

# **THE DRIVER**

BY

**GARET GARRETT**

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# CHAPTER I

## PHANTASMA

### i

It is Easter Sunday in the village of Massillon, Stark County, Ohio, fifty miles south by east from Cleveland. Fourth year of the soft Money Plague; 1894.

Time, about 10 o'clock.

The sky is low and brooding, with an untimely thought of snow. Church bells are ringing. They sound remote and disapproving. Almost nobody is mindful of their call. The soul may miss its feast; the eye of wonder shall not be cheated. The Comic God has published a decree. Here once more the sad biped, solemn, ludicrous and romantic, shall mount the gilded ass. It is a spectacle that will not wait. For weeks in all the newspapers of the country the fact has been advertised in a spirit of waggery. At this hour and from this place the Army of the Commonweal of Christ will set forth on foot in quest of the Economic Millennium.

The village is agog with people congregating to witness the fantasied event. In the main street natives and strangers mingle their feet gregariously. There are spasmodic sounds of laughter, retort, argument and ribaldry; and continually the shrill cries of youth in a frenzy of expectation. Buggies, two-wheelers, open carts and spring wagons line both sides of the street. The horses are blanketed. A damp, chill wind is blowing. Vendors from Chicago, lewd-looking men, working a hundred feet apart, are yelling: "Git

a Christ army button here for a nickel!” There is a composite smell of ham sandwiches, peanuts, oranges and cigars.

A shout rises at the far end of the street. The crowd that has been so thick there, filling the whole space, bursts open. A band begins playing “Onward Christian Soldiers,” and the spectacle is present.

First comes a negro bearing the American flag.

Next, on a white horse, is a thick, close-bearded, self-regarding man with powerful, darting eyes and an air of fantastic vanity. He wears a buckskin coat with fringed sleeves; the breast is covered with gaudy medals. On his head is a large white sombrero. Around his neck swings a string of amber beads. He is cheered and rallied as he passes and bows continually.

Behind him walks a trumpeter, saluted as Windy Oliver. After the trumpeter walks the Astrologer, bearing the wand of his mysterious office. Then a band of seven pieces, very willing and enterprising.

And now, by the timbre and volume of the cheering, you recognize the Commander. He rides. Sitting so still and distant beside a negro driver in a buggy drawn by two mares he is disappointing to the eye. There is nothing obviously heroic about him. He wears spectacles. Above a thin, down-growing mustache the face is that of a man of ideas and action; the lower features, especially the mouth, denote a shy, secretive, sentimental, credulous man of mystical preoccupations. None of these qualities is more than commonplace. The type is well known to inland communities—the man who believes in perpetual motion, in the perfectibility of human nature, in miraculous interventions of deity, and makes a small living shrewdly. He might be the inventor of a washing

machine. He is in fact the owner of a sandstone quarry and a breeder of horses.

But mark you, the ego may achieve grandeur in any habitat. It is not in the least particular. This inconsiderable man, ludicrously setting forth on Easter Sunday in command of a modern crusade, has one startling obsession. He believes that with the bandit-looking person on the white horse he *shares the reincarnation of Christ*.

In a buggy following, with what thoughts we shall never know, rides the wife of this half of Christ reincarnated.

Next comes another negro bearing the banner of the Commonwealth of Christ. In the center of it is a painted Christ head. The lettering, divided above and below the head, reads:

PEACE ON EARTH: GOOD WILL TO MEN

B U T

DEATH TO INTEREST BEARING BONDS

Then comes the Army of the Commonwealers. They are counted derisively. The Commander said there would be an hundred thousand, or at least ten thousand, or, at the start, not fewer than one thousand. Well, the number is one hundred scant. They are a weird lot—a grim, one-eyed miner from Ottumwa; a jockey from Lexington, a fanatical preacher of the raw gospel from Detroit, a heavy steel mill worker from Youngstown, a sinewy young farmer from near Sandusky, a Swede laborer from everywhere, one doctor, one lawyer, clerks, actors, paper hangers, blind ends, what-nots and tramps. There is not a fat man among them, nor one above



forty. They march in order, looking straight ahead. A man in a blue overcoat and white trousers, riding a horse with a red saddle, moves up and down the line eyeing it importantly.

At the end of this strange procession are two wagons. One is called the commissariat wagon; it is loaded with a circus tent, some bales of hay for the horses and a few bags of provisions—hardly enough for one day. The other is a covered wagon painted blue. The sides are decorated with geometrical figures of incomprehensible meaning. This vehicle of mystery belongs to the precious being on the white horse ahead. He created it; inside are sliding panoramas which he has painted.

As these wagons pass, people on foot and in buggies and wagons to the number of more than a thousand fall into line and follow. Their curiosity is not yet sated. They cannot abandon the spectacle.

Among these followers are forty-three correspondents, representing newspapers from New York to San Francisco; four Western Union telegraph operators, and two linemen. The route to Jerusalem is uncertain. Something may happen on the open road, miles from a telegraph office. Hence the linemen, anywhere to climb a pole and tap the wires, and special operators to dispatch the news emergently! The reporters are to whoop the story up and be in on the crucifixion.

Could anything less seeming of reality be invented by the imagination? It has the pattern of a dream. Yet it is history.

This is how two fatuous spirits, charlatans maybe, visionaries certainly,—Carl Browne on the white horse and Jacob S. Coxey in the buggy,—led the Army of the Commonwealth of Christ (Coxey's Army for short), out of Massillon, past the blacksmith shop, past

the sandstone quarry, past the little house where the woman was who waved her apron with one hand and wiped her eyes with the other, out upon the easting highway, toward Washington, with the Easter chimes behind them.

And for what purpose? Merely this: to demand from Congress a law by which unlimited prosperity and human happiness might be established on earth.

## ii

I, who am telling it, was one of the forty-three correspondents.

The road was ankle deep with that unguent kind of mud which lies on top of frost. Snow began to fall. Curiosity waned in the rear. The followers began to slough off, shouting words of encouragement as they turned back. Browne on his white horse, Coxey in his buggy and the man in the red saddle were immersed in vanity. But the marchers were extremely miserable. None of them was properly shod or dressed for it. They were untrained, unused to distance walking, and after a few miles a number of them began to limp on wet, blistered feet. The band played a great deal and the men sang, sometimes all together, sometimes in separate groups. The going was such that no sort of marching order could be maintained.

At one o'clock there was a stop for coffee and dry bread, served out of the commissariat wagon.

It was understood that the Army would live on the country as it went along, trusting to charity and providence; but the shrewdness of the Commander had foreseen that the art of begging would have

to be learned, and that in any case it could not begin successfully on the first few miles out.

The Commonwealers watched us curiously as we tapped the telegraph wires by the roadside to send off flash bulletins of progress. Both Browne and Coxey exhorted their followers to courage, challenged the weaklings to drop out, and the march was resumed with only two desertions. These were made good by accessions further on.

At four o'clock a halt was called near a village, the inhabitants of which made friendly gestures and brought forth bacons and hams which were gratefully added to the boiled potatoes and bread served out of the wagon. The tent was raised. Browne, astride his bespattered white horse, made a speech.

He was the more aggressive half of the reincarnation. Indeed, it came presently to be the opinion of the correspondents that he was the activating principle of the whole infatuation, and held the other in a spell. He was full of sound and rhetoric and moved himself to ecstasy with sonorous sayings. His talk was a wild compound of Scripture, Theosophy and Populism.

The Kingdom of Heaven on earth was at hand, he said. The conditions foretold in Revelations were fulfilled. The seven heads of the beast were the seven conspiracies against the money of the people. The ten horns of the beast were the ten monopolies nourished in Wall Street—the Sugar Trust, the Oil Trust, and so on.

“We are fast undermining the structure of monopoly in the hearts of the people,” he declaimed, reaching his peroration. “Like Cyrus of old we are fast tunnelling under the boodlers’ Euphrates and will soon be able to march under the walls of the second Babylon,

and its mysteries, too. The infernal, blood-sucking bank system will be overthrown, for the handwriting is on the wall.”

The listeners, though they growled at the mention of Wall Street and cheered the fall of Babylon, received his interpretation of their rôle and errand with an uneasy, bothered air. Voices asked for Coxey. He spoke to them in a gentle manner, praised them for their courage and fortitude, emphasized the hardships yet to be endured, proposed a hymn to be sung, and then dismissed them to rest with some practical suggestions touching their physical comfort. Rest and comfort, under the circumstances, were terms full of irony, but nobody seemed to think of that. They cheered him heartily.

### iii

In the village railroad station was a telegraph office, where our special operators cut in their instruments and received our copy. Among us we filed more than 40,000 words of narrative, incident, pathos and ridicule.

News is stranger than fiction not in what it tells but in how it happens. In a room twenty feet square, lighted by one kerosene lamp, we wrote our copy on our knees, against the wall, on each other's backs, standing up and lying down, matching notes and exchanging information as we went along.

“What's the name of this town?”

“Louisville.”

“Kentucky?”

“Kentucky, no. Hear him!—Ohio.”

“Didn’t know there was a Louisville, Ohio.”

“Write it anyway. It isn’t the first time you’ve written what you don’t know.”

Then silence, save for the clicking of the telegraph instruments and the cracking of copy paper.

“Who was the man in the red saddle?”

No answer.

Again: “Who was the guy in the red saddle?”

No answer.

Another voice, in the same difficulty, roaring: “Who in hell was the man in the red saddle?”

Now everybody for a minute stops writing. Nobody knows.

Voice: “Call him Smith: the man of mystery: the great unknown.”

We did. The man in the red saddle was Smith the Great Unknown to the end of his silly part.

There was a small hotel in the place, with only two bedrooms available, and these had been selfishly seized by three magazine writers who had no telegraph stuff to file. They had retired. The rest of us took possession of a fairly large lounging room and settled ourselves for the night on cots, pallets and chairs.

The lean-minded man from Cleveland, reclining on the hotel desk with his feet on the cigar case, started an untimely discussion.

“We’ve sent off a lot of guff about this thing,” he said, “and not a word of what it means. Not a man here has tried to tell what it means.”

“Leave that to the editorial writers and go to sleep,” said St. Louis from under his hat. He had made his bed in the swivel chair.

“It means something ... it means something,” said Cleveland.

“Well, what?” asked a petulant voice.

“It’s a joke,” said St. Louis, not moving. “People have to laugh,” he added. “Go to sleep or be still.”

Another voice: “What does it mean, you Cleveland? I saw you reading Plutarch. What does it mean?”

“These people are asking questions to which there is no answer,” said the Cleveland man, lifting on his elbow. “Why is anybody hungry in a land of surplus food? Why are able bodied men out of work while we have such roads as the one we traveled to-day? I don’t know. I’m asking.”

A man whom we had hardly noticed before, anæmic, shrill and hairy, sat up on his mattress and thrust a naked bent arm out of his blanket.

“I’ll tell you what it means,” he shouted. “Wall Street has sucked the country dry. People may perish, but Wall Street will have its profit and interest. Labor may starve, but the banking power will keep money sound. Money in itself is nothing,—merely a convenience, a token by means of which useful things are exchanged. Is that so? Not at all. Money no longer exists for the use of people. We exist for the sake of money. There is plenty

everywhere, but people cannot buy because they are unemployed and have no money. Coxey says, 'Create the money. Make it abundant. Then people may work and be prosperous.' Well, why not? Wall Street says if you make money abundant you will ruin the country. Hell! The country is already ruined. We laugh. Yet what we have seen to-day is the beginning of revolution. As people have freed themselves from other tyrannies, so they will free themselves from this money tyranny."

He stopped, out of breath and choking, and a singular hubbub arose. Everyone awake had been listening attentively, and now, just as they lay, not an arm or a leg stirring, all those huddled, inert forms became vocal, shouting:

"Populist! Right-o! Put him out! Douse him!"

Accents of weariness, irritation and raillery were inseparably mingled. Yet the overtone was not unfriendly. We could be light and cruel with the Army of the Commonweal of Christ, because its whole figure was ludicrous, but there was no love among us for Wall Street or the money power. Those names stood for ideas of things which were commonly feared and hated and blamed for all the economic distress of the time.

Above, the plutocratic magazine writers were pounding on the floor. The hairy agitator, breathing heavily, melted back into his mattress, heavy in his conscience, no doubt, for having written a very sarcastic piece about that Easter Day event. We saw it afterward in his Chicago paper. The fat reporter from Cincinnati began to snore.

For a long time I lay awake, thinking.

What were we doing here? Reporting the news. News of what? One hundred inconsequent men dreaming in the mud,—was that news? No, not intrinsically. As a manifestation of the frustrate human spirit it might serve as material for the reflective fictionist, or text for some Olympian humorist, but why was it news to be written hot and dispatched by telegraph?

In their acts of faith, folly, wisdom and curiosity men are moved by ideas. Perhaps, therefore, the discrepancy between the unimportance of this incongruous Easter Day spectacle itself and the interest we bestowed upon it was explained by what it signified—that is, by the motivating idea. This thought I examined carefully.

Two years before this, Jacob S. Coxey, horse breeder, quarry owner, crank, whom no one had heard of until then, proposed to cure the economic disease then afflicting the country by the simple expedient of hiring all the unemployed on public works. Congress should raise half a billion dollars from non-interest bearing bonds and spend the money on national roads. This plan received some publicity as a freak idea; nobody had been really serious about it. What then happens?

One Carl Browne, theosophist, demagogue and noise-breaker, seeks out this money crank at Massillon and together they incubate the thought of calling upon the people to take the plan in the form of a petition and walk with it to Congress. The thing is Russian,—“a petition in boots,” a prayer to the government carried great distances by peasants on foot. The newspapers print it as a piece of light news. Then everybody begins to talk about it, and the response is amazing. People laugh openly and are secretly serious.



A day is set for the march to begin, a form of organization is announced and Coxey Army contingents begin to appear spontaneously all over the country. This also is news, to be treated in the same light spirit, and no doubt it is much exaggerated for sportive reasons. As the day approaches little groups of men, calling themselves units of the Christ Army of the Commonweal, set out from Missouri, Illinois, Pennsylvania, Kansas, Michigan, from anywhere east of the Missouri River, footing it to Massillon to merge their numbers. Then it rains. For three weeks there is nothing but rain, and the flesh fails. That is why there is but a scant one hundred to make the start. Coxey believes the bemired and tardy units will survive and catch up. He still hopes to have tens of thousands with him when he reaches Washington.

But all of this vibration is unmistakably emotional. That is a fact to be accounted for. When did it become possible to emotionalize the human animal with a financial idea?—specifically, a plan to convert non-interest bearing bonds into an unlimited amount of legal tender money? Never. The money theory is merely the ostensible aspect, the outwardness of the matter. Something else is signified. What is it?

I come back to what the Cleveland man said. Why are people hungry in a land of surplus food? Why is labor idle? Labor applied to materials is the source of all wealth. There is no lack of materials. The desire for wealth is without limit. Why are men unemployed instead of acting on their unfinished environment to improve it?

And now, though I had thought my way around a circle, I began to glimpse some understanding of what was taking place in a manner nominally so preposterous. People had tormented themselves with

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