

Bars and Shadows

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Title: Bars and Shadows

Author: Ralph Chaplin

Release Date: July, 2004 [EBook #6136] [Yes, we are more than one year ahead of schedule] [This file was first posted on November 18, 2002]

Edition: 10

Language: English

Character set encoding: ASCII

***** START OF THE PROJECT GUTENBERG EBOOK BARS AND**

SHADOWS ***

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BARS AND SHADOWS

THE PRISON POEMS OF RALPH CHAPLIN

With an introduction By Scott Nearing

1922

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INTRODUCTION

I.

Ralph Chaplin is serving a twenty year sentence in the Federal Penitentiary, not as a punishment for any act of violence against person or property, but solely for the expression of his opinions.

Chaplin, together with a number of fellow prisoners who were sentenced at the same time, was accused of taking part in a conspiracy with intent to obstruct the prosecution of the war. To be sure the Government did not produce a single witness to show that the war had been obstructed by their activities; but it was argued that the agitation which they had carried on by means of speeches, articles, pamphlets, meetings and organizing campaigns, would quite naturally hamper the country in its war work. On the face of their indictments these men were accused of interfering with the conduct of the war; in reality they were sent to jail because they held and expressed certain beliefs.

As a member of the Industrial Workers of the World, Ralph Chaplin did his part to make the organization a success. He wrote songs and poems; he made speeches: he edited the official paper, "Solidarity". He looked about him; saw poverty, wretchedness and suffering among the workers; contrasted it with the luxury of those who owned the land and the machinery of production; studied the problem of distribution; and decided that it was possible, through the organization of the producers, to establish a more scientific, juster, more humane system of society. All this he felt, intensely. With him and his fellow-workers the task of freeing humanity from economic bondage took on the aspect of a faith, a religion. They held their meetings; wrote their literature; made their speeches and sang their songs with zealous devotion. They had seen a vision; they had heard a call to duty; they were giving their lives to a cause—the emancipation of the human race.

When the war broke out in Europe, with millions of working-men flinging death and misery at one another, men like Chaplin, the world over, regarded it as the last straw. Was it not bad enough that these exploited creatures should be used as factory-fodder? Must they be cannon-fodder too? Why should they fight to increase the economic power of German traders? of British manufacturers? The

war was a capitalist war between capitalist nations. What interest had the workers in these nations? in their winnings or in their losses? So ran the argument.

The I. W. W. was not primarily an anti-war organization. In theory it had abandoned political activity to devote itself exclusively to agitation and organization on the field of industry. Practically its funds and its energies were expended upon industrial struggles. Long before the war, the I. W. W. had made itself known and feared for its conduct of strikes, its free speech fights, and its ability to put the sore spots of American industrial life on the front page of the daily press and to keep them there until the people had become aroused to the wrongs that were being perpetrated. It was in this domain of industry that the I. W. W. was functioning, and it was among the business interests that the determination had been reached to rid the country of the organization at all costs.

Had the chief offense of the I. W. W. consisted in its expressed opposition to the war, it would not have been singled out for attack. Many of the peace societies that flourished prior to 1917 were more outspoken and more consistent in their opposition to war than were the leaders of the I. W. W. None of these societies, however, had acquired reputation for championing the cause of industrial under dogs, and for demanding a complete change in the form of American economic life. Consequently, in the prosecution, in the sentences, in the commutations and in the pardons, the anti-war pacifists were treated very leniently, while the revolutionary I. W. W. members were singled out for the most ferocious legal and extra-legal attack.

Technically, Ralph Chaplin and his comrades had conspired to obstruct the war. Actually, they had lined themselves up solidly against the present economic order, of which the World War was only one phase. This was their real crime.

II.

Ralph Chaplin was guilty of the most serious social offense that a man can commit. While living in an old and shattered social order, he had championed a new order of society and had expounded a new culture. Socrates and Jesus, for like offenses, lost their lives. Thousands of their followers, guilty of no greater crime than that of denouncing vested wrong and expounding new truths, have

suffered in the dungeon, on the scaffold and at the stake.

Not because he and his fellows conspired to obstruct the war, but because they denounced the present order of economic society and taught the inauguration of a better one, are they still held in prison more than three years after the signing of the armistice; after the proclamation of peace and the resumption of trade with all of the enemy countries; after the repeal or the lapse of the Espionage Act and the other war-time laws under which they were convicted; and after German agents and German spies, caught red-handed in their attempts to interfere with the prosecution of the war, have won their freedom through presidential pardon.

The most dangerous men in the United States, during the years 1917 and 1918, were not those who were taking pay to do the will of the German or the Austrian Governments, but those who were trying to convince the American working people that they should throw aside a system of economic parasitism and economic exploitation, should take possession of the machinery of production and should secure for themselves the product of their own toil. In the eyes of the masters of American life, such men are still dangerous, and that is the reason that they are kept in prison.

III.

The culture of any age consists of the feelings, habits, customs, activities, thoughts, ambitions and dreams of a people. It is a composite picture of their homes, their work, their arts, their pleasures and the other channels of their life-expression.

The culture of each age has two aspects. On the one hand there is the established or accepted culture of those who dominate and control,—the culture of the leisure or ruling class. This culture is respected, admired, applauded, and sometimes even worshipped by those who benefit from it most directly. Civilization—even life itself seems bound up with its continuance. When the advocates of the established culture cry “Long live the King!” they are really shouting approval of royalty, aristocracy, landlordism, vassalage, exploitation and of all the other attributes of divine right. The world as it is becomes in their minds, synonymous with the world as it should be. For them the old culture is the best culture.

On the other hand there is the new culture, comprising the hopes, beliefs, ideas and ideals of those who feel that the present is but a transition-stage, leading from the past into the future—a future that they see radiant with the best that is in man, developing soundly against the bounties that are supplied by the hand of nature. These forward looking ones, impatient with the mistakes and injustices of to-day, preach wisdom and justice for the morrow. So imperfect does the present seem to them, and so obvious are the possibilities of the future, that they look forward confidently to the overthrow of the old social forms, and the establishment, in their places, of a new society, the embryo of which is already germinating within the old social shell.

The old culture relies on tradition, custom, and the normal conservatism of the masses of mankind. The new culture relies on concepts of justice, truth, liberty, love, brotherhood. Eighteenth century, Feudal France was filled with the prophecies of a form of society that would supplant Feudalism. Nineteenth century Russia, in the grip of a capitalist bureaucracy, proved to be the centre for the revolutions of the early twentieth century. The new culture, growing at first under the shadow of the old, gradually assumes larger and larger proportions until it takes all of the sunlight for itself, throwing the old culture into the shadow of oblivion.

Each ruling class knows these facts,—knows that the old must give place to the new; knows that the living, ruling culture of to-day will be the history of the day after tomorrow, yet because of the vested interests which they rely upon for their power, and because they are satisfied to have the deluge come after them, they oppose each manifestation of the new culture and strain every nerve to make the temporary organization of the world permanent. The more vigorously the new culture thrives, the more eagerly do the representatives of the old order strive to destroy it.

IV.

During three eventful centuries, the part of North America that is now the United States has witnessed two fierce culture-survival struggles. In the first of these struggles—that between the American Indians and the whites, the culture of Western Europe supplanted the culture of primitive America. In the second struggle—that between the slave holders of the South and the rising business

interests of the North, the slave oligarchy was swept from power, and in its place there was established the new financial imperialism that dominates the public life of the nation at the present time. Despite the extreme youth of the capitalist system in the United States, there are already many signs that those who profit by it must be prepared to defend it at no distant date. The Russian Revolution of 1917 sounded the loudest note of warning, but even before that occurred, the industrial capitalists had entered upon a struggle which they believed to be of the greatest importance to their future.

During the twenty years that elapsed between the Homestead and Pullman strikes and the beginning of the world war, the pages of American industrial history are crowded with stories of the labor conflict—on an ever vaster and vaster scale, between nationally organized employers, using the power of the police, the courts and, where necessary, the army; and the nationally organized workers, backed by some show of public sentiment, and armed with the strength of numbers. Although the bulk of the workers was still unorganized, and although those who were organized thought and acted within the lines of their crafts, considering themselves as railway trainmen or as carpenters first, and as workers afterward, there was not wanting a new spirit—sometimes called the spirit of industrial unionism—emphasizing labor solidarity and speaking most loudly through the propaganda, first of the Socialist Labor Party and later of the I. W. W.

The old culture was joining battle with the new. “America is the land of opportunity. It was good enough for my father: it is good enough for me” was the slogan of the capitalists. “The world for the workers,” answered the vanguard of the exploited masses.

The advocate of a labor state is as unpopular in a capitalist society as the abolitionist was in the Carolinas before the Civil War. He sees a vision that the stalwarts of the existing order do not care to see; he speaks a language that they cannot comprehend; he represents an interest that is as hateful to them as it is alien to their privileges.

V.

At the outset, while the old order is still relatively strong, and the new relatively

weak, the spokesmen of the old order can afford to ignore the champions of the new. But as the established order grows more senile and the new order more vigorous, the defenders of the old order, by force or by guile, set themselves to root out the new, even though they should be compelled to destroy themselves in the process. Then there ensues a savage struggle in which wits are matched against wits and force against force. Families are divided; the community is split into factions; civil war rages; society is torn to its foundations. At times the struggle reaches the military phase, but for the most part it instills itself into the lives of the people until it becomes an accepted part of the day's work.

Then it is that the real test comes between the old world and the new. The old world holds power—economic, social, political. It holds in its hands income, respectability and preferment, with which it seeks first to buy, and later to destroy all who oppose its will.

Buying is the easiest, the safest, and in the long run the cheapest method of gaining the desired end.

Each generation contains some men and women possessed of unusual endowments—as organizers and enterprisers, as spokesmen, as singers, as seers and prophets. These gifted ones the old order sets out to win—lavishing upon them gratitudes, favors, rewards; filling their lives out of the horn of economic and social plenty; teasing their vanities and gratifying their ambitions; soothing, cajoling, flattering. By these means the rulers succeed in bringing under their control the strong thinkers, the capable executives, the sensitive, the talented—all in fact who are worth buying, and who can be bought for income and for social preferment, even though they may have been born into the families of the humblest and most oppressed of the workers.

Most men and women go where income promises and social preferment beckons. But not all! There are some whose love of justice, truth and beauty; whose yearning for betterment and increased social opportunity, outweighs the tempting bait of ease and respectability. Them the established order smites.

The strength of the old order is measured superficially by the extent of its control over the means of common livelihood and by the generalness of the satisfaction or discontent with which the masses receive its administration. Fundamentally its strength is determined by the direction in which its life is tending. The structure of the Roman Empire was apparently sound before it buckled and

disintegrated. The French aristocracy was never surer of itself than in the gala days that preceded 1789. The old order may undergo a process of gradual transformation. In that case the change is slow, as it was when Feudalism gave place to Capitalism in England. Again, the old order may be exterminated as it was when Feudalism gave place to Capitalism in France. In one case the masters of life loosens the reins of power to ease the straining team; in the other case the masters hold the reins taut till they are jerked from their hands, as masters and team go together over the precipice.

The strength of the new order, at any stage in its development may be gauged by the solidarity of its organization, the efficacy of its propaganda, and the tone of its art. These forms of expression are necessary to the maintenance of any phase of culture, old or new, and by the last of the three, the esthetic expression of the culture, its morale may best be judged. It is for this reason that artists, musicians, dramatists and poets are so important a part of any order of society. They voice its deepest sentiments and express its most sacred faiths and longings. When the time arrives that a new social order can boast its permanent art and music and literature, it is already far advanced on the path that leads to stability and power.

VI.

The poems which appear in this volume are a contribution to the propaganda and the art of the new culture. "Above all things," writes Chaplin, "I don't want anyone to try to make me out a 'poet'—because I'm not. I don't think much of these esthetic creatures who condescend to stoop to our level that we may have the blessings of culture. We'll manage to make our own—do it in our own way, and stagger through somehow... . These are tremendous times, and sooner or later someone will come along big enough to sound the right note, and it will be a rebel note." It is that note which Chaplin has sought to strike, and that he has succeeded will be the verdict of anyone who has read over the poems.

Chaplin's work speaks for itself. Some of the poems were written in Leavenworth Prison and published in the prison paper. Others were written during the tedious months of the Chicago trial, when the men were kept in the Cook County jail. Chaplin has had ample time to work them out. Christmas, 1921, was the fifth consecutive Christmas that he has spent in prison. The poems bear the impress of the bars, but they ring with the glad vigor of a free spirit that

bars cannot contain.

The reader of Chaplin's prison poems unavoidably makes three mental comments:

1. When poems so reserved, so vigorous; so penetrating, so melodious, so beautiful, come from behind jail bars, it is high time that thinking men and women awoke to the fate that awaits bold dreamers and singers under the present order in the United States.
2. Men are not silenced when steel doors clang behind them. Free spirits are as free behind the bars as they are under the open sky. The jail, as a gag, is impotent. While it may master the body, it cannot contain the soul.
3. The new order in America is already finding its voice. Although it is so young, and so immature, it is speaking with an accent of gifted authority.

Chaplin is not a dangerous man—except as his ideas are dangerous to the existing order of society. His presence in the penitentiary, under a twenty year sentence, indicates how dangerous those ideas are considered by the masters of American public life. Rich those masters are—fabulously rich; and strong they may be, yet so insecure do they feel themselves that they are constrained to hold in prison this dreamer and singer of the new social order.

Chaplin, in prison, like Debs in prison, is doing his work. He is resisting the encroachments of those jail demons—hate, bitterness, revenge; he is holding his mind on the goal—a newer, better social order; he is keeping his vision of nature, of humanity, of brotherhood, of courage, of love, of beauty,—clear and bright. Chaplin, the man, is in jail; but Chaplin the poet and singer is roaming wherever books go; wherever papers are read, and wherever comrades repeat verses to one another in the flickering light of the evening fire.

SCOTT NEARING.

MOURN NOT THE DEAD

Mourn not the dead that in the cool earth lie—

Dust unto dust—

The calm, sweet earth that mothers all who die

As all men must;

Mourn not your captive comrades who must dwell—

Too strong to strive—

Within each steel-bound coffin of a cell,

Buried alive;

But rather mourn the apathetic throng—

The cowed and the meek—

Who see the world's great anguish and its wrong

And dare not speak!

TAPS

The day is ended! Ghostly shadows creep

Along each dim-lit wall and corridor.

The bugle sounds as from some faery shore

Silvered with sadness, somnolent and deep.

Darkness and bars ... God! shall we curse or weep?

Somewhere a pipe is tapped upon the floor;

A guard slams shut the heavy iron door;

The day is ended—go to sleep—to sleep.

Three times it blows—weird lullaby of doom—

And then to dream while fecund Night gives birth

To other days like this day that is done. .

But Morning ... does it live beyond the gloom—

This deep black pall that hangs above the earth—

He fears the dark who dares to doubt the sun!

NIGHT IN THE CELL HOUSE

Tier over tier they rise to dizzy height—

The cells of men who know the world no more.

Silence intense from ceiling to the floor;

While through the window gleams a lone blue light

Which stabs the dark immensity of night.

Felt shod and ghostly like a shade of yore,

The guard comes shuffling down the corridor;

His key-ring jingles ... and he glides from sight.

Oh, to forget the prison and its scars,
And face the breeze where ocean meets the land;
To watch the foam-crests dance with silver stars,
While long green waves come tumbling on the sand ...
My brow is hot against the icy bars;
There is the smell of iron on my hand.

PRISON SHADOWS

Like grey-winged phantoms out of sullen skies
They flood our cells and seem to fashion there
I know not what dim landscapes of despair;
All day we feel them lurking in our eyes.
At night they fall like crosses, sombre-wise,
Upon the shameful uniforms we wear,
Upon the brow, the face, the hand, the hair;
And on each heart their shadow always lies.

O heart of mine, why throb with futile rage

And beat and beat against these hopeless bars?
For, though you break in life's last deadly swoon,
You cannot pierce beyond this iron cage
To see the pulsing splendor of the stars
Or feel the blue-green magic of the moon!

PRISON REVEILLE

Out through the iron doorway, bolted strong,
I see the night guard's shadow on the wall.
The bugle sounds its thin, white silver call,
Awake! awake! O world-forgotten throng!
And then the sudden clanging of the gong,
And ... silence ... aching silence ... over all;
While through the windows, steel-barred, stern and tall,
Pale daylight greets us like a plaintive song.

Somewhere the dawn breaks laughing o'er the sea
To splash with gold the cities' domes and towers,
And countless men seek visions wide and free,
In that alluring world that is not ours;

But no one there could prize as much as we
The open road, the smell of grass and flowers.

PRISON NOCTURNE

Outside the storm is swishing to and fro;
The wet wind hums its colorless refrain;
Against the walls and dripping bars, the rain
Beats with a rhythm like a song of woe;
Dimmed by the lightning's ever-fitful glow
The purple arc-lamps blur each streaming pane;
The thunder rumbles at the distant plain,
The cells are hushed and silent, row on row.

Fall, fruitful drops, upon the parching earth,
Fall, and revive the living sap of spring;
Blossom the fields with wonder once again!
And, in all hearts, awaken to new birth
Those visions and endeavors that will bring
A fresh, sweet morning to the world of men!

THE WARRIOR WIND

Once more the wind leaps from the sullen land
With his old battle-cry.

A tree bends darkly where the wall looms high;
Its tortured branches, like a grisly hand,
Clutch at the sky.

Grey towers rise from gloom and underneath—
Black-barred and strong—
The snarling windows guard their ancient wrong;
But the mad wind shakes them, hissing through his teeth
A battle song.

O bitter is the challenge that he flings
At bars and bolts and keys.
Torn with the cries of vanished centuries
And curses hurled at long-forgotten kings
Beyond dim seas.

The wind alone, of all the gods of old,

Men could not chain.

O wild wind, brother to my wrath and pain,

Like you, within a restless heart I hold

A hurricane.

The wind has known the dungeons of the past

Knows all that are;

And in due time will strew their dust afar,

And singing, he will shout their doom at last

To a laughing star.

O cleansing warrior wind, stronger than death,

Wiser than men may know;

O smite these stubborn walls and lay them low,

Uproot and rend them with your mighty breath—

Blow, wild wind, blow!

TO FREEDOM

Out on the “lookout” in the wind and sleet,

Out in the woods of fir and spruce and pine,

Down in the hot slopes of the dripping mine
We dreamed of you and Oh, the dream was sweet!
And now you bless the felon food we eat
And make each iron cell a sacred shrine;
For when your love thrills in the blood like wine,
The very stones grow holy to our feet.

We shall be faithful though we march with Death
And singing storm the barricades of Wrong,
For life is such a little thing to give.
We shall fight on as long as we have breath—
Love in our hearts and on our lips a song—
Without you it were better not to live!

THE VISION MAKER

To EUGENE VICTOR DEBS

Christ-like he spoke. While angry cannon roared,
His vision tinged the torn and bleeding skies,
Men heard in him their own dumb anguished cries,
The heavens seemed to open at his word.

Give us a victim, shouted Caesar's horde,
From his black pyre red warnings shall arise,
The vision perishes, the prophet dies...
His truth is far more deadly than our sword!

And deadlier his dream—a quenchless flame,
For which no dungeon fastness can be built ...
You have but made the convict half divine,
Crowned Truth with martyrdom, yourselves with shame;
Not he, but you are branded deep with guilt;
His cell is holier than your highest shrine.

DISTANCES

Above the moist earth, tremulous and bright,
The stars creep forth—stars that I cannot see;
And to my cell steals, oh, so tenderly
The dewy fragrance of a summer night!
All wan and wistful, somewhere out of sight,
Stalking o'er landscapes wide and dark and free,
My friend, the moon, looks everywhere for me,

Splashing the paths I loved with silver light.

Oh loveliness! why do you torture so

With such keen beauty till the day appears?

Why touch to life things buried long ago,

Whose aching cries trouble the heart to tears;

Ghostly—like wind tossed sea gulls calling low

Out of the poignant vistas of the years?

PHANTOMS

Ghost of a mountain

And ghost of a moon;

Night birds sink droopingly

Over the dune

Clouds drifting hazily

Stars blurring through;

Darkness come close to me—

Darkness and you.

Mist on the water
And mist in the sky;
Netted with silver
The waves ripple by.

Ghost of a solitude
Lit with dead stars.
You have your memories
I have my bars!

SEVEN LITTLE SPARROWS

Beyond the deep-cut window
The bars are heaped with snow,
And seven little sparrows
Are sitting in a row.

Fluffy blur of snowflakes;
Dappled haze of light;
The narrow prison vista
Is all aw whirl with white.

Seven little sparrows
Ruffled brown and grey
Snuggled close against the bars—
And this is Christmas day!

SALAAM!

Serene, complacent, satisfied,
Content with things that be;
The paragon of paltriness
Upraised for all to see;
With loving pride he cherishes
His mediocrity!

The smirking, ass-like multitudes
Cringe down at his command.
With wagging ears and blinded eyes
They do not understand.
With pride they show each shackled wrist
And on each brow the brand.

The young, the old, the great, the small
Give homage—all supine.
Fond parents bring their children there
As to some holy shrine.
And every one the Beast transforms
From human into swine!

Well praised are they—rewarded well—
Who on their shoulders bore
The gilded Thing that all the mob
Fawned in the dust before.
And each that did obeisance there
Was naked like a whore.

The poet with his teeming song,
The wise his deep-delved lore,
The maiden with her tender flesh,
The strong his sturdy store:
Each yielded all he had to give;
No harlot could do more.

Is there not one to share with me
The shame and wrath I own?
Is there not one to curse that Thing
Or pick up stones to stone—
To rend and wreck and raze to earth—
Or do I stand alone?

Raise high the swine-like incubus,
Obediently bow!
Shatter the flame on rebel lips
And wreath that brazen brow!
So blaze the banners, ring the bells,
Apotheosis now!

My kind but scorn your dull “success”—
Your subtle ways to “win,”
We eat our hearts in solitude
Or sear our souls with “sin”;
Yet we are better men than you
Who fit so smugly in.

Go! grovel for the shoddy goods
And plod and plot and plan,
And if you win the paltry prize
Go prize it—if you can,
But I would hurl it in your face
To hold myself a man!

I will not bow with that mad horde
And passively obey.
I will not think their sordid thoughts
Nor say the things they say,
Nor wear their shameful uniforms,
Nor branded be as they.

Nor can they bend me to their will
Though black their numbers swell,
Nor bribe with hopes of paradise
Nor force with fears of hell;
Me they may break but never bend,—
I live but to rebel!

I go my way rejoicingly,
I, outcast, spurned and low,
But undreamed worlds may come to birth
From seeds that I may sow.
And if there's pain within my heart
Those fools shall never know.

So let me stand back silently,
The pageant passes by,
And live my life with these new Christs
Whom you would crucify,
And laugh with mirth to see the mob
Do homage to a Lie!

THE WEST IS DEAD

What path is left for you to tread
When hunger-wolves are slinking near—
Do you not know the West is dead?

The “blanket-stiff” now packs his bed
Along the trails of yesteryear—
What path is left for you to tread?

Your fathers, golden sunsets led
To virgin prairies wide and clear—
Do you not know the West is dead?

Now dismal cities rise instead
And freedom is not there nor here—
What path is left for you to tread?

Your fathers’ world, for which they bled,
Is fenced and settled far and near—
Do you not know the West is dead?

Your fathers gained a crust of bread,
Their bones bleach on the lost frontier;
What path is left for you to tread—
Do you not know the West is dead?

UP FROM YOUR KNEES

(Air: “Song of a Thousand Years”)

Up from your knees, ye cringing serf men!

What have ye gained by whines and tears?

Rise! They can never break our spirits

Though they should try a thousand years.

CHORUS

A thousand years, then speed the victory!

Nothing can stop us nor dismay.

After the winter comes the springtime;

After the darkness comes the day.

Break ye your chains, strike off your fetters;

Beat them to swords, the Foe appears.

Slaves of the world arise and crush him—

Crush him or serve a thousand years.

Join in the fight—the Final Battle,

Welcome the fray with ringing cheers.

These are the times our fathers dreamed of,

Fought to attain a thousand years.

Be ye prepared, be not unworthy,

Greater the task when triumph nears.

Master the earth, O men of labor;

Long have ye learned—a thousand years.

Out of the East the sun is rising,

Out of the night the day appears;

See! at your feet the world is waiting,

Bought with your blood a thousand years.

THE EUNUCH

(To those who fight on the side of the Powers of Darkness)

Once a Eunuch by the palace

In the sunset's fading glow

Felt the soft warm breezes blow;

Watched the fair girls of the Harem

Idly saunter to and fro.

Saw he beauty young and lavish—

Fierce to lure man's every sense—

(Grim the Eunuch stood and tense)

Laughingly the sparkling fountain

Mocked his bleak incompetence.

Came the Sultan from his hunting

Flaming with the zest of life;

(Laid aside were spear and knife)

Came for wine and song and feasting,

Came to seek his fairest wife.

Opened then the marble portals.

Fragrant incense filled the air,

(Sandalwood and roses rare)

While the girls with red-lipped languor

Scattered flowers everywhere.

Far away the fabled mountains,

(Like some paradise of old)
Glowed with lavender and gold.
Tense the Eunuch stood and silent—
Tense and sullen, tense and cold.

Now a quick impotent fury
Lashed him like a bronze-tipped cord.
Sprang he at the youthful lord,
Sprang again with blade all bloody ...
(Famished lust and dripping sword.)

*

Night crept on all chill and ghastly,
Jackals trotted forth to bark,
(Murder shuddered, still and stark ...)
By the palace ceased the fountain
And the whole grey world grew dark.

I. W. W. PRISON SONG

(Tune: “The Red Flag”)

The pale and dismal daylight falls
Through iron bars on prison walls.
In chains we came from far and near,
And in dark cells they hold us here.

CHORUS

Defiant 'neath the Iron Heel;
Their walls of stone and bars of steel!
For though all hell at us is hurled,
We and our kind shall rule the world!

At us the blood-hounds are let loose,
The lynch-mobs with the knotted noose;
In legal sanctioned mask and gown
The New Black Hundreds hunt us down.

To all brave comrades o'er the sea,
In chains for human liberty,
And all jailed rebels everywhere

We say: be bold to do and dare!

By all the graves of Labor's dead,
By Labor's deathless flag of red,
We make a solemn vow to you,—
We'll keep the faith; we will be true.

For Freedom laughs at prison bars
Her voice re-echoes from the stars;
Proclaiming with the tempest's breath
A Cause beyond the reach of death!

TO FRANCE

(May Day, 1919)

Mother of revolutions, stern and sweet,
Thou of the red Commune's heroic days;
Unsheathe thy sword, let thy pent lightning blaze
Until these new bastiles fall at thy feet.
Once more thy sons march down the ancient street
Led by pale men from silent Pere la Chaise;

Once more La Carmignole—La Marseillaise
Blend with the war drum's quick and angry beat.

Ah, France—our—France—must they again endure
The crown of thorns upon the cross of death?
Is morning here ...? Then speak that we may know!
The sky seems lighter but we are not sure.
Is morning here ...? The whole world holds its breath
To hear the crimson Gallic rooster crow!

VILLANELLE

(Torquato Tasso from his cell at *Ste. Anne*, 1548)

Her beauty haunts me everywhere—

A lone lark singing as it flies— Sweet, O sweet beyond compare.

Amber and gold meet in her hair,

Dark pools and starlight in her eyes; Her beauty haunts me everywhere.

Slim body, petal soft and fair,

Cool lips, cool, cool as evening skies— Sweet, O sweet beyond compare.

Pale fingers delicate and rare,

To lull and lure caressing-wise; Her beauty haunts me everywhere.

Here in my dungeon dim and bare

The last frail note of music dies— Sweet, O sweet beyond compare.

My heart? I steeled it not to care... .

But God! her love is paradise! Her beauty haunts me everywhere, O sweet,
sweet, sweet beyond compare!

WESLEY EVEREST

(Mutilated and murdered at Centralia, Washington, November 11th, 1919, by a
mob of “respectable” businessmen.)

Torn and defiant as a wind-lashed reed,
Wounded he faced you as he stood at bay;
You dared not lynch him in the light of day,
But on your dungeon stones you let him bleed;
Night came ... and you black vigilants of Greed ...
Like human wolves, seized hard upon your prey,
Tortured and killed ... and, silent slunk away
Without one qualm of horror at the deed.

Once ... long ago ... do you remember how
You hailed Him king for soldiers to deride—
You placed a scroll above His bleeding brow
And spat upon Him, scourged Him, crucified ...?

A rebel unto Caesar—then as now

Alone, thorn-crowned, a spear wound in his side!

THE INDUSTRIAL HERETICS

They say we are revolvers—that we stirred

The workers of all nations to rebel—

And that we would not compromise with Hell,

But damned it with our every deed and word.

They feared us as we faced them undeterred,

And gave us each a coffin of a cell

In this steel cave where living corpses dwell—

Hate-throttled here that we might not be heard.

We are those fools too stubborn-willed to bend

Our necks to Wrong and parley and discuss.

Today we face the awful test of fire—

The prison, gallows, cross—but in the end

Your sons will call your children after us

And name their dogs from men you now admire!

BLOOD AND WINE

(A certain little renegade of the Revolution chants a hymn of praise to his erstwhile enemy.)

Behold! The helots of the land
Are cowed beneath thy iron fist;
They are too dumb to understand—
Too tame and spineless to resist.

Victorious one! Against thy gains
These chattels cannot, dare not rise;
Stifle the thought within their brains
And rule ... with bayonets and lies.

So may thy sons, with greed uncurbed,
Their children's children rule again;
Aye, rule with iron, undisturbed,
The all-prolific sons of men.

What matters that ten million died

To give thy lust a dwelling place?

Does not thy Terror set aside

The ancient freedom of the race?

What matters that the peasant's plow

Bites at a soil baptised with red?

Are not thy bloody dollars now

More myriad than the myriad dead?

That in charred cities, wan with pain,

War-desolated mothers live,

While lips of babies tug in vain

At breasts that have no milk to give?

Or that beneath thy battered walls,

Cursed with the eloquence of hell,

Black Want to red Rebellion calls ...?

Heed not, I tell thee all is well!

Heed not! Have vine-clad maidens sing

And serve thee scented wine and gore;

Laugh! Glut thyself to vomiting,
And hiccough, screaming still for more.

What of the Men against the gate,
Black-massed and sullen, gaunt and lean ...
Like thee they crave one thing to hate.
Be glad ... and whet thy guillotine!

THE RED GUARD

Sons of the dawn! No more shall you enslave
Nor lull them with your honied lies to sleep,
Nor lead them on like herds of human sheep,
To hopeless slaughter for the loot you crave.
For now upon you, wave on mighty wave,
The iron-stern battalions rise and leap
To extirpate your breed and bury deep
And sow with salt the unlamented grave!

Accursed Monster — nightmare of the years—
Pause but a moment ere you pass away!

Pause and behold the earth made clean and pure—
Our earth, that you have drenched with blood and tears—
Then greet the crimson usurer of Day,—
The mighty Proletarian Dictature!

THE RED FEAST

Go fight, you fools! Tear up the earth with strife
And spill each others guts upon the field;
Serve unto death the men you served in life
So that their wide dominions may not yield.

Stand by the flag—the lie that still allures;
Lay down your lives for land you do not own,
And give unto a war that is not yours
Your gory tithe of mangled flesh and bone.

But whether it be yours to fall or kill
You must not pause to question why nor where.
You see the tiny crosses on that hill?
It took all those to make one millionaire.

It was for him the seas of blood were shed,
That fields were razed and cities lit the sky;
And now he comes to chortle o'er the dead—
The condor Thing for whom the millions die!

The bugle screams, the cannons cease to roar.
“Enough! enough! God give us peace again.”
The rats, the maggots and the Lords of War
Are fat to bursting from their meal of men.

So stagger back, you stupid dupes who've “won,”
Back to your stricken towns to toil anew,
For there your dismal tasks are still undone
And grim Starvation gropes again for you.

What matters now your flag, your race, the skill
Of scattered legions—what has been the gain?
Once more beneath the lash you must distil
Your lives to glut a glory wrought of pain.

In peace they starve you to your loathsome toil,
In war they drive you to the teeth of Death;
And when your life-blood soaks into their soil
They give you lies to choke your dying breath.

So will they smite your blind eyes till you see,
And lash your naked backs until you know
That wasted blood can never set you free
From fettered thralldom to the Common Foe.

Then you will find that “nation” is a name
And boundaries are things that don’t exist;
That Labor’s bondage, worldwide, is the same,
And ONE the enemy it must resist.

Montreal, 1914.

THE GIRLS WHO SANG FOR US

What does it mean to us that Spring is here?
We asked ourselves within the great grey hall.
We shall not feel the magic of her call;

This day, like others, will be dull and drear.
And then you sang ... and brought so very near,
The fragrant world beyond the prison wall,
The tender fields, the trees and grass, and all
The hopes and dreams that every man holds dear.

O, silvery voices, sweet with life and youth
Brushing our grey lives with your rainbow wings—
Lives that were stern and bitter with old wrong,
And cleansing them with beauty and with truth;
Reviving memories of vanished springs—
Making us whole with miracles of song!

TO EDITH

Do you remember how we walked that night
In early spring?
And how we found a new and sweet delight
In everything?
Do you remember how the air was filled
With mist and moonlight—how our hearts were thrilled—

And seemed to sing?

What if these walls shut out the world for me

And heaven too,

There still lives fragrant in my memory

The thought of you.

And out there now with life's high dome above you

If you but knew how very much I love you—

If you but knew

SONG OF SEPARATION

Two that I love must live alone,

Far away.

All in the world I can call my own,

Only they.

Mother and boy in the rocking chair,

Thinking of one who cannot be there,

Breathing a hope that is half a prayer;

Night and day, night and day.

Here in my cell I must sit alone,
Clothed in grey.
Bars of iron and walls of stone
Bid me stay.
What of the world with its pomp and show?
Baubles of nothing! This I know:
Deep in my heart I miss them so
Night and day, night and day.

TO MY LITTLE SON

I cannot lose the thought of you
It haunts me like a little song,
It blends with all I see or do
Each day, the whole day long.

The train, the lights, the engine's throb,
And that one stinging memory:
Your brave smile broken with a sob,
Your face pressed close to me.

Lips trembling far too much to speak;
The arms that would not come undone;
The kiss so salty on your cheek;
The long, long trip begun.

I could not miss you more it seemed,
But now I don't know what to say.
It's harder than I ever dreamed
With you so far away.

ESCAPED!

(The boiler house whistle is blown "wildcat" when a prisoner makes a
"getaway")

A man has fled... ! We clutch the bars and wait;
The corridors are empty, tense and still;
A silver mist has dimmed the distant hill;
The guards have gathered at the prison gate.
Then suddenly the "wildcat" blares its hate
Like some mad Moloch screaming for the kill,
Shattering the air with terror loud and shrill,

The dim, grey walls become articulate.

Freedom, you say? Behold her altar here!

In those far cities men can only find

A vaster prison and a redder hell,

O'ershadowed by new wings of greater fear.

Brave fool, for such a world to leave behind

The iron sanctuary of a cell!

RETROSPECT

The wall-girt distance undulates with heat;

The buildings crouch in terror of the sun;

Steel bars and stones, heat-tortured ton on ton,

On which the noon's remorseless hammers beat.

Alone I trudge the wide red-cobbled street:

How long before this evil dream is done ...?

These strange mad stones I know them every one,

Worn with the tread of oh, how many feet!

And yet it seems that I have seen it all

Before ... I know not when ... but there should be
Blunt buildings near a cliff, as I recall;
Bare rocks—a burning white—a gnarled dark tree ...
And looming clear above a sentried wall
The foam-laced splendor of a warm blue sea ...

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