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October 26, 2003

FIRST CHAPTER

# 'And the Dead Shall Rise'

By STEVE ONEY

April 26, 1913

That morning, thirteen-year-old Mary Phagan, after eating a breakfast of cabbage and wheat biscuits, devoted herself to getting dressed. First, she donned stockings and garters, then a store-bought violet dress and gunmetal-gray pumps. Two bows in her auburn hair and a blue straw hat adorned with dried red flowers atop her head completed the outfit. Mary wanted to look nice, for Saturday, April 26, 1913, marked a special occasion-Confederate Memorial Day. Around 11:45, with a silvery mesh purse and an umbrella (the skies were misting rain) in her hands, she boarded the English Avenue trolley headed to downtown Atlanta, where the annual parade would soon begin.

Well turned out or not, Mary would have been one of the prettiest girls in any crowd. Eyes blue as cornflowers, cheeks high-boned and rosy, smile beguiling as honeysuckle, figure busty (later, everyone acknowledged that "she was exceedingly well-developed for her age"), she had undoubtedly already tortured many a boy. There was simply something about her-a tilt to the chin, a dare in the gaze-that projected those flirtatious wiles that Southern girls often employ to devastating effect.

As her correspondence with her country cousin and friend Myrtle Barmore illustrates, Mary could be a handful. On December 30, 1912, she wrote:

Well, Myrt I don't know what to think of you for not coming [to lunch on Christmas day]. I think that was a poor excuse. When I come up there I'll give you what you need. Me and Ollie [her sister] & Mama & Charles

& Joshua [her brothers] went out at Uncle Jack Thurs. and taken dinner. "But gee" how we did eat. Had fresh "hog." I don't know when I can get

to come. Mama is getting where she will not let me go anywhere. "But

gee" I am going to save my money and go West. Gee I will have some time . . . When I come there, we will have some time "kid."

Yet despite her beauty and airy hopes (many inspired by the movies, which she attended frequently and followed in such magazines as Photo Lore), Mary Phagan was unlikely to escape drab and impoverished environs. She lived in Atlanta's Bellwood section, no one's vision of a beautiful wood. Northwest of downtown, the neighborhood was bordered on one side by the Exposition Cotton Mill

and its adjacent factory-owned village, Happy Hollow, on another by the clanging sheds of the Atlantic Steel Mill and on a third by an expanse of crookedly carpentered "nigger shacks." In homage to its bare-knuckled ward politics, the community was called "the bloody fifth."

Like most Bellwood people, Mary was a hillbilly. Her father, a farmer named William Joshua Phagan, had died of the measles in 1899 a few months before her birth in Alabama. Around 1900, Mary's widowed mother, Fannie, carried the children back to the family's ancestral home near Marietta in Cobb County, twenty miles northwest of Atlanta.

At one time, Phagan had been a fine name around Marietta. During the 1890s, the patriarch-William Jackson-had stood in the traces behind his own mules on his own land snug against the Blue Ridge mountains that rim Cobb County. But the old man had accompanied his son to Alabama, and after the boy's death, there he remained. When Fannie Phagan and her brood returned to Georgia, they moved in with her people, the Bentons, in the Sardis section, a rural area several miles outside Marietta.

In 1907, the family relocated again-this time to the dingy mill town of Eagan, a tiny place encysted in the southern Atlanta suburb of East Point. There, the widow Phagan opened a boardinghouse. The clan didn't move to Georgia's capital until 1912, when Fannie remarried. Her new husband, John W. Coleman, toiled intermittently at the Exposition mill but was presently employed by the municipal sanitation department.

That, down deep, Mary Phagan cleaved tight to her struggling family can be seen in the lines of a poem entitled "My Pa," which she'd recently copied from Successful Farmer magazine and presented to her stepfather:

My pa ain't no millyunaire, but, Gee! He's offul smart!

He ain't no carpenter, but he can fix a feller's cart . . .

My pa ain't president becoz, he says, he never run,

But he could do as well as any president has done . . .

My pa ain't rich, but that's becoz he never tried to be;

He ain't no 'lectrician, but one day he fixed the

telephone for me . . .

My pa knows everything, I guess, an' you bet I don't care

'Coz he ain't president or rich as any millyunaire!

Whenever things go wrong, my pa can make 'em right, you see;

An' if he ain't rich or president, my pa's good enough fer me!

Like many girls her age, Mary had quit school to help out at home. In 1909, at the age of ten, she'd

hired on part-time at a textile mill. In 1911, she'd taken a steady job at a paper manufacturer. In 1912, she'd moved to her current position at the National Pencil Factory, where she was paid ten cents an hour to run an apparatus called a knurling machine that inserted rubber erasers into the metal tips of nearly finished pencils.

Tough as times had been for the Phagans, the family was no worse off than most Atlantans in the early twentieth century. During these years, refugees from Georgia's hardscrabble tenant farms poured into the city, driven from the flatlands by the fluctuating price of cotton, from Appalachia by a rocky soil unkind to seed and plow. Figures compiled by the United States Census Bureau show that between 1900 and 1910 Atlanta nearly doubled in size. Many of the new arrivals toiled in the mills, chief among them the Fulton Bag and Cotton Mill, whose factory-owned village, Cabbagetown, spread out in row after identical clapboard row east of downtown. For these thousands of souls, the average workweek lasted 66 hours, and pay fell 37 percent below that earned by northern workers. In a city whose cost of living was exceeded among other American cities only by Boston's, a wage of ten or fifteen cents an hour did not go far. In 1911, Atlanta's Journal of Labor reported four thousand requests for assistance; in 1912, five thousand.

There were other problems as well. Over half of Atlanta's school children-both Negro and white-suffered from anemia, enlarged glands, heart disease or malnutrition. Death rates were abnormally high for citizens of all ages. (In 1905, 2,414 of every 100,000 Atlantans died; the national average was 1,637.) And there wasn't much indication that things would get better soon. More than 50,000 Atlantans lived with no plumbing. To service its 10,800 "earth closets," as the newspapers called them, the city provided just fifteen horse-drawn honey wagons. Moreover, the capital's physicians possessed no means of isolating and then combating infections, as Georgia was among only a handful of states yet to set up a department of vital statistics.

Nonetheless, Atlanta's crackers-as country folk come to town were known generally-and its lintheads-as millworkers were known specifically-did not spend their time in despair. On April 1, they'd staged their own musicale-the first annual Atlanta Fiddler's Convention-at the Municipal Auditorium. The master of ceremonies was Colonel Max Poole, a one-armed Confederate veteran from Oxford, Georgia, who played by cradling a bow under his stub, while the featured performer was Fiddlin' John Carson, a Cabbagetown resident and future RCA recording star who toted his 1714 Stradivarius reproduction in a feed sack. The Scotch-Irish reels the fiddlers favored-"Trail of the Lonesome Pine," "Annie Laurie," "Hop Light, Ladies"-could sure enough move a crowd. By closing night of the three-day festival, Momma and 'em were clogging in the aisles.

The spirit of Atlanta's crackers was independent to the point of contrariness, and a little bit hellish. No matter how bad things got, folks weren't likely to complain unless, of course, their dignity was threatened, which was exactly what the city's industrialists, by relying increasingly on child laborers, were now doing.

Rarely, if ever, had Atlantans been as conscious of the difficult lives to which so many of their children had been reduced as on April 26, 1913. thinks georgia treats little toilers worst, declared the headline in the afternoon's Atlanta Georgian over an article pointing out that "Georgia is the only state that allows children ten years old to labor eleven hours a day in the mills and factories, and is worse in that

respect than North Carolina, where the age limit is twelve years." Even more damning, the piece detailed how just a few months earlier a group of Georgia factory owners had banded together to kill a bill in the state senate that would have raised the legal working age to fourteen.

The Georgian's story was but the latest in a series of attacks by the newspaper on exploitative factory owners. William Randolph Hearst, its publisher since he purchased the sheet a year before, had pursued the issue relentlessly. His campaign, while intended to win readers, was not entirely disingenuous. The press baron's wife, Millicent, was obsessed with the "little girl in the mill town [who] is not receiving a living wage." And his chief

correspondent and ponderous moral conscience, Arthur Brisbane, was a fanatic on the subject. Earlier in the spring, Brisbane had filed a long, probably apocryphal piece about a Georgia mill owner so depraved that he refused to release his employees during daylight to attend the burial of one of their tiny coworkers. Entitled "A Funeral by Lamplight," the story was set in "a squalid room at midnight," where "a coffin rests on trestles" and children in "all stages of emaciation" moaned and sobbed.

Hearst was not alone in calling attention to the plight of Atlanta's underage workforce. Elsewhere in the city on this spring Saturday, others were speaking out just as forcefully. During a Confederate Memorial Day sermon delivered at the downtown Oakland Cemetery, Dr. Charles Lee, a first cousin of General Robert E. Lee, stood on a platform at the base of the Sleeping Lion, the Confederacy's Tomb of the Unknown, and told a rain-soaked audience of a thousand:

Our principles were not defeated when we surrendered at Appomattox. The wars are not over. There are other enemies, bitter ones, that must be fought—emigration, labor, the double standard of child labor and white slavery. Our fathers would face these and defeat them had they the youth and vitality that was once theirs, and it behooves us to do it for their sake, if nothing else.

Meantime across town at the Wesley Chapel, the Southern Sociological Conference was convening. Among the convocation's goals was the formulation of tactics to put an end to "the awful curse" of child labor. Attended by some one thousand educators, pastors and social workers (many of them Negro), the affair was chaired by Alexander J. McKelway, regional secretary of the National Child Labor Committee, an organization best known as the sponsor of Lewis Hine the photographer, whose portraits of begrimed little coal miners and millworkers had alerted America to the Dickensian dilemma of its urchin wage earners.

The three-day Atlanta assembly was not devoted solely to the topic of child labor. Also on the agenda were such subjects as "Race Problems" and "Organized Charities." In fact, the convention was something of a referendum on the myriad problems affecting the city's poor. Yet in the end, the fiercest stir was created by the remarks of Owen R. Lovejoy, general secretary of the National Child Labor Committee, who promised the multitude: "'Thy Kingdom come' means the coming of the day when child labor will be done away with, when every little tot shall have its quota of sunlight and happiness."

How this vision could be realized was a subject of great debate. Ideas involving everything from labor unions to legislation, and ranging from the utopian to the revolutionary, vied for attention. At the radical end of the spectrum could be heard alarming notions inspired by the fact that many of Atlanta's

factories, among them the Fulton Bag and Cotton Mill, were Jewish-owned. At first such talk was discouraged. In fact, when Dr. Edwin M. Poteat, the president of the Baptist-endowed Furman University in Greenville, South Carolina, began to denounce Jews for their purported crimes against workers, Alexander McKelway cut him off in mid-diatribes. But Poteat literally walked his text over to the Baptist Tabernacle. There, after telling a packed house that "in America today, the immediate conflict is between the bosses and the people," he lit into the faith that he believed had produced a disproportionate share of the oppressors. "The Jewish race lost its divine commission when it rejected Jesus as the Saviour," he thundered. "Up to that time, it had been the leader in religion. Every great idea contributed to the thought of the world came from the Jews. In fact, the Jews were chosen of God, but they rejected the stone that is the keystone of the arch." Then, for good measure, Poteat flayed the Catholics: "The Catholic church has no place in America. The priest is 2,000 years out of date. The nation cannot and will not submit to the encroachments of the despot, even in religion."

Considering the many outcries on the topic of child labor, one Georgian was conspicuously silent on April 26, 1913. In his heyday, Thomas E. Watson had been the state's most relentless advocate for the workingman, leading a quarter-century-long campaign against the forces of rapacious capitalism. To "The Sage of McDuffie County," factories were the "soulless" locus of modern evil, dynamos studded by "a hundred dull red eyes, indicative of the flames within which were consuming the men, women, and children, the atrocious sacrifice to an insatiable god!"

Rail-thin, redheaded and possessed of galvanizing rhetorical skill, Watson was equal parts stem-winding stump speaker, defense lawyer, poet, popular historian, sentimental defender of the Old South and seer of an unlikely New South. Early on, he had divined that the strangest but truest allies in the region were poor white farmers and Negroes, and with these groups—each victimized by Dixie's elites—as his constituency, he had ascended to the United States Congress.

But since the mid-1890s, when leaders of a rival political faction stuffed the ballot box to deny him reelection to the House of Representatives from Georgia's predominantly rural tenth district, Watson had been in decline. His troubles had increased in 1896 after the Populist Party's national ticket—William Jennings Bryan for president, Watson for vice president—went down to defeat. By the early 1900s, the self-proclaimed friend of "Old Man Peepul" had abandoned his black supporters and become, after his own overwrought fashion, a muckraker, pillorying "the Standard Oil crowd" and various sleek plutocrats and plunderers in the pages of Tom Watson's Magazine.

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