

From Paris to Barcelona

Rirette Maîtrejean

1959

He had arrived one day from Brussels, where he was our correspondent for the small anarchist newspaper I was taking care of since Libertad's death. He was only 20. He was handsome as a god: a face of a very pure oval, a high forehead, a straight nose with quivering nostrils, a thin and sensitive mouth, with a slightly distant smile; on all of this, an expression of great detachment, continuously contradicted by a constant need to work, to discuss, to write.

Almost straight away we made a habit of meeting almost every day, in libraries, along the embankments he loved, at the Luxemburg near the pond of the Médicis Fountain, or at my place, in my small home rue de la Seine. In the warm season, we often took the bateau-mouche to Saint-Cloud, a few books or translation and correction work under our arms.

Then, one grey autumn day, as we were reading and commenting François Villon together, in my silent home, love came... from this moment on my life was completely transfigured.

We were both full of enthusiasm, and we worked with much bravery to animate the small newspaper which was in our care: he at the redaction, and I mainly at administration, and even at housework tasks which often presented formidable difficulties.

Several months passed by in this manner, quite peacefully. Then came the awful torment that was to be called the case of the "tragic bandits", in which we were both taken away, each in a different prison. Even the dangers of the formidable accusation seemed less terrible, less hard to face than being apart. But he was an exceptionally serene soul, and, during the five long years of his imprisonment, he never complained even once. He needed paper, quills, books, many books. He knew I was very poor, but it was as if he had no material needs at all. He never asked for anything.

The last day of the trial – when I was freed – he wrote me, as soon as he was back in prison: "Do not worry for me, my sweet friend, I will stand all of this very well. I am so happy that you are out of this. It will soon be springtime. Enjoy Paris, enjoy life. Keep me only your tenderness and I will be happy."

At the Melun central prison, where he was transferred, he was soon admitted in the printing workshop, where he learnt typography. We were in the middle of the great war, the prisoners' food was dreadful, and three times he had to be moved to the infirmary where they were treated slightly better. He made the best of this forced leisure to learn German, Spanish and Esperanto. He worked ceaselessly, studying, reading, translating, writing. From the Santé prison and the

Melun central prison, I received 528 letters, every single one numbered for control, every one more tender, more affectionate and braver than the other.

As soon as he arrived in Melun, the question of our relationship was raised. We were not married, and from the moment he had been convicted, we were no longer allowed to write to each other, and I was not allowed to visit him. We decided to marry, but we needed the authorisation from the Home Office for this. When it finally reached us, and when the marriage was announced, I went to Melun. The ceremony took place with his two witnesses – prison wardens – and mine – some journalist friends. Then, we were left alone in a small council office, for about an hour. It had been around two years since we had last been close to one another. And our emotion was so great we could hardly speak. Hands joined, eyes blurry with tenderness, we uttered a few meaningless sentences, while our hearts were so full of each other.

Alas! After the five years, we did not find each other again: he was deported, as a foreigner, and he chose the Spanish border. In Barcelona, where I joined him, I could not find the means to support my two children, and I had to leave for Paris. At that time, I found him still resigned and brave as per usual. He had been hired as a typographer and had joined the – revolutionary – union where he immediately took part in the already great agitation among Spanish militants.

When the Russian revolution broke out, he couldn't resist: he felt like he had to go there, be on the ground, take part, give of himself. He came back to France thanks to some consulate indulgence, and I had to help him struggle to find a way to leave. We only managed to have him put in a concentration camp, where he spent another two years. After that, he managed to be part of a transport of hostages leaving for Russia.

The life he led there, he told in his *Memories of a Revolutionary*. Everyone has been able to follow him through his work, which I deem of such great importance, but of which it is not my place to write. But all along this incredible journey, we never left each other, morally speaking. I have his letters from everywhere – Russia, Germany, Austria, Silesia, and, finally, Mexico. I followed him thus through his travels and adventures, with the same tenderness, the same inalterable friendship. I had at some point planned also to leave for Mexico, tired of this abominable life under the occupation. He encouraged me and promised to help me to land on my feet over there. Circumstances did not allow it, but we both delighted in the idea.

It was at lunchtime that I learnt, on the radio, the news of his sudden death, by a heart attack. And I can easily say that it was one of the greatest sorrows in my life.

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