

“A Socialist in Congress!”

In the fall of 1910, another election was to take place; this time the selection of members to the House of Representatives in Washington, D.C. It was not only natural but absolutely imperative that the Socialist Party select as its choice the best qualified man. That man was Victor Berger.

And now we were headed for more work, more responsibilities and more and greater interests. The campaign as you may imagine was bitter and hotly fought. But when the votes were counted, to our surprise and joy my husband had won his seat in Congress. Again, this success startled the nation. A Socialist in Congress! Unheard of before!

My reaction was queer. While I had gradually been absorbing the socialist philosophy, I know now that I wasn't ready for the rapid political progress we were making.¹ My husband had to resign as alderman in order to represent the Fifth District of Wisconsin in Washington. Now not only local problems but national problems were brought into the home.

I am so grateful that the children grew up such healthy children because I have often wondered just how to meet still more problems.

Naturally everyone in the whole country wanted to know who this lone Socialist congressman elect was and what he was like. Again we were besieged with writers from everywhere to get the facts. I've always been so grateful to

¹ Miriam Frick added here (for Meta Berger): "To be thrown into center of national activity was overwhelming to me. Questions affecting nation—tariff, free trade, international problems being discussed—big jump from civic and local problems to these larger ones. Had been on the school board about one year. That had been a tremendous jump then—whole new world opening up—and now Congress. I couldn't catch up by reading, too much to take in a philosophy of life and economic order—had to get it by absorption. (Was not to this day read Karl Marx but has Marxian philosophy.) Harle and Paula never graduated from eighth grade."

Frederic C. Howe for being so understanding of our situation and I have always counted him as a friend.²

But Milwaukeeans too were jarred into a curiosity about their representative, and new friends appeared on the horizon. In order to meet the situation and in order to give these new friends a glimpse of what my husband was like—we inaugurated at our home a series of dinners, say one a month, the guests always to be from the ranks of the opposition. In order to accommodate my guests a banquet top was made to fit over the dining room table. Then I was able to have eighteen guests at one evening.

So, the members of the press came, the judges came, the clergy came, the educators came, the social workers came, etc. etc. In this way they and we became acquainted and much hostility broke down. After a good dinner and good wine, the guests and my husband and I would retire to the library which was on the top floor (formerly the attic) of a house in which we lived, and there in the most friendly manner the economic, political and party topics were discussed until the early hours of the next day. It is needless to say, that all, everyone, left our home with a feeling of friendship even though we made no converts to our political faith.

I recall especially one member of the clergy who each Sunday in his sermons denounced my husband in no uncertain terms. Monday morning papers always played up these denunciations. Well, this minister of the gospel also was a guest at one of these dinners. He was charming as could be, was my partner at the table, and later on took an active part in a lively discussion. When leaving for home that morning, he came to me and said, "Thank you Mrs. B.—for a lovely and stimulating evening. I shall never again preach against your husband." And he kept his word.

Well—I guess the dinners helped a little.

It was during this time also that Henry C. Campbell of the *Milwaukee Journal*, Dr. Horace Manchester Brown and Victor Berger organized the Milwaukee City Club.³ The purpose of this club was to bring lecturers and speakers to Milwaukee. The dues were only one dollar a year. This was done so that

² Milton Frink added here: "Frederic C. Howe represented a magazine, writer of books—later immigration commissioner at Port of New York (Harding? Wilson?). He came to know when Mrs. B. was running carpet sweeper, she leaned it up against wall and he made her feel perfectly at home, very charming. Cf. Howe Who's Who. Has a sister living here in Milwaukee. Macmillan, Soil comes to Milwaukee."

³ Henry C. Campbell (1862–1923) was a *Milwaukee Journal* editor and amateur historian. Horace Manchester Brown (1857–1929) was a surgeon and hospital owner. Fernando Mark, John Butler, Glenway Maxson, and Charles Norris organized the Milwaukee City Club in 1909. Campbell was one of the club's first members and served as its president from 1919 to 1923 (*Milwaukee City Club Records*, State Historical Society of Wisconsin).

everyone could join and make it a truly civic organization. But as happens so often, the committees managing club affairs soon wanted permanent headquarters. These cost money. Consequently the dues went up to twenty-five dollars a year. Naturally the character of the club changed and now only those who could afford it were members.

Also my husband was instrumental in establishing the Milwaukee Press Club.⁴ I mention these facts because a few years later during World War I both clubs expelled him from membership. More of that later.

The anticipation and joy of looking forward to the work and living in Washington was tempered a good deal by the difficulties connected with getting the *Milwaukee Leader* launched. Always and always the great questions were finances, advertisements, subscriptions etc. etc. After all, the future of our whole movement depended on the life and success of our paper. So Victor Berger as leader carried the greatest of burdens. Not only did he caucus with the Socialist members in the city council, but he had to make the contacts of the larger advertising media, both in the city and in the nation, [and] he had to borrow money from banks, unions, people who were sympathetic and from everyone possible. In keeping the *Leader* going he had the most wonderful and loyal help of Elizabeth H. Thomas.

Miss Thomas was president of the *Milwaukee Leader* publishing company and as such she shared the financial burdens. And now let me say something about Elizabeth H. Thomas. She was a Quaker, coming from very strict Quaker stock from New York. She had means of her own, consequently all her services were a donation. She was one of those human beings who had originally become interested in the welfare of the people by working in Hull House working with Jane Addams⁵ [and] had gone to Russia to contact the liberal or protest movement against czarism over there. She is undoubtedly the best read woman of my acquaintance and is the salt of the earth. She was a spectator at the unity convention in New York when the national Socialist Party broke with the Socialist Labor Party which was then under the domination of Daniel De Leon.⁶ While there, Elizabeth H. Thomas decided to throw in her lot and also a good share of her fortune with the Social Democratic Party of Wisconsin.

⁴ According to the *Milwaukee Press Club Book* (Milwaukee: Milwaukee Press Club, 1895), Victor Berger was an active member but not a founder of the club, which was established in 1885.

⁵ Jane Addams (1860-1935), a noted reformer and pacifist, established the social settlement Hull House in Chicago in 1889 and served as its head resident until 1935. She was international president of the Women's International League for Peace and Freedom (1915-1929) and a co-recipient of the Nobel Peace Prize in 1931.

⁶ Daniel De Leon (1852-1914) led the Socialist Labor Party when a dissenting faction left the party in 1899. The unity convention, held in Indianapolis in 1901, formally joined this faction with the Social Democratic Party and established the Socialist Party.

She became secretary of the Socialist Party here, secretary and confidant of my husband, [and] later president of the Social-Democratic Publishing Company, which published the *Milwaukee Leader*. The responsibility of her various offices very frequently thrust upon her perhaps the most difficult task of borrowing money with which to meet current debts. While these tasks were always distasteful, not once did she hesitate. To Elizabeth H. Thomas and to Victor Berger can be credited the fact that the *Milwaukee Leader* survived the continuous financial storms. And borrowing money is always difficult, but more so for a socialist paper.

Sometimes some good comrade would advance his bit, but always with fear that it might not be repaid. But the *Leader* always repaid those who had helped, timidly but courageously.⁷

And so we launched the daily paper about December 1911?⁸ with which to carry on.

In the meantime, my husband and I were making plans to go to Washington. Some cranks or venomous people sent us threatening letters, saying in effect that if we dared claim the seat in Congress bombs would be planted in our home and my husband and his family would be blown to bits. These letters were never signed, so we considered them "crank letters" which were consigned to the waste basket. It would have made an interesting volume had we kept them.

So with high hopes and a great⁹ feeling of responsibility we started out for Washington; taking the three children and Josie with us.¹⁰ William J. Ghent¹¹ was appointed by my husband as his secretary. This was a happy choice we thought. Ghent was a writer, a scholar and a Socialist. Unfortunately, the two men were temperamentally not qualified to work together easily.

The sight of the Capitol from the station gave us all the thrill of our lives. Never had we seen anything anywhere so beautiful, so wonderful. The im-

⁷ The *Milwaukee Leader* did not repay all loans. Because the paper ran at a nearly constant deficit, many party members' contributions were essentially considered donations, especially after Victor Berger's death in 1929.

⁸ The *Milwaukee Leader* was first published on December 7, 1911.

⁹ Meta Berger first wrote "fearful," then crossed it out and wrote "great."

¹⁰ Although Meta Berger was present when Victor Berger took the oath of office on April 4, 1911, she stayed in Wisconsin with their children during the first and third sessions of the Sixty-second Congress (April 4–August 22, 1911, and December 2, 1912–March 3, 1913). The family joined Victor in Washington, D.C., for most of the second session (December 4, 1911–August 26, 1912) but returned to Wisconsin by the end of June 1912.

¹¹ William J. Ghent (1866–1942), author of several books, joined the Socialist Party in 1904 and helped establish the Rand School of Social Science in New York, serving as its secretary (1906–1909) and president (1909–1911). In 1911 he became Victor Berger's secretary but resigned in 1912 as a result of illness. Ghent left the party in 1916 because of his antiwar stance.

posing dome against a blue blue sky, surrounded by a parkway—up a gentle slope—gave us quite a sensation of reverence.

Mr. Ghent had found us a house quite near the House Office Building. We were delighted at first, but after a night or two there we discovered the house was quite rat-infested. That settled it. At once I went house-hunting. For a stranger in Washington, that was quite a task. After a week of tiresome hunting, we finally found a very pretty house way up on Thirteenth [Street] NW on the outskirts of the city not far from Rock Creek Park. In fact in the next block were meadows on which cows were grazing. It was pleasant to hear the bells tinkling on the cattle. For this home we paid the sum of forty-eight dollars a month, but it was worth it since it was new, clean and comfortable. But it was miles and miles away from the HOB. And since automobiles were not so plentiful, the street car was our only means of transportation.

I really tried to be a good companion and wife to my husband; but I found it a little more difficult to get into his work at Washington and keep house and get the children into school etc. etc.

Also, I thought it was my duty to take the youngsters sight-seeing. There were so many beautiful sights and historical spots to visit. We climbed the Capitol Dome, Washington's Monument, saw the White House in all its simplicity and glory—went to art galleries and did the town up properly. But Mount Vernon captured us all.

Often I would go to my husband's office and try to help. His office was in my opinion the busiest office on Capitol Hill. True, he represented the Fifth District of Wisconsin, but he also felt that he represented the entire socialist movement. As a result of the activities his office soon became a bureau of information. Members of Congress frequented his office, constantly getting facts they needed for their own speeches.

The congressional library was a great boon to us. Not only did we have to be sure of our facts, but we had to be careful to lay the foundation of future social policies. For instance, my husband was the first member to introduce [a bill for] an old age pension system. This policy has not yet reached fruition, but it is certainly progressing to fulfillment.¹²

Perhaps the most colorful and at the same time the most tragic incident in the first term was the Lawrence strike.¹³ The textile mills at Lawrence were

¹² Mignon Frink added here: "Milwaukee Journal (?) last two or three years had an editorial giving him credit."

¹³ In January 1912, textile workers in Lawrence, Massachusetts, went on strike to protest a pay cut; the strike ended in March in the workers' favor. Strikers' children were sent out of town for the purpose of saving money and garnering public support. Although most of the gains were lost within a year, the strike was significant in that it organized an unskilled and ethnically diverse workforce, a group that organized labor had largely overlooked.

not organized, and as a result of a drastic wage cut the workers, mostly of foreign extraction, struck against the wage cut but also against the working conditions in general. Conditions at Lawrence must have been pretty bad, because the strikers were farming their children out to neighboring sympathetic towns. Some two hundred children came to Washington to make a protest. Finally my husband succeeded in getting President Taft to permit a hearing in Washington on labor conditions at Lawrence. To do this legally, a federal law had to be found which would allow such a hearing to be held in Washington. This was done. Both President and Mrs. Taft attended the hearing which was exciting enough, with both sides making heated arguments.

This was the first time I saw and met President William H. Taft. Whatever else his policies were, I wish to state that he was certainly friendly and jovial. Mrs. Taft also took a keen interest in the Lawrence strike.

The results of that strike, as I recall, were beneficial to the workers, and soon after they were organized so that their working conditions improved as well as their wages.

Except for my interest in what was going on in the Congress, life in Washington didn't particularly appeal to me. I was not used to society life and calling on strangers. But the wife of a congressman from Seattle, Washington,¹⁴ told me it was a definite duty to call on certain people, such as the wife of the Speaker of the House, the wives of members of the Supreme Court, the wives of the chairmen of my husband's committee, the wives of the floor leaders of both majority and minority leaders, and the wives of the president's cabinet members. Furthermore, said this good lady—that while they (Republicans and Democrats) clubbed together to get taxis to make the round of calls—so many on Monday—and so many Tuesday etc. etc., she advised me to go alone as I represented the third party in Congress and everyone was interested in looking me over, where as if I went with the group I might be over-looked.

Of course I was aware that the good lady's intentions were of the best. And so were mine. Therefore—being poorer and not being able to hire a taxi alone, I started out to do my social duty alone, taking street cars and walking. I cannot tell you how often I was lost, especially along the winding roads around Rock Creek Park. I walked miles daily for three days and then finally gave up being a socialite in Washington.

Then came invitations to the White House! Now—question—could a class-conscious Socialist accept an invitation to the White House reception given by a most conservative president of the country? We pondered on that important [question] long and earnestly and finally decided that the represen-

¹⁴ Helen Humphrey (1870–1936) was active in women's clubs. Her husband, William Ewart Humphrey, served as a Republican representative from Washington from 1903 to 1917.

tative from the Fifth District of Wisconsin was invited because he was chosen by the people back home and that invitations to the members of the House of Representatives were not invited because they were Republicans, Democrats or Socialists. So we went. Can you imagine all the impressions we got that night.

We were used to going out at seven or eight o'clock. But here the time was set for 10:00 P.M. And then we had to go to the White House by auto because that was the way it was done. I remember that car cost us five dollars to take us about six blocks and back again.

But I have appreciated Cinderella ever since. The long line of guests—there were usually five hundred to eight hundred guests at one of these receptions—slowly winding its way up the stairs from the cloak rooms; Secret Service men stationed every ten or fifteen feet along the line, then precisely on the appointed hour the door at the head of the stairs opened and the line proceeded through the rotunda, the Red Room, [and] the Blue Room where the president and his wife and members of the cabinet with their wives received the guests. The military attaché asked your name and then introduced us. This formality over, the famous East Room was for the guests of the evening where dancing took place—if you found enough space to dance on. Usually light refreshments were served in the famous dining room. But here you had to stand and try to eat if you could.

Well—the evening made a great impression on me. I loved the White House. My husband was the center of attraction because the gentlemen laughed and joked with him and I guess they tried him out socially that night. The ladies—well—I don't know what to say of them. I can only hazard a guess that they were a little afraid of the word "Socialist." It took me much longer to get on a friendly footing with them, and then with only a few.

Somehow, I thought that when my husband was earning for the first time in our lives a magnificent salary—that I would have plenty of money to spend. Not so! I was so hard up that sometimes I didn't have a nickel in my purse. Nor did my husband. I couldn't understand our financial situation at all. So one day I said I'd like to discuss with him the question of our financial status, and when I said—"Now why—when you are earning so much money—don't we have enough to get on comfortably?"—with a queer smile he said, "Now Mama—do you remember all those conventions you went to—well—I borrowed money to take you and now I am paying back that money and more besides. Also the money I pay to strike funds, charitable causes etc. etc. takes everything I earn."⁵

⁵ Miriam Flink added here: "Rent paid first of month. Grocery and meat bills paid back month—no cash left over. Congressman's salary was \$650 (check?) " U.S. representatives earned \$7,500 per year in 1911.

All right I said—"You pay back the money—I understand and I'll walk." And the walk from the HOB to our house on [Thirteenth] Street NW was between five and six miles. Many is the time my husband and I reached our home dog-tired. And when you are so tired, some of the beauty of Washington just faded out of the picture.

One day—upon reaching our Washington home, I found a man on our porch nailing up a red-flag. My consternation knew no bounds. Hadn't we gone through enough at Milwaukee without having the red flag follow us even into our home in Washington? I ordered him to take it down immediately—thinking the meanwhile—what would the opposition press at home do to us now. The man did remove the flag after some protest, telling me that the owner of that house (a widow) had lost it, and that it was now up for auction and that the red-flag was the auctioneer's flag to notify anyone that the house would be sold. I insisted however that the flag could not be nailed to the house while I lived in it and paid the rent. So very resentfully he planted the flag on the curb; but we did have the flag and I couldn't forbid him the right under real-estate rules to place it in front of the house. Fortunately this all happened in the late spring, so by the time the new owner notified us to move, we were ready to come back to Milwaukee at the close of the congressional session.

Our social life was limited to the official White House functions and a dinner at the British embassy. How did we ever get to the British embassy? Well—I'll tell you. While we were working hard in Milwaukee, we suddenly received a visitor—Lord Eustace Percy¹⁶—who was sent over to America to study the labor movement but more particularly the socialist movement. Naturally, my husband did his best, spared neither pains, time, or (?) to enlighten the young lord. I guess he must have had an interesting evening because the visit lasted all night.

When we first arrived [in] Washington—he was one of the very first to call on us to renew his acquaintance. Again we enjoyed him and he enjoyed my husband, for one day an invitation came from him to have dinner with him at the British embassy. Have you ever been in the embassies of foreign lands? Well—it's a worthwhile experience. Upon entering the front door opened by a footman or butler, and there half way up a most beautiful wide stairway—on the landing was a gorgeous life sized picture of Queen Victoria. Of course I do not know whether it was a good likeness but it certainly was a gorgeous picture and set the stage for everything that followed.

¹⁶ Eustace Percy (1887–1958) served as a diplomat in the British embassy in Washington, D.C., from 1910 to 1914. He resigned from the diplomatic service in 1919 and became a politician and educator.

Lord Percy's guest of honor was my husband. And he had invited the two grandsons of Gladstone who were in the States on a visit, Sir and Mrs. Arthur Willert, representative of the *London Times*, [and] the daughter of James G. Blaine.¹⁷ We had a most interesting evening and as you can imagine the discussion was most animated and inspiring. I shall always count that evening as a mile-stone in my education as well as an introduction into high society. Twenty-five years later I had the good fortune to again meet Lord Eustace Percy while I was in London and where he was a member of the British Cabinet—minister without portfolio. More of that later.

A two year term is hardly enough for a congressman to learn the seriousness of being in Congress. And many representatives were so fearful of not being re-elected, that often they could not or did not vote their convictions, but had their ears to the ground in the hopes that they were making a good bid with their constituents for re-election.

What was the lone Socialist member to do? He felt that a socialist message to the nation was so important, that he could do more good to humanity than catering for votes for re-election. Besides weren't all his proposals as good for San Francisco, Cal., Dallas, Texas, or New York, N.Y. as they were for the Fifth District of Wisconsin?

But how to get all his messages out to the nation? That was a problem. But a solution was found. Daily—reporters from the press called at the office to report to their respective papers. We finally succeeded in getting one of these gentlemen on our pay-roll provided he agreed to send out a daily news item from the lone Socialist in Congress. Thus we succeeded in doing a good bit of constructive work during those two years. Our office was the busiest one on the Hill, we thought.

The next fall, during the federal election for Congress, my husband was defeated to succeed himself. It was a little hard to take, but knowing the political line-up in Wisconsin we were not wholly surprised.

The two years in Washington had been rich in experience, so we came home better prepared to go forward in the political life of Wisconsin. My children—too, had had a change in schools and environment which could only help them better on their road of life. When we returned to Milwaukee, we came home with seven dollars in our family treasury.

¹⁷ The other guests included William Glynne Charles Gladstone (1885-1915), the grandson of former British prime minister William Ewan Gladstone (1809-1898); Arthur Willert (1882-1973), American correspondent for the *Times*; Florence Simpson Willert (1876?-1955); and Harriet Stanwood Blaine Beule (b. 1872), daughter of former U. S. Secretary of State James G. Blaine (1830-1893). Arthur Willert wrote that Percy's brother also attended the dinner (*Washington and Other Memories* [Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1972], 47).

Our next task was to build the Socialist Party and to fortify the *Leader* against the financial hazards with which it was always beset. Both of these undertakings were terrific. And of course much of the burden came home and reflected itself in the family relationship.

Also, since both girls had reached the adolescent period, it became necessary for us to look around for larger living quarters. Finally, we found a large red brick house on the corner of First and Clark Street which formerly belonged to Mr. Ed. Schuster of the Schuster Dry Goods Company. Mr. Schuster had gone to California for his health and died, leaving this magnificent house to his son, who was a doctor in Detroit and wasn't interested in owning the house. Therefore we bought it at a most reasonable price, but we bought this particular house because of the marvelous attic, a room thirty by thirty-three by nine [feet] high with plenty of windows. At once we saw the possibility of using the attic for our ever growing library. We could place nearly all the books up there, but still there was an overflow in three other rooms of the house. The purchase of this house only added to our financial burdens, but it did also provide us with ample bed-rooms, living rooms and kitchen. Here we lived during the rest of my husband's life.

So we settled down to private life except for the fact that we were always the target for criticism by the opposition. Anyone who believes in minority causes and whose convictions are such that he must give voice and action to those convictions, must indeed have a thick skin. We had that. But we were not so immune to criticism that our nerves reacted to much of it. Largely because we felt we were right and the critics were either stupid or motivated by small and selfish interest.

Naturally my husband bore the brunt of it and we in turn suffered through his irritability. I often recall the sort of electric shock that ran through the family when we heard his key in the front door in the evening. A quick glance around the room to reassure us that at least here there was nothing to criticize. Whatever happened during the day at the office would soon be made clear. And it never failed. The burdens of the office were fearful. Money to pay for print-paper on flat cars, interest to be paid on machinery-notes, payrolls to be met, rent, taxes, borrowing more and more money to meet the most pressing demands. The drive for circulation, the effort to increase our advertisements, both local and national, the growth of the party and the quarrels within, all these helped to create a nervous explosive temperament.

Meanwhile, family life went on as best it could. The children were now in high school and doing well.

Occasionally very prominent guests came to visit us; perhaps the most famous of all was Keir Hardie¹⁸ of England, a man we so greatly admired. Philip Snowden, [Henry Noel] Brailsford, Norman Angell and many more. Also a Mr. Greulich, the vice-president of the Swiss Republic.¹⁹ Not only prominent folks came, but the simple poor fellow who wanted to visit us.

I remember so well, a Mexican laborer came and spent several hours with my husband. Fortunately the children had been put to bed; after our Mexican friend left, my husband came to announce that he believed the Mexican had a highly developed case of small-pox. Well—that was the man whom Mr. B. took the time out to teach.

In the meantime the Seidel administration was voted out of office. So the Socialist didn't have much of a chance. Although there were still a few Socialist members in the common council and in the legislature. However no reverses such as losing political office could discourage us. The main and important fact was that the Socialist vote increased slowly but surely.

It was during this period that we had those dinner parties; mainly to get those in high positions to really know us and not believe we had horns etc.

Our progress was slow but sure. We had a very good staff of editorial writers on the *Leader*: Ernest Untermann, A. M. Simons, Winfield R. Gaylord and others whose names do not come back to me at this moment.²⁰

Our circulation also increased as did some of the advertising accounts.

Now we just saw a bit of blue in what had been a dark and gloomy sky when the fateful year of 1914 approached.

¹⁸ Minam Finnk added here; "Idol of British Labour Party—Scotch, bearded—." Keir Hardie (1856–1915), a British labor leader, helped found the Labour Party and served as a member of Parliament (1892–1895 and 1900–1915).

¹⁹ Philip Snowden (1864–1937) served as chancellor of the exchequer in the first two British Labour Party governments (1924 and 1929–1931). Henry Noel Brailsford (1873–1958) was a liberal British author and journalist. Norman Angell (1873–1967), a British peace activist and author, won the 1933 Nobel Peace Prize. Hermann Greulich (1842–1925) was a Swiss labor leader and Social Democratic politician but never served as Switzerland's vice president.

²⁰ Ernest Untermann (1864–1956), born in Germany, worked for the *Milwaukee Leader* from 1915 to 1916 and again in the 1920s. He resigned from his editorial position in 1916 because Victor Berger objected to the pro-German slant of his writings. Alge M. Simons (1870–1950), a Socialist Party founder, editor, and theorist, worked for the *Leader* from 1913 to 1916. He supported U.S. involvement in World War I and was expelled from the party in 1917, when he joined the staff of the prowar Wisconsin Defense League, later called the Wisconsin Loyalty Legion. Winfield R. Gaylord (b. 1870), a former Congregational and Methodist minister, was a Socialist Party lecturer, a Wisconsin state senator (1909–1913), and the party's five-time candidate for Congress in Wisconsin's Fourth District. He supported U.S. involvement in World War I and was expelled from the party in 1917.