

## Chapter Five

### *The Inevitable Uprising*

APRIL 1876–AUGUST 1877

IN THE SPRING OF 1876, after Chicago's third punishing winter of depression, socialist agitators took to the streets all over the North and West sides. Every week they called workers to meetings to hear German and Czech speakers and their American spellbinder, Albert Parsons. Their activity was little more than an irritation to Chicago's men of power, who had vanquished the upstart People's Party and sent its immigrant leaders back to their neighborhoods. City government was once again in what they considered safe hands, and business activity was picking up. There was plenty of money on the streets of Chicago, and no one was paying much attention to socialist "calamity howlers."

One prominent Chicagoan felt uneasy, however. Former mayor Joseph Medill put his ear to the ground that summer and heard troubling rumbles of discontent. Back in charge of the *Tribune*, the publisher saw a city swarming with tramps and brimming with danger. As one journalist recalled a decade later, "The lumberyards, vacant buildings, sheds, railroad depots and all public places were thronged with idlers; crime of all kinds was on the increase; it was dangerous to venture out after dark; people were sandbagged, garroted or 'held up' on some of the leading streets." The Chicago police made more than 27,000 arrests in 1876, including many among what the police superintendent labeled a "dangerous class of vagrants called 'tramps' who would prefer to beg or steal than to work." However, these arrests did little to increase citizens' confidence in the police department, whose former superintendent had been jailed on corruption charges. Indeed, citizens looked upon "the average blue coat as a barnacle and nuisance" and only tolerated him because they could not figure out how to get on without him.<sup>1</sup>

In this atmosphere nervous businessmen hired private guards to pro-

tect their property and bought guns to protect themselves. The Western Gun Works offered a solution: a new lightweight, silver-plated pistol made of the best English steel with a rifled barrel. The .22-caliber weapon, with deadly accuracy and long range, could be purchased along with a month's supply of 100 cartridges for only \$3. The gun was advertised as a "TRAMPS TERROR," valuable to bankers and policemen (who bought their own firearms), but also good for household use at a time when "Tramps, Burglars and Thieves Infest[ed] Every Part of the Country."<sup>2</sup>

Despite this "tramp menace," Chicago's prosperous citizens enjoyed themselves during the summer of 1876, promenading on the lakefront, spending a day at the races or a night at one of the opera houses and flocking downtown to celebrate the nation's centennial on streets the merchants had decked with American flags. Businessmen and working-men congregated in their clubs and saloons and talked of baseball and their White Stockings team led by the incomparable Albert G. Spalding, who had been wooed away from the Boston club and was now playing and managing a team of nine players destined to win the National League pennant.<sup>3</sup>

Amid all this hoopla, Medill cautioned the prosperous readers of his *Tribune* to avoid ostentatious displays of wealth during these mean times. The publisher, who cared deeply about the quality of life in his city, loathed Irish ward heelers and saloonkeepers, gamblers and socialist rabble-rousers, but he knew "honest poverty" when he saw it. Hardworking men, unemployed through no fault of their own, deserved the respect and understanding of more fortunate Chicagoans, not their contempt. While the city enjoyed a lavish centennial celebration on July 4, Medill agonized over the future of the nation, "great in all the powers of a vast empire," but "weak and poor in social morality as compared with one hundred years ago."<sup>4</sup>

MEDILL'S FEARS WERE JUSTIFIED. Within the city's huge, largely invisible community of immigrant working people, embers of anger and frustration smoldered that summer. They flashed red-hot in one particular district on the Southwest Side, a dense settlement of pine shanties, saloons and little stores just above the South Branch of the Chicago River. This dismal-looking neighborhood called Pilsen contained a swelling population of Czechs; it was, in fact, the largest Bohemian community in America,

greater in size than that of any city in Bohemia except Prague. Thousands of former Czech peasants toiled in nearby lumberyards, where they hauled and shovelled lumber for \$1.50 a day—a meager wage when contrasted with the earnings of the Irish dockworkers, who earned twice that, or locomotive engineers, who took home four times that amount.<sup>5</sup>

The massive Bohemian migration to Chicago also swept along a few artists, intellectuals and skilled workers from Prague. Among these literate Bohemians, a large sprinkling of “free thinkers” with socialist sympathies carried with them strong antipathies to the Roman Catholic Church. Dedicated nationalists, these young Czechs revered Jan Hus, who led his people in revolt against the domination of the church and helped make Bohemia the first Protestant nation in Europe.<sup>6</sup> These immigrants also clung to their cultural, social and linguistic heritage with “a tenacity that resisted easy Americanization.” They created an array of benevolent societies based on similar institutions they had known in Bohemian cities and villages, and established Czech-language schools and publications as well as the first Czech socialist newspaper in the United States. Prokop Hudek, the most prominent of these Bohemian socialists, had come to Chicago before the Civil War, in which he fought as a Union army officer. After the war Hudek became commander of the Bohemian Sharpshooters, a local militia unit, and helped found the Workingmen’s Party of Illinois in 1874.<sup>7</sup>

Freethinkers in Pilsen included socialists like Hudek, as well as atheists, agnostics and worshipers of Thomas Paine, the rationalist, and Thomas Jefferson, the deist, in addition to devotees of Illinois’ famous freethinker Colonel Robert Ingersoll. Most were raised Protestant, but some were Catholics who did not attend mass regularly or accept the authority of the church hierarchy over parish affairs. Indeed, tension escalated in little Bohemia between the Catholic clergy and the members of free-thought societies because priests refused to wed freethinkers, baptize their children or bury their dead. Then, in 1876, a single event released the tension. When a Catholic priest denied a church burial to a Czech woman because she did not confess on her deathbed, a wave of anger swept the community, followed by an exodus from the church, as hundreds of people in Pilsen abandoned Catholicism and joined free-thought societies.<sup>8</sup>

Despite their poverty and their internal conflicts, the Czechs caused no trouble for the city’s employers or public officials until the summer of 1875, when thousands of Bohemians toiling in the sizzling lumber-

yards struck to demand a living wage. Their protest ended quickly and peacefully, seeming to be little more than a brief outburst of frustration, but the following spring came the storm. When lumberyard owners cut the wages of common laborers from \$1.50 to \$1.25 a day, the Bohemians reacted to the blow as a community.<sup>9</sup> Thousands of lumber shovers left the yards en masse. When they were replaced by unemployed Irish workers from across the river, the strikers attacked the interlopers, and street warfare raged through the Southwest Side until wagonloads of police finally arrived and drove the Czechs off the streets.<sup>10</sup>

Medill's *Tribune* devoted three days of coverage to the "serious troubles in the Bohemian lumber district," but few of its readers would have paid any attention to the riots in a depressing river district no Americans visited other than salesmen, vessel men and policemen. A reporter for the *Chicago Daily News* looked back on this time a decade later and realized that the city's leading men had blinded themselves to the anger seething in the lumberyards and alleys of Pilsen, where workingmen had suffered intolerable wage cuts and feared more to come. When these men struck, they always failed and were forced to return to work for less pay



*Chicago's lumberyard district near Pilsen*

than they were getting before they went out. "There were ten pairs of hands ready and willing to take the place of every single pair of hands that quit," the reporter noted. With their families on the edge of starvation, the workingmen were being driven to desperation.<sup>11</sup>

If city leaders seemed unconcerned about the discontent seething in Pilsen, they were quite aware of the city's burgeoning radical movement, one that seemed to "grow luxuriantly in well-prepared soil." Socialist societies flourished in many poor quarters of the city, and their meetings filled Market Street, the Haymarket and a lakeshore park. Everyone in Chicago knew that it would take only one bolt of lightning to set off a thunderstorm of protest: "Everybody knew that," recalled the journalist John Flinn. "The businessman knew it, the 'Prominent Citizen' knew it, the mayor knew it. The superintendent of police knew it." And yet they did nothing to prepare for the coming storm.<sup>12</sup>

THE SOCIALISTS WERE indeed busy cultivating their party that spring. They nominated their best English-speaking activist, Albert Parsons, to run for City Council on the North Side. He and his wife, Lucy, had found larger quarters there, on Larrabee Street, thanks to his steady work in the *Times* composition room and her earnings as a dressmaker. It was during his run for office on the North Side in the spring of 1877 that Parsons met large numbers of German socialists, including the ambitious August Spies, who had by now worked his way out of wage labor as an upholsterer.<sup>13</sup>

Spies opened his own upholstery business in a little shop and brought over from Germany his mother, sister and three brothers. They lived together in a small town house near Wicker Park, some distance out on Milwaukee Avenue in a new development where well-to-do German businessmen and professionals were building comfortable but unpretentious brick homes. Acting on his growing interest in socialism, Spies agreed to take to the hustings for the new social democratic Working-men's Party. During the campaign he frequented the scores of saloons and beer gardens along Milwaukee Avenue, talking with other German tradesmen and laborers about the political events of the day: the disputed Hayes-Tilden presidential contest, which Democrats called the "stolen election of 1876," and the compromise that gave the White House to the Republicans and ended military reconstruction in the South; the crisis in

Chicago's City Hall, where two mayors sat for a time; and the conviction of the city's top German Republican politicians in the sensational "whiskey ring" scandal.<sup>14</sup>

In this unsettled political climate, the socialists' most promising candidate was the party's eloquent American orator, Albert Parsons, who made speech after speech about the rotten state of affairs in the Republic. The cocky young Texan with a sharp tongue captivated his new German comrades, who worked like beavers for his campaign. When he polled 400 protest votes in his ward, even the North Side's Republican bosses were impressed with his political skills.<sup>15</sup>

Still, Chicago's top business and political leaders had no reason to notice a few hundred votes tallied by the socialists, because these elites were celebrating the reelection of a Republican mayor. With municipal government firmly in the control of the Yankee elites, the Citizens' Association turned to the state capital, where its leaders launched a concerted campaign to ban the workers' militia. In May, association members celebrated the first stage of militia reform, confident that under the state's new military code their own First Regiment would remain commissioned and that the German workers' militia, the Lehr und Wehr Verein, would be outlawed.<sup>16</sup> After facing four years of depression and travail, Chicago's business elites could relax and look forward to the restoration of order and the return of good times.

THEN, DURING THE HEAT of July, disturbing news ticked over the wires from the East, news with portents for the nation's railroad hub. Henry Demarest Lloyd, the *Tribune*'s brilliant young business columnist, was one of the first to notice the reports of workers blocking trains in West Virginia, strikers plundering an armory in Maryland, scores of "insurgent camp fires" surrounding freight houses in Pittsburgh.<sup>17</sup>

The uprising of 1877 began in the busy railyards of Martinsburg, West Virginia, on July 17, when engineers on the Baltimore & Ohio Railroad reacted to a wage cut by stopping trains. State militiamen tried to move a train and shooting began: a soldier and a striker fell dead. Train crews soon spread word of the confrontation all along the B&O line. The action quickly spread to Baltimore, where trainmen struck and closed Camden Yards. When militia units marched in to reopen the yards, a furious battle took place and ten people were killed by the troops.<sup>18</sup>

These spontaneous protests arose because of wage cuts imposed by

the B&O's managers, who followed a trend initiated by the most influential businessman in America, Tom Scott of the Pennsylvania Railroad. Scott's managers compounded the resentment when they ordered engineers and train crews to haul "double headers"—dangerous trains with two engines and twice as many cars. Workers in Pittsburgh refused the order and surged into the yards, paralyzing rail traffic. The governor of Pennsylvania ordered out the National Guard, but many local militiamen from Pittsburgh refused to report for duty. In response to Scott's pleas, the governor then ordered militia units from Philadelphia to the scene.

The ensuing confrontation on July 22 between the soldiers and huge crowds resulted in a bloodbath when encircled militiamen fired on the protesters. Twenty people died, including a woman and a child. The immigrant neighborhoods erupted in fury. By the time the Battle of Pittsburgh ended, enraged crowds had killed several militiamen, driven the National Guard from the city, destroyed millions of dollars of railroad property, derailed trains, dismantled roundhouses and burned Union Depot to the ground.

The news of these events shocked Chicagoans, who read that "Pittsburgh was in the hands of a mob; that the property of the railroad companies ~~was in flames, that blood had been spilled freely in the streets; that a reign of terror prevailed~~" and that "riot fever" was spreading west.<sup>19</sup> It seemed to one journalist looking back on these events that city leaders should have expected trouble in Chicago, given the palpable grievances of wage workers and aggravating protests organized by the socialists. Residents felt instinctively that the riots in the East would follow the iron rails directly to the hub of the nation's railroads, and "yet nothing was done to prepare for the impending, the inevitable uprising."<sup>20</sup>

The next day freight handlers on the Illinois Central Railroad struck and marched through other Chicago yards and shops calling others out to join them. The evening *Tribune* simply proclaimed: "It Is Here." That night the Workingmen's Party organized meetings in various halls, where workers shouted for resolutions of sympathy with the workers of Pittsburgh. Later on, runners circulated a leaflet calling for a "mass meeting" the next evening on Market Street. "Working men of Chicago!" it began: "Have you no rights?—No ambition?—No Manhood? Will you remain disunited while your masters rob you of your rights and the fruits of your labor? For the sake of our wives and children and our own self-respect, LET US WAIT NO LONGER! ORGANIZE AT ONCE!"<sup>21</sup>

The meeting on the night of July 23 was "a monster affair" with 30,000 people filling every foot of space on Market Street. Worn down by four years of depression, frustrated by one wage cut after another and enraged by the massacres of citizens in the East, Chicago workers gathered to hear news of the great uprising and to learn what it meant for them.<sup>22</sup> It was a thrilling moment for Albert Parsons, who delivered a memorable speech to the impassioned throng. George Schilling, who was there that night, marveled at his comrade's ability to capture the feelings of the workers.

Parsons told the crowd that railroad lords like Tom Scott had subverted democracy with money and reduced their own loyal employees to degrading poverty. But they could still be stopped by an aroused citizenry. "As long as we have a Republic, we have hope," he declared. Realizing that many Union army veterans stood among the assembled workmen, he invoked the name of the most prestigious body in postwar Chicago: the Grand Army of the Republic, the citizen soldiers who saved the Union. No longer honored veterans, Lincoln's soldiers were now being shot down like criminals by their own militia, and for what? For protesting yet another wage cut that meant less food for them and their hungry families.

"We are assembled here," Parsons exclaimed, "as a Grand Army of Starvation. We have come together to find the means by which the great gloom that now hangs over our Republic can be lifted," he shouted. "It rests with you to say whether we shall allow the capitalists to continue to exploit us. Will you organize?" When they cheered, he responded, "Then, enroll your names in the Grand Army of Labor." When Parsons finished, the enormous crowd chanted into the night air: "Pittsburgh, Pittsburgh, Pittsburgh!"<sup>23</sup>

On the morning of Tuesday, July 24, switchmen on the Michigan Central left their yards and marched through the city beseeching and cajoling other railroad men to join their ranks. Soon their parade swelled as gangs of rough-looking boys joined the men. By noon this small army poured through Burlington's yards and freight houses, gaining recruits in the process. Some bold railroad men even commandeered a freight train and moved it down to the Fort Wayne yards, where more switchmen left their jobs.<sup>24</sup>

Thoroughly alarmed, Mayor Monroe Heath closed the city's saloons and called upon citizens to organize armed patrols in their respective neighborhoods. When a prominent citizen offered to pay for extra police,

the mayor accepted.<sup>25</sup> Several hundred civilian special deputies were sworn in, armed with clubs and sent to stations. That afternoon fire bells rang all over the city, calling the militia to their armories, and that evening Civil War veterans met to form volunteer companies under the command of former army generals, colonels and captains. Fearing the worst in Chicago, the United States secretary of war ordered the 22nd Infantry of General Phil Sheridan's Division of the Missouri to move into Rock Island, Illinois, and stand ready. No violence erupted that day, but a rolling tide of protest had swept out of the railyards and into the factories, lumberyards and brickyards of the South Side, where the Bohemians seemed to have been waiting for another chance to protest their lot.<sup>26</sup>

Leaders of the Workingmen's Party counseled peace that day and expressed concern that roughnecks in the crowds would provoke bloodshed. The party issued a flyer proposing a coordinated national strike for the eight-hour day without a reduction in pay. The circular called for a meeting that evening so a strike committee could be assembled to lead and coordinate the walkout and preserve the peace. By the end of the day, however, Workingmen's Party activists were laying low after being driven from the streets by the police.<sup>27</sup>

ON WEDNESDAY, JULY 25, Chicagoans awakened to suffocating heat and humidity, made worse by clouds of pollution. In the early-morning haze, strikers and young men from the shantytowns appeared again in the gloomy streets, roaming throughout the city, closing workshops and battling police. When strikers gathered to hold rallies and meetings, they were attacked by patrolmen, who made no distinction between the crowds hurling stones and groups of workers assembling peacefully. That night railroad men and gangs of Irish boys from Bridgeport again converged on the Burlington yards at 16th and Halsted, where they confronted a detail of police from the Hinman Street Station. The boys began stoning the railyards and an incoming passenger train; when they continued, the patrolmen opened fire. A Burlington switchman fell dead on the spot; a score of others were wounded, including two boys who later died.<sup>28</sup>

The next day, July 26, the city was an armed camp of soldiers, police officers and armed civilians, mainly clerks and managers, who had been made special deputies. Still, the day began with more violence as a large crowd returned to Halsted Street and began cutting telegraph lines

and stoning streetcars that carried commuters to work. At the stockyards and the gasworks men forced officials to sign papers promising to raise wages. Meanwhile, other strikers patrolled the idled lumberyards, which had been abandoned by the Czech laborers, and a well-coordinated general strike spread to the North Side, closing all shops and factories as well as the tanneries and rolling mills on Goose Island. Workers who had been suffering from layoffs and wage cuts for nearly four years were suddenly aroused to mass action by the protests of the nation's railway workers.

The significance of the work stoppage was overshadowed, however, by warfare that resumed along Halsted Street. The flash point of the fighting was the viaduct where Halsted Street crossed 16th Street and the Burlington tracks. There, on the edge of Pilsen, officers confronted a huge crowd that included Bohemian lumber shovers lining the sidewalks. The blue coats attacked and drove people into the viaduct, firing their revolvers into the mass. After the officers emptied their guns, they ran for their lives.

The "battle of the viaduct" escalated when hundreds of striking butchers and meat cutters arrived from Bridgeport in a column flying the emerald and gold nationalist banner of the Fenian Brotherhood. They joined the Bohemians in a brawl with the police that raged all afternoon. Even mounted troops could not stop it. It was TERROR'S REIGN, according to the *Chicago Times*, and a sure sign of it was the presence of wild women in the crowd, "Bohemian Amazons" brandishing clubs in their "brawny arms."<sup>29</sup>

After the battle at the viaduct, the police forces drove men and boys up Halsted Street until they reached Vorwärts Turner Hall at 12th Street. Inside, several hundred members of the Harmonia Society, an association of cabinetmakers and their employers, were discussing the eight-hour-day question in German. Some of the members who were smoking cigars outside the hall shouted protests at the policemen, who wheeled toward them and chased them into the meeting hall with guns drawn.

When officers thundered into the meeting room, chaos ensued as police attacked the cabinetmakers with clubs. When the Germans defended themselves with chairs, some patrolmen opened fire. Charles Tessman, a twenty-eight-year-old union cabinetmaker, fell dead when a bullet ripped through his brain. Men clogged the stairs trying to escape the danger, and the police pounded them with clubs until they dropped in a heap at the bottom. Outside, witnesses saw a police sergeant firing his



*Police attacking cabinetmakers' meeting at Vorwärts Turner Hall, 1877*

pistol at bystanders, while his men beat cabinetmakers as they fled the hall in terror. Sent out to suppress rioters, the police became rioters themselves. Their attack on the Harmonia Society at Vorwärts Turner Hall aroused all of Chicago's Germania and provoked some immigrant workers, like the upholsterer August Spies, to join the armed organization of workingmen, the Lehr und Wehr Verein.<sup>30</sup>

That afternoon spirits rose in downtown Chicago as anxious residents saw sunburned regulars of the United States infantry marching down Madison Street with bayonets fixed, fresh from the Dakotas, where they had been fighting the Sioux. That evening, a forbidding moonless night, the shooting stopped and a few brave people ventured out of their homes to shop; some even rode out to the Exposition Hall on the lakefront for an evening concert of Wagnerian music. The program included selections like "Siegfried's Death" from *Götterdämmerung*, which matched the concertgoers' mood at the end of a violent day.

On Friday, July 27, an eerie calm enveloped the city. The great uprising had been put down. In working-class neighborhoods like Pilsen and Bridgeport, people gathered on street corners, in saloons and in meeting halls to ponder what had happened, while some made plans to bury their

loved ones. Within a few days the body count had been tallied: 30 men and boys had died, most of them from the Irish and Bohemian wards around Halsted Street.<sup>31</sup> The police and the 5,000 specials they depurated suffered no casualties.

As the immigrants mourned their dead and the police girded for future confrontations, businessmen measured the costs of the uprising in dollars and cents: at least \$6 million lost in shipping and manufacturing alone, not to mention the cost of property damage and extra pay for the special deputies. But these expenses paled at what would now be spent to make the city secure. Chicago's richest man, Marshall Field, would donate thousands to purchase arms and would insist the money be invested in constructing fortresslike armories. The Citizens' Association provided the police department with four 12-pound cannons with caissons, one ten-barrel Gatling gun, 296 Springfield breech-loading rifles and 60,000 rounds of ammunition. Police Superintendent Michael Hickey, designated a colonel by the mayor, infused the police force with a martial spirit, ordering patrolmen to drill regularly for street fighting and to receive instruction in handling their pistols and their new arsenal of heavy weapons.<sup>32</sup>

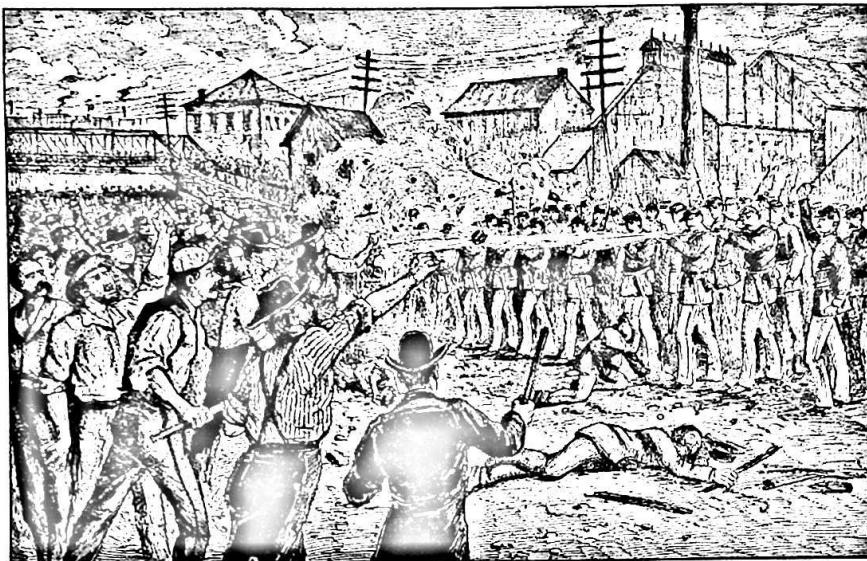
What could not be counted or measured, but only felt, was the hate and mistrust that now gripped Chicagoans of different social classes. The uprising of 1877 and its suppression left toxic fumes of animosity that would poison social relations in the city for years to come.<sup>33</sup> No one expressed these hard feelings more strongly than the editor of the *Tribune*, who drew some tough lessons from the episode for the police. On the first day of the strike patrolmen fired blank cartridges to no effect. On the second day they shot above the heads of the strikers and a few of the rioters were hurt, but on the third day of the riots the police began firing directly at the protesters, which "had a most admirable effect on the mobs." Had the police been ordered to fire low on the first day, the *Tribune* concluded, "fewer would have been hurt than were, and the city would have been saved the disgrace of three days' rule by the commune."<sup>34</sup>

WHILE THE MILLIONAIRE MERCHANT Marshall Field concluded that only a militarized city would be safe from another uprising, and while the editors of the *Tribune* decided the police now needed a shoot-to-kill strategy to suppress rioting, labor activists drew their own lesson from the con-

flict; it was not, however, the one conservatives feared, the one reached by the European anarchists who believed that state repression left workers with only one choice: to commit acts of violence that would spark an armed revolution. In the United States, socialists and labor reformers began a search for American solutions to the dilemma they faced, solutions that would allow hardworking citizens to peacefully capture the republic from the money lords who ruled it and make it a democracy by and for the people.<sup>35</sup> These radicals were encouraged not only by the militancy of the strikers but by the behavior of hundreds of city dwellers who joined the workers in a series of community uprisings that expressed long-standing grievances against the railroads and their destructive invasion of urban space.<sup>36</sup>

All those who spoke for laboring people agreed on the challenge before them. The actions of Tom Scott and the other railroad chiefs confirmed the widespread popular belief that these men had risen above the law and descended below any accepted standard of Christian morality. They could discharge employees without cause, withhold their pay without notice and cut their wages without compunction. Scott and the railroad barons forced their workers to make a choice: submit to industrial serfdom and sacrifice their manhood or take concerted action and become outlaws. This, wrote one labor reformer, was no way to treat hard-working citizens of the world's only democracy.<sup>37</sup>

Workingmen and their leaders had feared monopolists like Tom Scott for decades, but in 1877 they encountered a new threat: the massive use of the militia and the U.S. Army to suppress civil protest. For the first time, citizen strikers and their allies confronted a hostile array of forces deployed by their own cherished government. As if to exacerbate workers' fears and to reassure frightened property owners, the popular *Harper's Weekly* featured a frightful illustration of militiamen pouring rifle fire into a group of Chicago workers armed with sticks and stones. The scene, depicting the battle at the Halsted Street viaduct, was a vivid but misleading one; the police, not the militia, had fired all the fatal bullets in that assault. Nonetheless, National Guard units had killed scores of strikers and other citizens in Maryland and Pennsylvania, and these shootings were more than enough evidence to confirm the popular view that the railroad kings could influence governors, intimidate mayors, exploit the militia and in effect subvert the republican system of government. After the smoke had cleared in 1877, George McNeill, a leading labor intellectual, expressed a new fear, a fear that the "spirit of hate that



*The Battle of the Viaduct at Halsted and 16th streets, 1877, in which National Guard troops are inaccurately depicted as firing on a crowd*

now centers upon the great monopolies will soon extend to the government that acts as their protector.”<sup>38</sup>

And yet the insurgency of 1877 offered a surprisingly affirmative message to labor leaders. Samuel Gompers of the Cigar Makers recalled that the strikes alerted discouraged union men to the enormous latent power of the wage-earning class. Made desperate by their accumulated miseries, the railway workers rebelled, but, lacking strong organizations, they were doomed to defeat. Still, their rebellion in the “name of American manhood” and in defense of their rights as citizens inspired labor activists like Gompers, who wrote later that the trainmen sounded “a tocsin” with “a ringing message of hope for us all.”<sup>39</sup>

No one heard the alarm bell in July more clearly than Albert Parsons. Indeed, on the second day after the strike began in Chicago, he experienced a sequence of unforgettable events that shook him to the core.<sup>40</sup> That Tuesday morning after the printer said goodbye to his wife, Lucy, in their North Side flat, he took the Clark Street horsecar downtown, feeling excited about the great enthusiasm his speech had generated the night before. His mood changed quickly when he entered the *Times* building and learned that he had been removed from the rolls of working compositors. He had been fired because of his rousing speech. Feeling dejected,

Parsons walked a few blocks to the offices of his party's German newspaper, *Arbeiter-Zeitung*, hoping to find some consolation from his fellow union printers. As he was telling his story, two men entered the building and informed Parsons that Mayor Heath wanted to see him at City Hall. He readily joined them, thinking that perhaps city leaders might want to consult him about finding some way to calm the workers before another hideous riot exploded.

As they walked away, Parsons realized that his escorts were policemen in plain clothes, and soon he learned they were taking him not to the mayor's office, but into the bowels of an old wooden building called the Rookery, which had served as a temporary police headquarters since the fire. Assuming he was being arrested, Parsons was amazed when he was ushered into a large room filled with well-dressed businessmen he recognized as Board of Trade members. He was put in a chair and lectured by Police Superintendent Michael Hickey on the great trouble he had brought upon the city of Chicago. Hickey wanted to know: Did Parsons think he could come up from Texas and incite working people to insurrection without arousing suspicion?

Parsons tried to respond, but his voice sounded pathetically thin. He had a cold and was hoarse from speaking outdoors the night before. He was also weak from lack of sleep and shaken by his firing that morning. Yet he summoned his strength and explained that he had not called for an insurrection at the rally, but had addressed the causes of the uprising and outlined the program of the Workingmen's Party. Then, more boldly, he proclaimed that a strike would not have erupted "if working men had voted for their own party and elected good men to make good laws." This remark infuriated some businessmen in the room, who burst into jeers and shouts. A few screamed, "Hang him, lynch him!"

Parsons's ordeal lasted for two hours. When it ended, Hickey told him to leave the city because his life was in danger, that he could be assassinated at any moment on the street. The superintendent then opened a spring latch door, shoved Parsons into a dark hallway and whispered in his ear, "Take warning."

Lost in a dark labyrinth of the Rookery's empty corridors, Parsons walked aimlessly, not knowing where to go or what to do. He felt "absolutely alone, without a friend in the world." This, Parsons wrote later, was his first experience with "the powers that be" in Chicago, one that made him conscious that they were powerful enough to give or take a person's life.

Parsons wandered the nearly deserted streets that night and sensed "a hushed and expectant feeling" pervading the city. He picked up an evening newspaper reporting that the strikers had become more violent, that the Commune was about to rise and that he, Albert Parsons, was the ones who caused it all. Frightened now, he decided once again to look for support from his union brothers. He called upon the printers at the *Chicago Tribune* to see if he could get a night's work and, as he later wrote, to be near men of his own craft, whom he instinctively felt would sympathize with him. He entered the composing room and began talking with union typographers on the night shift about the great strike, but was soon seized from behind by two men who pushed him out of the room and down the stairs, ignoring the angry shouts from his fellow compositors. As the men dragged him down the stairs, Parsons protested at being treated like a dog, but he soon fell silent when one of them put a pistol to his head and threatened to blow his brains out.

In less than twenty-four hours Albert Parsons had been fired, removed from his trade, blacklisted, threatened with lynching, had a gun held to his head and been warned to leave the city. But he was not absolutely alone in the world; he had many friends in Chicago. Furthermore, he knew how to live with the burden of being a marked man. For five dangerous years he had defied the Ku Klux Klan and risked his life to defend the rights of black freedmen in Texas. He had held his ground then, and he would do so again. The Board of Trade was not going to drive Albert Parsons out of Chicago. Within a month after his ordeal, he would be back on the streets, campaigning for the Workingmen's Party.