6,000, enough to keep the spark of life alive in *The Call*, and then his hand fell beside him, his work nearly done.

Then Ben Hanford weakened. He came to the office of *The Call* from day to day, and with faltering step, with his voice now thin and cracked and high pitched, he would joke with the boys on the desk. And those boys who loved him made believe that their hearts were not broken, and they bandied back witticism for

witticism, keeping back their tears.

As the weeks wore on he knew that he was dying. He was confined to his bed, and his beard grew long and white. He joked about his death, and he asked Julius Gerber to find him a cheap undertaker. “I have been fleeced so much in life,” said he, “that I don’t want my people to be fleeced in my death.”

On January 24 [1910], he grew delirious. There were with him his 3 closest friends, Julius Gerber, John A Behringer, and Sam Hurok. He began to sink. He imagined he was on a platform, swaying great multitudes of workers with his eloquence. He was speaking again.

Then he grew <illeg.> a while as his mind became lucid. He signalled Hurok for an envelope — one of the long yellow envelopes in which he had been in the habit of bringing his “copy” to the office of *The Call* — and with a pencil his dying fingers wrote this message to *The Call*:

**I WOULD THAT MY EVERY HEART’S
BEAT SHOULD HAVE BEEN FOR THE WORK-
ING CLASS, AND THROUGH THEM FOR ALL
HUMANITY.**

BEN HANFORD.

And then he died.

We took his body and draped it with our red flags. We sang defiant revolutionary songs over it. We sang, while we wept, for we had loved that fine, simple, flaming soul. Then we took his body and cremated it, and went back to our task of fighting the fight as Ben Hanford had taught us to fight, proud and glad and happy that he had lived, and that we had known him.

Ben Hanford is dead. His voice has been stilled for these 10 long years. His cheery laugh, his magnetic presence are no longer with us. Men like Ben Hanford and Gene Debs do not come into the world too often.

But he has lived, and we knew him. And we have caught some of his fire. And we have with us his creation, Jimmie Higgins — and we know that Hanford when he wrote Jimmie Higgins, might have been writing of himself.

We, who knew Ben Hanford, know that there is something holy, something almost divine in human nature because we know what manner of man he was, and in what manner he served the Cause. And we in our turn will be content if we can serve as honestly, as faithfully and unselfishly in the spirit of Jimmie Higgins as Ben Hanford — Comrade.

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