

Voluntary Slavery

Ricardo Flores Magón

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Juan and Pedro came to age at the precise age to start working to survive. They were sons of workers, who died not having the opportunity to acquire formal education to free them from the chains of salary. But Juan was spirited. He had read in newspapers how some men, born from humble beginnings, had come to be, with work and thrift, become financial kings, and dominate, with the power of money, not only in the market place, but in the world. He had read thousands of anecdotes of the Vanderbilts, the Rockefellers, the Rothchilds, the Carnegies, and all of those whom, according to La Prensa, and some school reading books, with the stupidities of our contemporary childhood, are abreast of world finances, not because of anything else, -oh, despicable lies-but the dedication to work and the devotion to save.

Juan tenaciously threw himself into his work. He worked a year, and found himself as poor as the first day. At the turn of the following year, he found himself in the same circumstances. He kept on working more, without dismay, without rest. Five years went by, and he found that, at the cost of sacrifices, he had saved some money-not too much. To save those coins, he had to minimize the expense of his nourishment, lowering his strength, dressed in rags, with the torment of heat and cold weather, his system wore out too; he lived in miserable shacks, and the unsanitary environment contributed to his weakness. But Juan kept on saving, saving money at the cost of his health. For every penny he was able to save, he lost strength. So in order to not pay rent, he bought a lot, and built a small home. Later, he married a young girl. The court and the priest took away a big chunk of his savings, saved with so much sacrifice. Some years passed, but work was not steady, debts started to stress poor Juan. One day one of his children got sick, the doctor did not want to assist him since he had no money, and in the public dispensary, he was given such poor attention that the poor child died. Juan, however, did not give up. He would remember the writings he had read about the famous virtues of being thrifty and other foolishnesses of the kind. He had to be rich because he worked so hard, and saved. Didn't Rockefeller, himself, Carnegie and others, before millions, drool unconscientiously? Meanwhile, basic necessities were costing more, making him worried. Groceries were costing more, and extremely limited the home of the innocent Juan, and, much to his concern, bills were increasing, and he could not save a penny. To add pain to injury, the owner, that morning, fired him from work. Occupying their places were new slaves, who, like the ones before, would dream with accumulated wealth, by hard work and savings. Juan had to pawn his home, with the hope to keep his dreams, but he was going down, sinking without help. He could not pay his debt, and had to leave it at the hands of the sharks, all

the product of his sacrifice, that small lot saved for with his blood. Obstinate, Juan wanted to save more, but it was in vain. This deprivation to which he subjected himself, so he could save, the hard work he labored the best years of his life, had destroyed his vigor. Everywhere he asked for work, he was rejected, and there was no work for him. He was a machine to produce money for his employer, but very worn out. Old machines are seen with disdain. And, meanwhile, Juan's family suffered hunger. In the dark shack, there was no heat, no covers to protect them from the cold; the children plead for bread with fury. Juan would go out everyday to look for work, but who wanted to hire tired old arms? And after walking all the city and the fields, he returned home, where they were waiting, sad and hungry, those loved ones, his wife, children, those loved ones who once dreamt about the wealth of the Rockefellers, the fortune of the Carnegies.

One afternoon, Juan stopped to contemplate the automobiles passing by, driven by fatty drivers, imagining the satisfaction of having a life without worries. Women chatting happily, and men, flattering syrupy and insignificantly, attending to them with mellifluous phrases that could make other women yawn with boredom if they had not been those bourgeoisie.

It was cold; Juan shivered, thinking about his family, what they could expect inside that dark shack, that mansion of misfortune. How could they shiver in that cold weather, that very moment; suffering the indescribably torture from famine; how bitter the tears shed those very moments! The elegant parade continued. It was the perfect moment for the rich to show off, just from whom Juan had learned "to work and save," like the Rothchilds, like the Carnegies, like the Rockefellers. A great gentleman was coming in a luxurious car. His presence was magnificent. Gray hair, but his face looked young. Juan cleaned his eyes, rubbing them, worried to be a victim of an illusion. No, no, his old and tired eyes did not fool him; that great man was Pedro, his childhood comrade. "How much had he worked and saved," thought Juan, "so he could get out of his misery, and reach such a level, and gain so much distinction."

Oh, poor Juan! He has not been able to forget the imbecilic stories about the vampire of humanity; he could not forget what he had read in school books, in what conscientiously stupefies the population.

Pedro had not worked. A man without scruples. And with great malice, he had become aware that honesty is not a fountain of wealth, so he started cheating his fellow man. As soon as he pooled some savings, he installed a shop and hired cheap labor; so he went up, up. He widened his shop, and hired more help, more and more, and he became a millionaire and a great man, thanks to the many "Juans" who carefully took the advise from the bourgeoisie.

Juan continued watching the parade of the lazy and the indolent. At the next corner a man was preaching to the townsmen. There were a few people, really, but this orator, who was he? What did he say? Juan went to listen:

"Comrades," exclaimed the man, "the time has come to reflect. Capitalists are thieves. Only by bad tricks can one become a millionaire. The poor drop down, working, and when we cannot work anymore, we are fired by the bourgeoisie, as leaving a tired and old horse from service. Let's bare arms to conquer our welfare and for our families!"

Juan saw the man with disdain, spit on the floor with anger, and walked to the obscure shack, where his loved ones waited sad, hungry, and cold. He could not let his idea die, that saving and work make the man virtuous. Not even the undeserving, who deserved misfortune from his fellow man, could make the miserable soul educated to be a slave, nor could he recognize his mistake.

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