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# **Debs Goes to Prison**

**Karsner David**

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DEBS GOES TO  
PRISON

BY  
DAVID KARSNER

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W.A.M.

#### AN ACKNOWLEDGMENT

The story of Eugene Victor Debs going to prison from his home in Terre Haute, Indiana, which is told in the succeeding pages, is substantially the same as it appeared daily in the *New York Call* from April 13th, 1919, to April 19th, 1919. I was privileged to accompany Debs on the whole journey only by reason of my connection with the editorial staff of *The Call*. For the purposes of this book I have rearranged the whole story, made it consecutive, and placed the incidents in their proper order as they occurred. Perhaps a total of 2,000 words have been added to the narrative since it appeared in *The Call*. Otherwise, every word of this story was written in the flash and current of moments en route from Terre Haute to Cleveland, to Moundsville, and during the two succeeding days in Wheeling, West Virginia. There was no time to attempt to polish the story then. The main endeavor, both of myself and of *The Call*, was to get the story before thousands of readers. I have had no desire since its appearance in *The Call* to rewrite it, and the only excuse for its appearance now in this form is to give the narrative a national reading to the end that the workers might bestir themselves in the face of this and other colossal social tragedies.

DAVID KARSNER.

*New York City,*  
*May 1, 1919.*



## SALIENT POINTS IN DEBS' CAREER

- 1855—Born, Terre Haute, Ind. (November 5).  
1870—Graduated with credit from the Old Seminary School in Terre Haute. Began working in shop for Terre Haute & Indianapolis Railroad Company. Promoted to locomotive fireman.  
1874—Clerk, grocery store at Terre Haute, Hulman & Cox.  
1870 to 1878—Joined Brotherhood of Locomotive Firemen. Organized Brotherhood of Railroad Brakemen. Helped organize Switchmen's Mutual Aid Association and Brotherhood of Railway Car Men.  
1878—Associate editor of the Firemen's Magazine.  
1879—Elected City Clerk.  
1880—Grand secretary, Firemen's Magazine (July).  
1893—Editor and manager of Firemen's Magazine (February). Organized, at Chicago, the American Railway Union (June).  
1894—Great Northern strike organized (April 16). Pullman strike. Jail.  
1895—Advocates co-operative commonwealth (November).  
1896—A Democrat. Votes for and supports Bryan.  
1897—Publicly announces conversion to Socialism.  
1898—Organized Social Democratic party of America.  
1900—Candidate for President on Socialist Democratic ticket; 87,814 votes.  
1904—Again candidate; 402,321 votes.  
1905—Advocates industrial unionism.  
1908—Candidate for President on Socialist ticket; 421,000 votes.  
1912—Candidate for President on Socialist ticket; 900,000 votes.  
1916—Candidate for Congress from the 5th Congress district of Indiana.  
1918—September, indicted, tried and convicted under the Espionage act for utterances made in a speech at Canton, Ohio, on June 16.  
1919—March 13, Supreme Court upholds conviction, evading the issue of the constitutionality of the Espionage act, and Debs on April 13 begins the serving of a 10-year sentence in the state penitentiary at Moundsville, W. Va.





## HOW DEBS PILLORIED THE SUPREME COURT WHEN HIS CONVICTION WAS CONFIRMED

"The decision is perfectly consistent with the character of the Supreme Court as a ruling class tribunal. It could not have been otherwise. So far as I am personally concerned, the decision is of small consequence. But there is an issue at stake of vital interest to the American people. It involves the fundamental right of free speech. Without this, our boasted freedom is a delusion and a farce.

"The Supreme Court has dodged the issue. It has held the Espionage Law valid without affirming its constitutionality. The real issue before the court was the constitutionality of the act. This issue the Supreme Court did not dare to decide. What the Supreme Court did decide is, that the constitution is another 'scrap of paper.'

"Great issues are not decided by courts, but by the people. I have no concern in what the coterie of begowned corporation lawyers in Washington may decide in my case. The court of final resort is the people, and that court will be heard from in due time.

"The decision just rendered places the United States where old Russia under the Czar left off. It is good for, at least, a million Bolshevist recruits in this country.

"I stand by every word of the Canton speech. The Supreme Court to the contrary, notwithstanding, the Espionage Law is perfectly infamous, and a disgrace as well, to the capitalist despotism at whose behest it was enacted.

"Sixty years ago the Supreme Court affirmed the validity of the Fugitive Slave law to save chattel slavery. Five years later that infamous institution was swept from the land in a torrent of blood. I despise the Espionage Law with every drop of blood in my veins, and I defy the Supreme Court and all its powers of capitalism to do their worst.

"All hail to the workers of America and the world!

"The day of emancipation is dawning."



## IN TERRE HAUTE

### CHAPTER ONE

Unguarded and unescorted, save for the company of a few friends, Eugene Victor Debs, four times candidate for President of the United States on the Socialist party ticket, on Saturday, April 12, 1919, left his home in Terre Haute, Indiana, on the ten o'clock train over the Big Four Route for Cleveland, Ohio, to surrender himself to the federal authorities who would take him to prison for ten years for having exercised his constitutional right of free speech, thereby violating the Espionage Law, a war time statute, enacted June 15th, 1917.

Debs had made a speech under the auspices of the Ohio State Socialist convention at Canton, Ohio, June 16th, 1918, in which he reiterated the Socialist Party's opposition to the war, denounced the profiteers, paid tribute to the Bolsheviki of Russia, and all the struggling forces in the world that were making for the emancipation of the workers. For this speech Debs was tried on September 9, 1918, in the Federal Court at Cleveland before Judge D. C. Westenhaver, and was found guilty by a jury on September 12th. On Friday, September 14th, 1918, he was sentenced to serve ten years at the Moundsville, West Virginia, State Penitentiary, which has a

contract with the government to receive 250 federal prisoners a year.

It was about 11 o'clock Saturday morning, April 12, 1919, when the telephone in Debs' home rang. Debs himself answered. It was District Attorney Wertz on the other end of the line. "Yes," said Gene. "Good morning. What can I do for you?"

Wertz told Debs that he would not send a deputy marshal to Terre Haute to escort him to Cleveland, but that Debs should leave at the earliest possible moment of his own accord.

"Thank you, Mr. Wertz; I'll be right along. Good-by."

From that moment until 9:30 o'clock in the evening Debs was busying himself at home packing up a few of his things for the journey to the penitentiary. Mrs. Kate Debs, his wife, helped him with this and that, reminding him to write that little note before he went away, and "Don't you think you should attend to this?"

All day long telegrams and special delivery letters poured into his home in 8th street. They were from his friends in all corners of the continent.

"What a wonderful demonstration of love," said 'Gene as he opened another telegram that arrived while he and I were seated in his parlor. He signed for the message, patted the little messenger boy on the head and called a loving "Good-by" as the astonished youngster tripped down the porch and off the wooden steps.

It was just before 2 o'clock that I arrived in Terre Haute. There were crowds at the station, and I thought surely that Debs must have just gotten away. A news-