

# NEVER CALL ME A LADY

## By Rusty Harding

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# NEVER CALL ME A LADY

*A Ten Minute Dramatic Monologue*

**By Rusty Harding**

**SYNOPSIS:** Mary Harris "Mother" Jones recounts her life as a pioneering labor activist. She was instrumental in improving the working conditions for children, women, steel workers, and coal miners throughout the early 20<sup>th</sup> century. She would ultimately become one of the principal founders of the Industrial Workers of the World, and would work tirelessly for the labor movement until her death at 93.

## CAST OF CHARACTERS

*(1 female)*

MOTHER JONES (f)..... 84; Based upon the legendary Mary Harris "Mother" Jones.

**SETTING:** A single bench in the middle of a bare stage, simulating a train station.

**COSTUMES:** The character should wear period 1920's clothing and aging makeup.

## PROPS

- Small Suitcase, 1920's era
- Pocket Watch, 1920's era

## DEDICATION

This play is dedicated to Elaine Erback, a dear friend and a terrific actress,  
for whom it was originally written.

**AT RISE:** MARY “MOTHER JONES” HARRIS, enters the stage. She slowly approaches the bench, then smiles at an unseen woman “sitting” on the bench.

**MOTHER JONES:** (To unseen woman.) Hello, sweetie. Would you mind terribly if I were to sit here beside you for a moment? My train doesn't leave for a few minutes, and I'm afraid I'm not as young as I used to be. Those trains rattle these old bones something fierce. (Sits, sighs wearily.) Ah, that's better. Always does a body good to rest a bit, although God knows there's precious little time to rest these days. Every year it seems to get harder. Here I am... (Beat, thinking.) Wait, how old am I? What year is this, 1921? That would make me 84. My, my, much as it pains me to admit, I'm getting to be a tired old lady. (Beat, genuinely horrified.) Good Lord, did I just say that? Did I really use such terrible language? A lady is the last thing on earth I want to be. (Beat, laughs.)

Sweetie, a *lady* is someone who has accepted the male perspective of silence and submission. She's let men convince her she doesn't know how to think for herself. A woman, all women, need to realize that there is no limit to what they could accomplish. God Almighty created women. (Bitterly.) Men like Rockefeller and his gang of thieves created ladies. In fact, when I was in jail, I once asked another prisoner why he was there, and he said he had stolen a pair of shoes. I told him he'd set his sights too low. If he'd stolen a railroad, he'd be a senator. (Beat.) Hmm? Oh, yes, I was in jail. Three times, in fact. Or was it four? I'm so old I'm beginning to lose count. (Beat.) What for? Oh, well, let me think. (Muses.) Once for creating a public nuisance, once, no, *twice* for trespassing, and once for sedition. Yes, that's right, sedition. (Beat, laughing.) I'm sorry, sweetie, I see I've shocked you. I suppose you don't know who I am? I'm Mary Harris Jones, although most people know me as Mother Jones.

*(Beat, grinning.)* Oh, so you have heard of me? Nothing good, I'll wager. *(Beat.)* How's that? It's all right, you can tell me. I've been called every name known to creation, and quite a few that aren't. After eighty four years, nothing bothers me now. *(Beat, musing.)* Agitator? Oh, yes, I'm very familiar with that one. But I don't like that name. Oh, no, doesn't suit me at all. I prefer to think of myself as a hell-raiser. Much more appropriate. *(Beat.)* What? Well, of course I'm proud of it. Why wouldn't I be? Anyone who fights injustice should always be proud of it. That's what I do: fight injustice. Whenever and wherever I find it. And God knows there's more than enough of it around. That's why I'm traveling today; why I'm always traveling. In fact, my address is like my shoes, *(Lifts her feet.)* it travels with me. *(Beat.)* Why do I do it? Well, someone has to. Someone has to take up for the workers and the common laborer.

*(Beat.)* Would I be mistaken in assuming you're a wife and mother, sweetie? *(Beat, quickly.)* Oh, there's nothing wrong with that; nothing at all. God's great vocation for the majority of women is to raise children. You should be proud of your family. *(Wistful.)* I had a family once, a long time ago. A husband and four beautiful children. But they all died. Yellow fever. *(Beat, dismissive.)* No, no, don't be sorry, it was a long time ago. A very long time ago. I was devastated when it happened, of course, but I learned very quickly I had to adapt and move on. I was a schoolteacher then, living in Memphis, but I decided to move to Chicago and start a dressmaking business. *(Winking.)* I preferred sewing to bossing little children, you see. I did quite well, too, until Mrs. O'Leary's cow kicked over that lantern and burned me out of business. *(Chuckling.)* Along with most of the city. In fact, it was while I was trying to rebuild that I got into the hell-raising business. I went to a linen mill to negotiate a contract for material, and do you know what I found? Most of their workers were children! Children, some as young as six years old, working from 5:30 in the morning until seven at night! Children going home to sleep on a straw pallet until time to resume work the next day. And the conditions they worked in were absolutely appalling.

I remember one little girl, she couldn't have been more than ten or twelve; her head was covered by a dirty shawl. She had no hair. It had been ripped right out of her head by a looming machine. And do you think she was compensated? Not by a damn sight. And not a single tear had been shed by her management. (*Angrily.*) Don't ever let anyone tell you there are no more slaves in America. I saw children sold for two dollars a week to the manufacturers. And if a child was injured, like that little girl, or even died, which too many did, they were simply replaced by another. (*Shaking head bitterly.*) It was too much to bear. Simply too much. Those children needed a voice, and by God, it was going to be mine.

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