Voltairine de Cleyre

The Making of an Anarchist

"Here was one guard, and here was the other at this end; I was here opposite the gate. You know those problems in geometry of the hare and the hounds — they never run straight, but always in a curve, so, see? And the guard was no smarter than the dogs; if he had run straight he would have caught me."

It was Peter Kropotkin telling of his escape from the Petro-Paulovsky fortress. Three crumbs on the table marked the relative position of the outwitted guards and the fugitive prisoner; the speaker had broken them from the bread on which he was lunching and dropped them on the table with an amused grin. The suggested triangle had been the starting-point of the life-long exile of the greatest man, save Tolstoy alone, that Russia has produced: from that moment began the many foreign wanderings and the taking of the simple, love-given title "Comrade," for which he had abandoned the "Prince," which he despises.

We were three together in the plain little home of a London workingman — Will Wess, a one-time shoemaker — Kropotkin, and I. We had our "tea" in homely English fashion, with thin slices of buttered bread; and we talked of things nearest our hearts, which, whenever two or three Anarchists are gathered together, means present evidences of the growth of liberty and what our comrades are doing in all lands. And as what they do and say often leads them into prisons, the talk had naturally fallen upon Kropotkin's experience and his daring escape, for which the Russian government is chagrined unto this day

Presently the old man glanced at the time and jumped briskly to his feat: "I am late. Good-by, Voltairine; good-by, Will. Is this the way to the kitchen? I must say good-by to Mrs. Turner and Lizzie." And out to the kitchen he went, unwilling, late though he was, to leave without a hand-clasp to those who had so much as washed a dish for him. Such is Kropotkin, a man whose personality is felt more than any other in the Anarchist movement — at once the gentlest, the most kindly, and the most invincible of men. Communist as well as Anarchist, his very heart-beats are rhythmic with the great common pulse of work and life.

Communist am not I, though my father was, and his father before him during the stirring times of '48, which is probably the remote reason for my opposition to things as they are: at bottom convictions are mostly temperamental. And if I sought to explain myself on other grounds, I should be a bewildering error in logic; for by early influences and education I should have been a nun, and spent my life glorifying Authority in its most concentrated form, as some of my schoolmates are doing at this hour within the mission houses of the Order of the Holy Names of Jesus and Mary. But the old ancestral spirit of rebellion asserted itself while I was yet fourteen, a schoolgirl at the Convent of Our Lady of Lake Huron, at Sarnis, Ontario. How I pity myself now, when I remember it, poor lonesome little soul, battling solitary in the murk of religious superstition, unable to believe and yet in hourly fear of damnation, hot, savage, and eternal, if I do not instantly

confess and profess! How well I recall the bitter energy with which I repelled my teacher's enjoinder, when I told her that I did not wish to apologise for an adjudged fault, as I could not see that I had been wrong, and would not feel my words. "It is not necessary," said she, "that we should feel what we say, but it is always necessary that we obey our superiors." "I will not lie." I answered hotly, and at the same time trembled lest my disobedience had finally consigned me to torment!

I struggled my way out at last, and was a freethinker when I left the institution, three years later, though I had never seen a book or heard a word to help me in my loneliness. It had been like the Valley of the Shadow of Death, and there are white scars on my soul yet, where Ignorance and Superstition burnt me with their hell-fire in those stifling days. Am I blasphemous? It is their word, not mine. Beside that battle of my young days all others have been easy, for whatever was without, within my own Will was supreme. It has owed no allegiance, and never shall; it has moved steadily in one direction, the knowledge and the assertion of its own liberty, with all the responsibility falling thereon.

This, I am sure, is the ultimate reason for my acceptance of Anarchism, though the specific occasion which ripened tendencies to definition was the affair of 1886–87, when five innocent men were hanged in Chicago for the act of one guilty who still remains unknown. Till then I believed in the essential justice of the American law and trial by jury. After that I never could. The infamy of that trial has passed into history, and the question it awakened as to the possibility of justice under law has passed into clamorous crying across the world. With this question fighting for a hearing at a time when, young and ardent, all questions were pressing with a force which later life would in vain hear again, I chanced to hear a Paine Memorial Convention in an out-of-the-way corner of the earth among the mountains and the snow-drifts of Pennsylvania. I was a freethought lecturer at the time, and had spoken in the afternoon on the lifework of Paine; in the evening I sat in the audience to hear Clarence Darrow deliver an address on Socialism. It was my first introduction to any plan for bettering the condition of the working-classes which furnished some explanation of the course of economic development, I ran to it as one who has been turning about in darkness runs to the light. I smile now at how quickly I adopted the label "Socialist" and how quickly I cast it aside. Let no one follow my example; but I was young. Six weeks later I was punished for my rashness, when I attempted to argue for my faith with a little Russian Jew. named Mozersky, at a debating club in Pittsburgh. He was an Anarchist, and a bit of a Socrates. He questioned me into all kinds of holes, from which I extricated myself most awkwardly, only to flounder into others he had smilingly dug while I was getting out of the first ones. The necessity of a better foundation became apparent: hence began a course of study in the principles of sociology

and of modern Socialism and Anarchism as presented in their regular journals. It was Benjamin Tucker's *Liberty*, the exponent of Individualist Anarchism, which finally convinced me that "Liberty is not the Daughter but the Mother of Order." And though I no longer hold the particular economic gospel advocated by Tucker, the doctrine of Anarchism itself, as then conceived, has but broadened, deepened, and intensified itself with years.

To those unfamiliar with the movement, the various terms are confusing. Anarchism is, in truth, a sort of Protestantism, whose adherents are a unit in the great essential belief that all forms of external authority must disappear to be replaced by self-control only, but variously divided in our conception of the form of future society. Individualism supposes private property to be the cornerstone of personal freedom; asserts that such property should consist in the absolute possession of one's own product and of such share of the natural heritage of all as one may actually use. Communist-Anarchism, on the other hand, declares that such property is both unrealisable and undesirable; that the common possession and use of all the natural sources and means of social production can alone guarantee the individual against a recurrence of inequality and its attendants, government and slavery. My personal conviction is that both forms of society, as well as many intermediations, would, in the absence of government, be tried in various localities, according to the instincts and material condition of the people, but that well founded objections may be offered to both. Liberty and experiment alone can determine the best forms of society. Therefore I no longer label myself otherwise than as "Anarchist" simply.

I would not, however, have the world think that I am an "Anarchist by trade." Outsiders have some very curious notions about us, one of them being that Anarchists never work. On the contrary, Anarchists are nearly always poor, and it is only, the rich who live without work. Not only this, but it is our belief that every healthy human being will, by the laws of his own activity choose to work, though certainly not as now, for at present there is little opportunity for one to find his true vocation. Thus I, who in freedom would have selected otherwise, am a teacher of language. Some twelve years since, being in Philadelphia and without employment, I accepted the proposition of a small group of Russian Jewish factory workers to form an evening class in the common English branches. I know well enough that behind the desire to help me to make a living lay the wish that I might thus take part in the propaganda of our common cause. But the incidental became once more the principal, and a teacher of working men and women I have remained from that day. In those twelve years that I have lived and loved and worked with foreign Jews I have taught over a thousand, and found them as a rule, the brightest, the most persistent and sacrificing students, and in youth dreamers of social ideals. While the "intelligent American" has

been cursing him as the "ignorant foreigner," while the short-sighted working man has been making life for the "sheeny" as intolerable as possible, silent and patient the despised man has worked his way against it all. I have myself seen such genuine heroism in the cause of education practised by girls and boys, and even by men and women with families, as would pass the limits of belief to the ordinary. Cold, starvation, self-isolation, all endured for years in order to obtain the means for study; and, worse than all, exhaustion of body even to emaciation — this is common. Yet in the midst of all this, so fervent is the imagination of the young that most of them find time besides to visit the various clubs and societies where radical thought is discussed, and sooner or later ally themselves either with the Socialist Sections, the Liberal Leagues, the Single Tax Clubs, or the Anarchist Groups. The greatest Socialist daily in America is the Jewish *Vorwaerts*, and the most active and competent practical workers are Jews. So they are among the Anarchists. I am no propagandist at all costs, or I would leave the story here; but the truth compels me to add that as the years pass and the gradual filtration and absorption of successful professionals, the golden mist of enthusiasm vanishes, and the old teacher must turn for comradeship to the new youth, who still press forward with burning eyes, seeing what is lost forever to those whom common success has satisfied and stupefied. It brings tears sometimes, but as Kropotkin says, "Let them go; we have had the best of them." After all, who are the really old?

Those who wear out in faith and energy, and take to easy chairs and soft living; not Kropotkin, with his sixty years upon him, who has bright eyes and the eager interest of a little child; not fiery John Most, "the old warhorse of the revolution," unbroken after his ten years of imprisonment in Europe and America; not grey-haired Louise Michel, with the aurora of the morning still shining in her keen look which peers from behind the barred memories of New Caledonia ; not Dyer D. Lum, who still smiles in his grave, I think; nor Tucker, nor Turner, nor Theresa Clairmunt, nor Jean Grave — not these. I have met them all, and felt the springing life pulsating through heart and hand, joyous, ardent, leaping into action. Not such are the old, but your young heart that goes bankrupt in social hope, dry-rotting in this stale and purposeless society. Would you always be young? Then be an Anarchist, and live with the faith of hope, though you be old. I doubt if any other hope has the power to keep the fire alight as I saw it in 1897, when we met the Spanish exiles released from the fortress of Montjuich. Comparatively few persons in America ever knew the story of that torture, though we distributed fifty thousand copies of the letters smuggled from the prison. and some few newspapers did reprint them. They were the letters of men incarcerated on mere suspicion for the crime of an unknown person, and subjected to tortures the bare mention of which makes one shudder. Their nails were torn out, their heads

compressed in metal caps, the most sensitive portions of the body twisted between guitar strings, their flesh burned with red hot irons; they had been fed on salt codfish after days of starvation, and refused water; Juan One, a boy nineteen years old, had gone mad; another had confessed to something he had never done and knew nothing of. This is no horrible imagination. I who write have myself shaken some of those scarred hands. Indiscriminately, four hundred people of all sorts of beliefs — Republicans, trade unionists, Socialists, Free Masons, as well as Anarchists — had been cast into dungeons and tortured in the infamous "zero." Is it a wonder that most of them came out Anarchists? There were twenty-eight in the first lot that we met at Euston Station that August afternoon, homeless wanderers in the whirlpool of London, released without trial after months of imprisonment, and ordered to leave Spain in forty-eight hours! They had left it, singing their prison songs; and still across their dark and sorrowful eyes one could see the eternal Maytime bloom. They drifted away to South America chiefly, where four or five new Anarchist papers have since arisen, and several colonising experiments along Anarchist lines are being tried. So tyranny defeats itself, and the exile becomes the seed-sower of the revolution.

And not only to the heretofore unaroused does he bring awakening, but the entire character of the world movement is modified by this circulation of the comrades of all nations among themselves. Originally the American movement, the native creation which arose with Josiah Warren in 1829. was purely individualist; the student of economy will easily understand the material and historical cause for such development. But within the last twenty years the communist idea has made great progress owing primarily to that concentration in capitalist production which has driven the American workingmen to grasp at the idea of solidarity, and, secondly, the expulsion of active communist propagandists from Europe. Again, another change has come within the last ten years. Til then the application of the idea was chiefly narrowed to industrial matters, and the economic schools mutually denounced each other; today a large and genial tolerance is growing. The young generation recognises the immense sweep of the idea through all the realms of art, science, literature, education, sex relations, and personal morality, as well as social economy, and welcomes the accession to the ranks of those who struggle to realise the free life, no matter in what field. For this is what Anarchism finally means, the whole unchaining of life after two thousand years of Christian asceticism and hypocrisy.

Apart from the question of ideals, there is the question of method. "How do you propose to get all this?" is the question most frequently asked us. The same modification has taken place here. Formerly there were "Quakers" and "Revolutionists"; so there are still. But while they neither thought well of the other, now both have learned that each has his own use in the great play of world

forces. No man is in himself a unit, and in every soul Jove still makes war on Christ, Nevertheless, the spirit of Peace grows; and while it would be idle to say that Anarchists in general believe that any of the great industrial problems will be solved without the use of force it would be equally idle to suppose that they consider force itself a desirable thing, or that it furnishes a final solution to any problem, From peaceful experiment alone can come final solution, and that the advocates of force know and believe as well as the Tolstoyans. Only they think that the present tyrannies provoke resistance. The spread of Tolstoy's "War and Peace" and "The Slavery of Our Times," and the growth of numerous Tolstoy clubs having for their purpose the dissemination of the literature of non-resistance, is an evidence that many receive the idea that it is easier to conquer war with peace. I am one of these. I can see no end of retaliation unless someone ceases to retaliate. But let no one mistake this for servile submission or meek abnegation; my right shall he asserted no matter at what cost to me, and none shall trench upon it without my protest.

Good-natured satirists often remark that "the best way to cure an Anarchist is to give him a fortune." Substituting "corrupt" for "cure," I would subscribe to this; and believing myself to be no better than the rest of men, I earnestly hope that as so far it has been my lot to work, and work bard, and for no fortune, so I may continue to the end; for let me keep the intensity of my soul, with all the limitations of my material conditions, rather than become the spineless and idealless creation of material needs. My reward is that I live with the young; I keep step with my comrades; I shall die in the harness with my face to the east — the East and the Light.

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