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Emma Goldman—Fighter and Idealist

Guido Bruno

August 1917

So far as a man thinks, he is free. Nothing is more disgusting than the crowing about liberty by slaves, as most men are. and the flippant mistaking for freedom of some paper Preamble like a "Declaration of Independence, or the statute right to vote, by those who have never dared to think or act.

—EMERSON.

“Get Miss Goldman,” cried the pale-faced, thin-lipped matron to another white-clad attendant behind the bars of the Tombs. It was a few days after Emma Goldman’s arrest as “the head of a country-wide conspiracy to resist conscription.” I stood in a small, triangular hallway. The high walls exhaled the odor of fresh paint. The friendly rays of a hot afternoon sun played hide and seek on the stone floor through the shining glass panes of the heavily barred window. It was peaceful and quiet.

“Get Emma Goldman.” The order had for me a deep significance. “Get Emma Goldman” for the past twenty-seven years has been

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Retrieved on 26th April 2021 from www.libertarian-labyrinth.org
Pearson’s Magazine 38 n0. 2 (August, 1917): 61.

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the cry of the guardians of our recognized, social order and our conventional morals.

It is not hard for our authorities to “get someone” if they really want to. What an extraordinary law-abiding life must this woman rebel have led for the last twenty-seven years (both private and public) in order successfully to escape the clutches of state and federal authorities save for a few arrests and short incarcerations!

Emma Goldman’s eyes captivated me at once. They are large and deep blue, always smiling, full of mirth and of kindness, of energy and of self-confidence. They register her emotions with the sincerity of a mirror whenever she raises her voice, whenever she changes the subject of her conversation. Her eyes are steady, like those of a very experienced fighter. Hard in their purpose, resolved “to see it through,” knowing and weighing subconsciously the motives and the physical advantages of her adversary, not overestimating, never underestimating; kind in victory and in defeat.

Emma Goldman is a powerful orator, using as arguments only cold facts and naked truth. But in her eyes lies the real secret of her influence over millions of people in the United States. These eyes are so sincere, so convincing, that no one, not even the very man who signed the warrant for her arrest, can resist admitting “she is a remarkable woman, she has a wonderful mentality, she has a great heart, and the people (meaning the millions who live and suffer and die) love her.” Twenty-seven years a fighter for liberty and the elimination of poverty, always sympathizing with the under-dog, exposing the ruling classes, battling against authorities, against governments, against police ... and Emma Goldman has not ceased to see her ideal within the reach of her hands. Dreams have been shattered again and again, dear hopes have vanished into the night of impossibility, battles have been lost to iniquity; justice has mocked at the best of her warriors, prisons and jails have been the visible honors bestowed upon her most faithful followers; treachery in her own ranks, perfidy and ungratefulness among her co-workers ... and Emma Goldman continued to cherish her hopes;

she ceased dreaming, and fought for the immediate realization of her ideals: “for an organization without discipline, fear or punishment and without the pressure of poverty: a new social organism which will make an end of the terrible struggle for the means of existence; for a social status which will establish wellbeing for all.”

“There is one thing I would ask you to tell the readers of Pearson’s Magazine,” she said, after we had been comfortably seated in little camp chairs near the keeper’s office. “I never conspired in my life against government or against anyone, and I did not conspire in this specific case. I conducted my campaign against conscription openly and squarely. I used the United States mail, all my meetings were public and accessible to everyone. While the police and those who dictate to our authorities tried always to interfere with my work, it has not been necessary up to the present to resort to the methods of the Russian fighters for the people. I do hope it will never be necessary to conspire in America while fighting for freedom and for liberty.

“My paper, Mother Earth, has enjoyed for the last eleven years without interruption the second-class mailing privileges. My June issue has been confiscated. I wrote several letters to the Third Assistant Postmaster, Burlison, inquiring why my magazine had been held up, but I received no answer. My arrest, perhaps, was the drastic answer of the authorities. I am fighting the conscription law because I do not believe that any man should be forced into war against his conscience. I have no objections if anyone wants to go to war or wishes to bear arms or desires to enter voluntarily upon military training.”

She spoke quietly, without emotion. Her dress, consisting of a simple blue and white striped blouse and dark skirt, gave her the appearance of a motherly matron. Her hands, laying in her lap, seemed more adapted to stroke with kindly caresses than to strike with clenched fists.

“If I am comfortable here in prison? Fairly well. Whenever I go to prison I know what I have to expect and therefore I make the

best of the prevailing conditions. I should prefer to be out in the country. I love Nature in early summer.

“A dreadful new feature has been introduced here since the recent passing of the ‘dope’ laws to prevent visitors from smuggling in drugs to their incarcerated friends. The authorities have provided a very finely meshed iron netting through which the conversation has to be carried on between inmates and visitors. It is impossible to see through or to distinguish the faces of the persons to whom one is talking. People have to shout in order to make themselves understood. It is a public visiting room, but visits from friends in such a place are a torture. The whole reminds one very much of an insane asylum. I think it cruel to spoil the only light moments of the prisoner’s monotonous life.

“It is touching and such a great consolation to me that the unfortunate women who share the cells on my floor love me and treat me with marked respect. It is customary here to call each other by one’s given name. They never address me otherwise but ‘Miss Goldman,’ which sounds strangely inside the walls of the Tombs. I must tell you that all of these unfortunates are grateful for Mr. Harris’ work in the Woman’s Night Court in their behalf. They all read his articles in Pearson’s Magazine, and are anxious to affirm his exposure as what they call ‘Gospel Truth.’”...

Among the many people who besieged the doorkeeper of the Tombs, anxious to convey to Emma Goldman a few words of sympathy, was a dark-haired girl of about twenty who had walked all the way from Paterson, New Jersey.

“Do you know Miss Goldman?” I asked of her.

“I heard her lecture once in our city,” was the answer. “She gave a new meaning to my life on that evening. She made me think. I am only a poor mill-worker, but I love Emma Goldman better than I love my own mother.”

I walked to the office of United States Marshal Thomas B. McCarthy.

“What do you think of Emma Goldman?” I asked him.

“She is a menace to the country. The literature that was seized in her home shows that Berkman is not only; an enemy of the nations but also a danger to public morality. Emma Goldman’s influence over a lot of poor and weak people is dangerous at present to the safety of the country. These are not the times to voice her opinions of reforms. She had to be stopped.”

Three days after Miss Goldman’s arrest \$15,000 cash for bail had been sent in by her friends. The money had come in in amounts ranging from one dollar in stamps to one thousand dollar checks. Emma Goldman’s Liberty Bonds found willing and voluntary subscribers in all parts of the country.