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"Our country is the world - our countrymen are mankind."

L.D. BLISS, Printer

## Pie in the Sky in the Great Nigh & Nigh



### Doggerel advice from an old Wobbly

Every Wednesday night, my wife's grandmother used to accompany her husband down to The Salvation Army's Harbor Lights rescue mission in Prince George, British Columbia. Grandpa Brown preached and Grandma Brown played the piano as the audience belted out the old hymns, some no doubt more enthusiastically than others. Almost assuredly, "The Sweet Bye and Bye" was part of her repertoire:

*There's a land that is fairer than day,  
And by faith we can see it afar;  
For the Father waits over the way  
To prepare us a dwelling place there.*

*In the sweet bye and bye,  
We shall meet on that beautiful shore;  
In the sweet bye and bye,  
We shall meet on that beautiful shore.*

Joe Hill, the legendary union organizer, had no similar fondness for The Salvation Army. In 1911, he wrote his most famous rally song "The Preacher and the Slave," and the second verse goes:

*The starvation army they play,  
They sing and they clap and they pray  
'Till they get all your coin on the drum  
Then they'll tell you when you're on the bum:*

The song became a staple of the *Little Red Songbook* of the IWW (the Industrial Workers of the World, the "Wobblies"). The song is also known by a phrase that appears in the chorus, a phrase which Hill seems to have coined, "Pie in the

Sky." It's all sung to the tune of "The Sweet Bye and Bye" and its first verse and refrain are as follows:

*Long-haired preachers come out every night,  
Try to tell you what's wrong and what's right;  
But when asked how 'bout something to eat  
They will answer with voices so sweet:*

*Chorus:*

*You will eat, bye and bye,  
In that glorious land above the sky;  
Work and pray, live on hay,  
You'll get pie in the sky when you die.*

(If you want to hear the entire song performed by a colleague of Hill's, Henry K. McClintock, YouTube has a recording: click [here](#).)

Joe Hill was no stranger to the bed and bread of rescue missions in San Francisco and the Pacific Northwest. He might even be accused of ingratitude. His complaint however against "The Starvation Army" was political. On at least one occasion in Spokane, city officials and industry bosses seem to have deployed the Salvation Army's big brass band to drown out the union's soapbox speeches on Stevens Street. The slave, of Hill's title, is a laborer who has been lured to Spokane by fraudulent job brokers. Laborers paid a fee, came to Spokane--a hub of the railroad, timber, mining, and agriculture industries--but found no jobs waiting for them. Historian William Adler writes: "The inexhaustible labor supply allowed a foreman, or 'straw boss,' to keep the hours long and the wages low, and to weed his camp of any rabble who would rouse the workers to organize. And the harsh conditions ensured rapid employee turnover, a pleasing situation for the many employers in the Inland Empire who helped themselves to a 'rake-off'--a cut--of one-third of the fees paid by new hires to employment agencies." Thus the reference to slavery. In fact, Spokane of this era

became known as “the slave market.” To these slaves, the long-haired preachers preached that they should stifle their discontent, leave off organizing, agitating, and demanding justice. They should wait patiently for the bye and bye above the sky. The slaves will eat then, have pie even. For now though, poor laborers are advised to “work and pray, live on hay.”

Of course, during this time, The Salvation Army, following the lead of their founder General William Booth, was doing more than banging on drums and tambourines; they were running rescue missions and soup kitchens. As much as any other ministry of the evangelical Church at that time, they were feeding the hungry, slaking the thirsty, clothing the naked, caring for the ill, welcoming the immigrant, and visiting the incarcerated (cf. Matthew 25:31-46, [The Liberator Today 2/16/15](#)). Yet if Joe Hill the Hymnist could make any claim to divine inspiration, he could have cross-referenced Jesus’s own declaration of his kingdom-now-come-in-Him:

*“The Spirit of the Lord is on me,  
because he has anointed me  
to proclaim good news to the poor.  
He has sent me to proclaim freedom for the prisoners  
and recovery of sight for the blind,  
to set the oppressed free,  
to proclaim the year of the Lord’s favor.”* (Luke 4:18--19)

Charity is charitable; its very root (*charis*) is grace and kindness, but charity must also extend to setting the oppressed free, and to proclaiming freedom. Just what exactly did the Salvation Army of Spokane, Washington, circa 1911, think constituted the “good news” that is proclaimed to the poor? What did Jesus think it meant in Palestine, circa 30 AD? I once heard a priest working in Latin America, circa 2015, who lamented: “When I feed the poor, they call me a saint; when I ask why they are poor, they call me a Communist.”

Joe Hill was a Wobbly, and in the last verse of his song he freely admits to not only seeing red, but being one:

*Workingmen of all countries, unite,  
Side by side we for freedom will fight;  
When the world and its wealth we have gained  
To the grafters we’ll sing this refrain:*

I first assumed that “grafters” was an insulting term, akin to the Starvation Army-- “graft” being a term for corruption--but actually in Hill’s day, grafter was slang for a worker. I’m inclined to listen to what these workingmen want to sing to me in the final chorus:

*You will eat, bye and bye,  
When you’ve learned how to cook and to fry.  
Chop some wood, ‘twill do you good,  
And you’ll eat in the sweet bye and bye.*

This sounds an awful lot like the good ol’ Protestant work ethic. Sound advice. In the end, I take two things away from my encounter with “The Preacher and the Slave”:

1. I do believe in the “Sweet Bye and Bye,” but I believe that Jesus has inaugurated his kingdom now. This is simultaneously true with the fact that Jesus will one day return to consummate his kingdom fully. And so I sing:

*In the sweet nigh and nigh,  
We have met on this beautiful shore;  
In the sweet bye and bye,  
We shall meet on that beautiful shore.*

This means that right now I commit myself to feeding the hungry something other than hay, and something more than my words about a blessed future. In the here and now, I commit to confronting the three (now four) evils that Martin Luther King--who was also accused of being a Red--fought against: racism, poverty, militarism, and (now) ecological destruction. (Cf. [The Liberator Today 2/23/15](#)).

2. Nonetheless, as such an activist (though I prefer the term lover), I feel the need to keep Hill’s chorus alive. The main difference though is that I must sing it not to the poor and the oppressed, but to myself alone as a lover. If we undertake a good deed in this lifetime--an action, and certainly any confrontation of the modern straw bosses--and expect to set down to our presumed success as if to a meal, then we will be disappointed more often than not. Instead, when people ask us why we bother, why we risk the execution (in myriad forms) that a Jesus or a Joe Hill suffered literally, all we can do is sing what we believe: namely that every good deed, any charitable act, any stand for justice is assuredly a feast, deferred but guaranteed, for the lover. Lovers will eat bye and bye. For now, you work and pray and certainly eat your share of hay, but do not lose heart: “*You’ll get pie in the sky when you die.*” That doesn’t sound as harsh when you sing it to yourself. And neither does the original hymn sound susceptible to parody when we understand that the “blessing of rest” is for grafters of Christ’s love-- my wife’s Grandma Brown among that number-- who often work for the poor and oppressed without reward:

*We shall sing on that beautiful shore  
The melodious songs of the blessed;  
And our spirits shall sorrow no more,  
Not a sigh for the blessing of rest.*

*To our bountiful Father above,  
We will offer our tribute of praise  
For the glorious gift of His love  
And the blessings that hallow our days.*

-A.O.B.