Memories of Benjamin Tucker

J. William Lloyd

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My first contact (mental) with Benjamin R. Tucker occurred in the winter of 1884-1885, just after I had become a member of the Blodgett Health Colony in Waldena, Florida. Previously, in Tennessee, George Schumm, of New York City, had "sold" me on the ideas of "Karl Heinzen Democracy" for the promulgation of which he published a little magazine. Now he wrote me that a wonderful men, named Tucker, had converted him to "Individualist Anarchism" and he had stopped his periodical.

Just then there came down to the colony, out of the far North, Evald Hammar, the Swede, who announced himself as an Anarchist, which greatly aroused our curiosity. Hammar's appearance was quite in keeping with the newspaperman's description of the species. He was careless in dress, short and stocky, had a shock head of yellow hair, and his broad face was almost hidden by an immense yellow beard. But he was finely educated, better read than any of us, had nice, gentle blue eyes, and a low pleasant voice.

We colonists had organized a weekly Sunday meeting for the discussion of advanced ideas, and I had been made chairman. The Blodgetts, hardly knowing what the word Anarchism meant, invited Hammar to give us a lecture on the subject in one of those meetings and we all seconded the motion. He gave us a good lecture but Sam Blodgett became so excited over some of the "treasonable" things uttered about our government that he wanted me to stop Hammar then and there. I replied that our meetings were for the advancement of free-thought and free-speech, and as long as I was chairman any one could say what he pleased. The other colonists roundly applauded this, and Sam sulked. But the next day, he, as head of the colony, tried to organize a boycott on poor Hammar, but it worked backwards, and he found that if anybody was boycotted it was himself. I liked Hammar from the first, and we became life-long friends. He lent me *Liberty*, and I fell under the spell of Tucker, corresponded with him, subscribed to and became a contributor to his periodical for the rest of my time in Florida, fighting many verbal battles in defense of his ideas.

Then came catastrophe. An epidemic swept Florida, its "boom" failed, work failed, my wife died, and I brought my two children back to the old home in New Jersey. New York was not far away and then, of course, I personally met Tucker. He was very different from Evald Hammar and did not conform at all to the journalistic picture of the type.

I met a man well-groomed, fashionably dressed, with a neatly trimmed dark beard (beards were fashionable then), a swarthy complexion, flashing black eyes, a frequent if perhaps slightly

nervous laugh, and a charmingly genial manner, which I never knew him to lose. My work did not permit me to see him very often, but at intervals I did see him until he finally left to live permanently abroad. I remember that on one occasion he invited me to lunch with him and John Henry Mackay, the German poet, who had just come on from Germany to visit him.

Tucker was at his best but I am sorry to say that my memory of Mackay's appearance is not as clear as I wish it might be; but I find myself thinking of him as a blonde man, slightly gray and rather small, with fine blue eyes and a delightfully vivacious way of talking, using excellent English. He talked to us about affairs in Europe, the spread of Anarchist influence there, and about his poems. One anecdote sticks, the trivial. About his first visit to Paris, and in a cafe there encountering absinthe, a drink new to him. Having no one to warn him, he took a really dangerous dose, and found himself so physically paralyzed that he could not rise from his chair even, much less walk. But his mind, he said, became marvelously clear and illuminated. He described it all laughingly, in a most vivid manner.

Tucker had tremendous influence on us young Anarchists in those days and was our hero. Handsome, a brilliant translator, an editor of meticulous care and finish, a trenchant reasoner, with a faith and enthusiasm for his "ism" that had no bounds, he was like a strong current that swept us along. Josiah Warren, Pierre J. Proudhon, Wm. B. Greene, Lysander Spooner were given us for our gods, with Auberon Herbert, Herbert Spencer, Stephen Pearl Andrews and a few others almost admitted to the pantheon.

Tucker's manner of writing was what chiefly attracted attention to him. No more fiery and furious apostle ever put pen to paper. A veritable baresark of dialectics. He was dogmatic to the extreme, arrogantly positive, browbeating and dominating, true to his "plumb-line" no matter who was slain, and brooked no difference, contradiction or denial. Biting sarcasm, caustic contempt, invective that was sometimes almost actual insult, were poured out on any who dared criticize or oppose. In this he reminded me of my old-time medical teacher, R. T. Trall, M.D. He regarded all who did not accept Anarchism as fools, or near-fools, and was not slow to let them know it. There was nothing he hated more than communism, and the Communist-Anarchists used to call him "the Pope." One could not read *Liberty* without getting the impression that he was a fire-eater, most of the time angry.

This tended to scare off opponents, no doubt, but as positive assertion and burning faith convince many people more than any argument, it also brought him many converts, and a reputation of being a sort of dragon, breathing fire and smoke.

And no doubt he affected all of us. For I recall some commentator, at that time, writing of "the three slashing critics of *Liberty* – Tucker, Yarros and Lloyd," so I must have been implicated.

But life is full of contradictions and Tucker soon became a conundrum to me. Was he a Jekyll and Hyde? For this swashbuckler, on paper, when you met him in person, was the most genial, affable, and charming gentlemen that you could possibly imagine, kind, gentle and always smiling. I discounted this as toward myself but I could not learn that anyone had ever had a hard *spoken* word from him, and I have never to this day heard of one who had. Face to face this tiger was a dove. I remember my friend, Albert Chavannes, telling me of her interview with Tucker when he visited New York. "Why," he said, laughing delightedly, "I found him the mildest mannered pirate that ever cut a throat or sunk a ship."

And I remember that one evening I found myself sitting beside Tucker in some radical meeting, the purpose of which I have now forgotten. After a while I was called upon to make a speech. But I was no good at public speaking. Not that I was afraid of my audience, or weak in voice,

but I seemed "unable to think on my feet," as the saying is, having all my life been accustomed to writing my ideas out piece-meal, and in private, with all the time I pleased to think them together. And still worse I did not have the preacher's talent to expand a given text to infinity of verbiage, but rather a tendency to condense a group of ideas into an aphorism, and then go dry of thoughts and words for the moment. So I rose and told the company that a man should know his limitations and my tongue was limited. Whereat, some flattering lady, whose name I have also forgotten, if I ever knew it, called out across the room, "But not your pen!" – upon which I smiled, bowed to the lady, and sat down.

The next call was for Tucker. I had never been with Tucker in a public meeting before and I expected, and I think most of those present did, a fiery and eloquent tirade that would make the heathen tremble. But to my utter amazement he got up with what looked to me like a nervously embarrassed smile, excused himself in a few words, and sat down. Then I began to think that perhaps I could get a line on Tucker.

Psychology was not as prominent a study in those days as it is now. The term "defense mechanism" was not yet in use, I believe, but we did have the word "bluff." Tucker had given me a full-length picture of himself that now looked to me as very revealing. In this he was manifestly very much posed, leaning back against a shelf, one leg crossed before the other, hands thrust into pockets in a "devil-may-care" way, a fierce expression on his face, nostrils dilated, and everything in his attitude breathing defiance to all the world.

Well, I came to see, or think, rightly or wrongly, that all his ferocity was a "bluff", a defensive pose. That really he was one of the gentlest, sweetest, kindest of men, eager to have everybody like and admire him, inwardly diffident and self-conscious, and who simply could not bring himself to say anything rude or unkind to anyone on actual contact. But one who no doubt blamed and hated himself for this bashfulness and moral weakness (as he regarded it) that presented him from being the eloquent orator and smashing debater and champion in speech and on the platform. So, in the old familiar way, to compensate, and justify himself to himself, as soon as got behind the armor of his pen and paper, he blazed forth according to his ideal. Both sides expressed him, but could not coordinate in him at one and the same time.

"Bold Ben Tucker" I had named him when I first knew him, but now I felt I had another light on his facets.

Another puzzle, that came at the last, was why this ardent propagandist, so prominent and tireless, in the very middle of his career, as it seemed, in good health, and in the prime of his powers, suddenly stopped and shut up as if paralyzed, closed up his affairs and went off to hide himself in France, like a superannuated businessman living off his income, never to utter another word.

I remember, in Montreal, one evening, talking to Horace Traubel and his saying in his sudden, impetuous way, "Benjamin Tucker never grew an inch." What I understood him to mean tallied with my own idea that Tucker believed with a final faith that he had found the perfect social philosophy, had said it all, ever and ever, was tired of repeating himself, and was done. He had given the world the perfect Gospel of Social Salvation, and there was nothing beyond. Still it does seem strange that a man of his literary abilities and tastes did not go on translating from the French.

They were interesting, the little group that were closest to him. Tall John Beverley Robinson, the architect; curly-haired, spectacled, little George Schumm, the proof-reader, enthusiastic and excitable, and Emma Schumm, his mate, thin, very shy and quiet, the German translator;

(free-union mates these two, but in fact the most devoted monogamists I every knew); dark-eyed beautiful Elizabeth Holmes, related to Oliver Wendell Holmes; blonde Clarence L. Swartz, always smiling, good-natured, also a proof-reader and sometimes acting editor of *Liberty*; Cynthia Treagear, the nurse of the Blind Babies Home, with the beautiful mouth, wistful face, and the motherly laugh; E.C. Walker, the able editor, son-in-law of Moses Harman; Victor Yarros, the brilliant little Jew who so soon and so marvelously mastered the English language; Florence Johnson, grand-daughter of Moses Hull, and her three clever girls. Of course many others, but I did not know them all. A handsome bunch indeed, and each with great talent in some direction.

I think Tucker had a real regard for me, but I must have been a trial to him. For I was never a perfect convert. Tho I did not know it then, Humanism was shaping itself in the back of my mind as greater than Anarchism. I was an incurable moralist, and Tucker snorted at morality. I affirmed natural rights, and Tucker said there was no natural right except the right of might, and men must get together and create rights if they wanted them. We always clashed on these lines and, finally, when the question of the rights of children came up, the split went wide open. I was horrified at his dictum that the child was a labor-product of the mother and she had a right to do anything she pleased with it. So I withdrew from Tuckerism, tho still considering myself a believer in Anarchism – but time was destined to take all my Anarchism also.

However Tucker and I remained good friends personally, I always admired, honored and respected the man for his absolute sincerity, his fine abilities, his real courage; he was very lovable, and always all right in his intentions, and I still think so. He seemed to me so much better than his ideas, which held him like a suit of iron armor, locked on him, and from which he could never get out, and which prevented him, as Traubel said, from ever growing an inch. The very consistency of some men is their fatal undoing.

Beautiful Pearl Johnson, with the classic face, became his mater, and as she was the devoted friend of my daughter, Oriole, she named her baby, when it came, Oriole, also. And what remarkable eyes that little Oriole Tucker had. They have always haunted my memory, for I never saw eyes like them. I remember that they all came out to my home at "Out-of-the-way" at Westfield, New Jersey, before Ben went to live permanently in Europe.

Tucker's office in New York, as I recall it, was a rather bare room, with desk and office-chair on one side, and a great pile of extra copies of *Liberty* along the other wall. I feel sure there was no typewriter. I think he wrote always in long hand. And what a hand it was, for a literary man, clear as copper plate, perfect in form, and always the same – not the slightest sign of nervousness or mental excitement in it.

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