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Kate Austin

Carl Nold

June-July 1934

To introduce Kate Austin to the younger generation of radical thought I can do no better than to quote from William Holmes what he wrote of her when he heard of her death:

“We who anxiously awaited her coming as that of a dear sister feel that the cause of radicalism in America has, in the death of Kate Austin, lost one of its brightest, most energetic and devoted champions — a woman fit, like Charlotte Corday, to wear the martyr’s crown, or under favourable circumstances to fill the role of Joan d’Arc, to lead a great army of the discontented to insurrection and victory. There is no doubt that had Kate Austin’s life been passed in an environment more suitable for development she would have become a noted character in the history of the nation. Even as it was her bold utterances and scathing denunciation of wrong in the radical press denoted ever increasing power and attracted widespread attention. Hers was a heart filled to overflowing with tenderness for the weak and suffering everywhere, with sympathy for the oppressed of all nations, with hatred for tyranny and hypocrisy at home and abroad.”

Kate Austin, born in La Salle country, Ill., July 25th, 1864 was a born rebel, one of those rare wild flowers that bloom and delight

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Retrieved on June 7, 2012 from www.katesharpleylibrary.net
From: *Man!* vol. 2 No. 6–7 June-July 1934.

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the thoughtful observer while the multitude passes on in ignorance of the hidden beauty. At the age of six, her parents moved to Hooks Point, Iowa; at the age of eleven her mother died and Kate, the oldest of five children, had to take the mother's place in raising the younger ones and taking care of the house. With but two years schooling in the red painted country school to which the farmer children marched several miles for five days a week, Kate had received early a bitter taste of life. However, she had learned to read, and reading was her only amusement. In 1883 she had become acquainted with a young farmer, Sam Austin, and married him. At about that time also a stray copy of Moses Harman's "*Lucifer*" fell in her hands. It was a ray of light, for the paper touched on questions that had already revolved in her mind, demanding solution. The young brain was convinced that there is something wrong in this society with the poor on one side and the rich on the other. But the real eye-opener was yet to come. It was the bursting of the bomb at the Haymarket in Chicago, on May 4th, 1886. The version of that act, as she read it in capitalist papers, did not agree with her searching mind. She subscribed for other radical papers of which she had read in "*Lucifer*" and soon Kate embraced the then so madly persecuted idea of Anarchism. Not satisfied of knowing the true conditions, she felt the desire to help and spread them and soon we see her name in *Lucifer*, *Blue Grass Blade*, *Discontent*, *Free Society* etc., etc., signed Kate Austin.

In 1890 she moved with her husband to Missouri near the small hamlet called Caplinger Mills, some twenty miles from the nearest railroad station. But the young woman did not feel lonesome in this isolation. Born and raised in the country, country life was her ideal. She had a husband sharing her ideas, children, housework and writing for radical papers. There was more to do than she could master. Having joined the American Press-Writers Association, her work and correspondence increased, she had come in contact with most of the well known radical writers and lecturers of her time and her correspondence kept her busy, sitting by an oil lamp, reading and

writing until late into the night while the family slept. She enjoyed it, it was part of her education.

It was Kate's nature to always take side with the underdog. In time of depressions, when the country was full of tramps, she always took them in and gave them the best she had, regarding them as human beings so much that some of the neighbours sent them to Kate, telling them that there is a free boarding house over there. The same consideration that Kate had for human beings, she also had for animals. It was beautifully illustrated to me one day when she told Sam to hitch two horses to a plough. "You know it's loose soil, one horse can pull it easy" replied Sam.

"Yes, I know, but it's easier on two," was Kate's suggestion, and so it was done.

The house, built before the war (1860) was a solid, spacious one-storey structure and open day and night to everybody. In fact I have never seen a key to any lock or door in the house, even when the whole family (Kate had three daughters and two sons) went visiting neighbours, no door was locked. There were no secrets in the house, no whispering because children might hear something they should not know. Children were supposed to hear what adults had to say and Kate aired her mind on every subject regardless of children or visitors.

Although of a serious nature, Kate Austin also had a humourous vein in her and she enjoyed a good joke. I distinctly remember two I heard her tell: While arguing one evening with a farmer that the earth makes a complete turn every twenty-four hours like a wheel on an axle, the farmer left her with a doubtful expression on his face, bidding her good night and "I'll see you tomorrow." And he did show up early the next morning, hollering at her: "Kate, you are a big humbug, when I got home last night I put a heavy stone on that tree stump near my house and this morning it was still there. Had the earth made a complete turn like a wheel, as you said, the stone would have fallen off, would it not?"

The other one was about the travelling evangelists and their revival meetings, which were looked upon with suspicion by the farmers. The farmer's wife was exceedingly anxious to attend these meetings while her husband ridiculed them. When one specially celebrated evangelist's coming was announced the wife insisted on hearing him, although it meant a two days' trip with horse and buggy going and returning. The farmer finally consented under the condition that she would wear a pair of tin-pants which he would make and solder onto her body while in that town. Be it so, said the wife and both went on the journey. The next morning after the meeting the farmer woke up and missed his wife. Out he stormed and met an acquaintance with the question: "Hello, Jim, have you seen my wife?"

"Yes," replied Jim, "I saw her going down the road towards the bushes with the evangelist, who had a can-opener in his hand."

There are people of the goody-goody variety who may consider such a joke vulgar, especially among children as listeners, yet Kate knew that these things are going on and although a little exaggerated, do happen and after all it is a good joke on evangelists and revival meetings.

And now the last sad chapter. A splendid woman and comrade, born, raised and all her life in good country air and healthy surroundings, was doomed to die of that city plague, consumption. For about a year she knew that there was something wrong with her but no one suspected the cause. She had been doctoring by correspondence with the well-known and reputable Dr. E.B. Foote in New York who advised a change in climate. Sam rigged up a covered wagon and left with Kate for the healthier air of Colorado. It was too late, Kate died on the road in the little city of Kingman, Kansas, on October 28th, 1902. Her body was sent back and interred in the cemetery at Caplinger Mills in the presence of the largest crowd that ever attended a funeral in that district.

Splendid articles in memory of Kate Austin were published in the radical press. A brief quotation of another noble woman comrade, Voltairine de Cleyre, is in place here:

"I never knew her, I always dreamed I should know her some day. From the time she wrote to me in much, far too much sorrow for a trifling injustice she had done me — and that only because she was steadfast for the honour of the workers, and jealous of a single contemptuous word against them — until yesterday, I always thought I should one day look into her face and tell her how much I admired her for her fearlessness and her truth. Now I never shall — never, anywhere, and by so much my life is made less."