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Light and Shadows in the Life of an Avant-Guard

Emma Goldman

1910

Denver is not unlike a prison. Its inhabitants, too, have been sent there “to do time.” That which makes the position of the prisoner preferable, is the consolation that the State will feed him and that some day his time will expire. The majority of Denverites have no such cheerful outlook, Although arriving there with hopes of a speedy return, it’s usually imprisonment for life.

We all know the paralyzing effect of the daily grind for existence, even for most of us who can boast an average physique. How much more paralyzing must it be for those who go to Denver as a last resort to rescue life from its downward path?

Under such conditions and in such an atmosphere people are not interested in abstract ideas. “To hell with Bebel’s speech,” said the consumptive in “Sanin,” in reply to the query of his companion enthused over the latest word-battle in the Reichstag. “I am interested in one thing — Life, and how long I may still see the sky, the stars.”

Artzibasheff, himself a victim of tuberculosis, understands the psychology of these people only too well.

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And yet, those who attended our meetings in Denver must have been interested. Else they would not have come, night after night. Or was it merely to get away from the grim reality? If so, I am happy to have furnished that opportunity, even though it was but for the moment.

The Ferrer lecture and the one on "Marriage and Love" brought the largest audience. Particularly the latter. Sex is a vital factor, after all; few people realize how very vital it must be for the exiles of Denver.

Fair newspaper treatment of an Anarchist is as scarce as light in the life of the avant-guard. One must therefore consider it an event if three papers in one city, during almost a week, devoted columns to verbatim reports of Anarchistic lectures, not to forget the extraordinary discovery of the dramatic critic of the Denver Times, to wit: "Emma Goldman is being treated as an enemy of society because, with Dr. Stockman, she is pointing out the ills and defects of society." O, for the naivety of an American dramatic critic! As if that was not the crime of all crimes, to point to the swamps of society.

Cheyenne. — Even woman's votes have failed to affect the grey matter of the police. Yet my sisters still believe in the miraculous power of woman suffrage. Wyoming can boast women politicians, but the police are just as stupid as in other States, and a little more, as our dear editor has already described in a delightfully humorous comment in the April issue. I shall, therefore, only add that the danger signal was hoisted in Cheyenne by the Acting Mayor. The poor fellow was quite a nonentity in his town. To make himself conspicuous, he set the town afire, and when the smoke was over, he found he had only burned his own fingers. By noon of the day after our arrest the "hero" came slinking into our lawyer's office, whining "Please, sir, I'll be good. *It* never do it again." As for the majesty of the law, four meetings instead of the original two, and the sale of a quantity of literature, helped to make her majesty appear pretty flat and silly.

I cannot close this very important chapter without expressing our thanks to the faithful few in Denver, who came to the rescue the moment they heard of our arrest. The money they sent helped us to reimburse, in a small measure, the attorney who was instrumental in setting the dislocated funny bone of the Acting Mayor.

Salt Lake City. — The Mormon husband may be as agreeable around the house as the Christian dears, but as builder of cities the Mormons are certainly superior.

I have traveled through the length and breadth of this very Christian country, but I know of no city that can compare with the stronghold of the Mormons. Nothing mean about these people, whatever else they may be. They could not indulge in many wives if they were small or miserly. No wonder they are so generous with their city.

Spacious, beautifully laid out, and spotlessly clean, Salt Lake City has much more the appearance of an European than an American city, where every inch of ground is mutilated for business purposes. As regards public buildings, the Mormons are almost as extravagant as in the number of wives. Quite a variety of them, each one a joy to the eye.

My dear old friend Thurston Brown (who lost a fat church because he dared, as few did, give reasons for Czolgosz's act), together with Comrade Cline, of Salt Lake City, arranged two meetings, which proved the most successful of the second part of our tour. The audiences were large and remarkably appreciative, which was best proved by the quantity of literature purchased.

A drive into the glorious country surrounding Salt Lake City, with Comrade and Mrs. Cline, added to our short but delightful visit to the Mormons.

Reno, Nev. — The divorce mill of America. What a farce the marriage institution is, anyway. Here are thousands of women flocking to Reno, to buy their freedom from one owner in order to sell it more profitably to another. Thus a well known lady married the second man four hours after she was divorced from the first. These

respectable women do have it easy. No heartache, no soul agony of the free woman, who suffers a thousand torments in the transitory period between an old and new experience. just a piece of paper bought for so many dollars, and all is proper. What shallowness, what terrible hypocrisy. Yet these same respectable ladies of

Reno hold up their hands in holy horror when they hear of a free relationship of the free woman, who would never think of giving herself to any man, except when she loves. Some of these good women were perfectly scandalized when Emma Goldman registered in the same hotel. No, they could not stand for that. Either they or Emma Goldman must go. And the hotel keeper, poor lackey. The ladies have money; never mind their lack of character, or provincialism. Emma Goldman was told to get out. It would have been surprising if she hadn't. Respectability is indeed a shallow thing.

The greatest farce of Reno, however, is that in democratic America divorce is but an exclusively aristocratic privilege. The poor women, thousands of them, abused, insulted, and outraged by their precious husbands, must continue a life of degradation. They have no money to join the colony in Reno. No relief for them. The poor women, the slaves of the slaves, must go on prostituting themselves. They must continue to bear children in hate, in conflict, in physical horror. The marriage institution and the "sanctity of the home" are only for those who have not the money to buy themselves free from both, even as the chattel slave from his master.

Reno, the divorce mill of America, needed more than any other place to learn the cause of the failure of marriage and the meaning of love. Not the kind that is bought and sold, but the kind that is free as the elements to give itself in abundance or to deny itself in the same measure.

The beginning was made in Reno. I spoke on Anarchism, and on Marriage and Love. What I said may have been Greek to some. But that a few did understand, their faces betrayed. Theirs was the expression of the blind beholding the light of day for the first time.

To accomplish this much it was worth going even to Reno. The supreme effort of the avant-guard is onward, ever onward.