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Kate Austin

Various Authors

November 30, 1902

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On the evening of the 28th of October, in the little city of Kingman, Kansas, there passed to the Great Unknown a woman and comrade whose greatness of mind and heart had already endeared her to thousands of people who had known her thru writings in the radical journals. She died among strangers, in a strange place, hundreds of miles from the happy home she had left but a few weeks before, attended only by her devoted husband, who accompanied her in her quest of health, and a beloved sister, hastily summoned to her bedside. The dread disease, consumption, had already fastened itself upon her throat and lungs before she started; but it was hoped and expected that the invigorating climate of southern Colorado would soon restore her to health. It was for this purpose that the overland journey with team and covered wagon was resolved upon, but alas! undertaken too late to have the desired result. eavy and incessant rains aggravated the sick woman's complaint. The disease spread to the overworked brain, and when the city of Kingman was reached our comrade was taken so seriously ill that it was found she could proceed no further. After lingering several

days in a semi-conscious condition she passed peacefully away.

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 favorable circumstances to fill the role of a Joan de 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. The wrongs of the common people, particularly of the very poor, weighed heavily upon her; she made their sufferings her own, and the burden was too great for her. Altho she had enjoyed uniformly good health during her life, and was of a cheerful, hopeful disposition, the strain upon her nervous system occasioned by the injustice and cruelty of men was the main cause of her breaking down. As one who was very near and dear to her writes: She was a friend to all. No one ever came to her in trouble and went away uncomforted. Especially was she a friend to the friendless. She made their sorrows her own, and it was more than she could bear. Add to this the fact that she was a tremendous worker, for besides the cares and duties attendant upon her home life on the farm, she contributed many articles to the *Firebrand*, *Free Society*, *Discontent*, *Lucifer*, and other radical and labor journals, and was an active member of the American Press Writers' Association. She also carried on a voluminous correspondence with other radicals thruout the country, many of whom will agree with me

that it was a rare treat to receive one of her philosophical dissertations. No wonder, then, that the over-taxed body and brain finally succumbed, and she was stricken down in the prime of her life.

Our deceased comrade was born in LaSalle county, Illinois, July 25, 1864. When she was six years old her parents moved to Hook's Point, Iowa, where Kate resided until her marriage with Sam Austin in August, 1883. When Kate was but eleven years old her mother died, and the care of a large family of eight children, the youngest a mere infant, devolved upon our comrade and her father. Living in a region at that time but sparsely inhabited, opportunities for acquiring an education were very meager, and the ordinary pleasures of childhood were sadly wanting in the homes of the motherless little ones. For two years Kate lived with an aunt in Illinois, and during that time she attended the district school; but most of her education, and her wide knowledge of many subjects, was acquired by hard and persistent study at home. Fortunately she was from her childhood a great lover of books, and read everything that came in her way.

About the time of her marriage a copy of *Lucifer* fell into the hands of her father, and the new and radical ideas taught by Harman found ready lodgment in the minds of different members of the family, resulting in several subscribers to *Lucifer*. This was the first radical or really progressive literature that Kate had ever read, altho the family had for some time been familiar with the writings of Ingersoll, who was greatly admired. Kate readily accepted the economic ideas promulgated by *Lucifer*, and it was an easy step for her to embrace the doctrine of revolutionary Anarchism which she found in such papers as the *Alarm*, *Freedom*, the *Firebrand* and *Free Society*. The event, however, which finally stirred the young woman to the very quick was the Haymarket affair, and the subsequent imprisonment and judicial murder of our comrades in Chicago. About seven years ago she began to write for free thought and radi-

cal journals, and her literary productions have been constantly increasing in number and power every year. Her last contribution, so far as known, was the article in No. 385 of *Free Society*, in commemoration of the anniversary of the death of Czolgosz, whose tragic deed and fate made a deep impression upon her.

Our comrade was more or less familiar with every shade of radical thought, but subjects pertaining to sexual reform and to the economic status of the world's workers claimed her closest attention. Probably one of her strongest characteristics was her intense hatred of anything like sham and hypocrisy. She refused to compromise her principles one jot, even for a strategic purposes where a politic course seemed to promise good results. She was a passionate lover of liberty, claiming perfect freedom of action not only for herself but for others. Of her more than generous hospitality, and the hearty feeling of comradeship evinced by her and her entire family those comrades who have made the Missouri farm a welcome resting place can abundantly testify. She had already planned a delightful trip for all of us to her home in about a year, for she anticipated that before the expiration of a year spent in the foot hills of the Rocky Mountains, breathing the pure air and basking in the almost perpetual sunshine of this region, she would be completely restored to health.

On the little farm in Missouri so recently brightened by her presence she leaves a mourning husband and stricken family of five children, three girls and two boys, the eldest a young man in his nineteenth year, the youngest a boy of ten. A married sister has been left in charge of the home during the forced absence of Sam and Kate Austin, and several members of Kate's father's household reside near the farm.

The body of our dear comrade was sent back to their family, and was interred in the cemetery at Caplinger Mills on November 8, 3 p. m., in the presence of a large crowd. Herbert Folk, a friend of hers, made a few remarks, and read an extract from a beautiful address by Voltairine de Cleyre at the funeral of

We shall miss Kate Austin. There are few spirits in the movement at once so sweet and so heroic; and she will long be a noble and inspiring memory. She had great trust in her comrades. It is for us to see that we prove worthy of her confidence.

James F. Morton, Jr.

Joy
Freedom Colony, Kans.

* * *

Kate Austin's death is particularly sad news to me. There were few comrades in the land who were as dear to me as this brave, thoughtful woman. I remember most vividly the weeks I spent in her home, and our long talks on many themes. Handicapped as she was by lack of early education, lack of books or intellectual companionship in her isolated home, and the drudgery of unusually severe toil, it is marvelous to think of the degree to which she succeeded in cultivating her naturally fine mind. Her devotion to the cause of freedom was as intense as could be conceived, and she shrank from no effort or sacrifice on behalf of the cause that was so dear to her.

I have special reason, however, to remember and admire her tenderness of heart and her beautiful tolerance. Herself a revolutionist to the core, and an intense combatant in behalf of her own resolutely uncompromising position, she never departed from the standpoint of fraternal affection for every comrade. I can recollect many instances of her eagerness to recognize much good in those whose methods she condemned unsparingly. During the past year, her position and mine differed very widely along certain lines. She did not at all like the attitude of the philosophic Anarchists on certain important points. Yet her letters, tho filled with pungent arguments, were never bitter in the slightest degree. My correspondence with her continued up to the sickness which was to take her from us, and never included a single harsh or unkind word on either side. We could not reach an entire agreement of ideas; but we remained the closest of friends. As most readers of *Free Society* know, her view of Czolgosz was the direct opposite of my own. But I feel with a thrill of sympathy her warm and earnest nature, ready to go out to any man or woman who even seemed to be an enemy of oppression.

Katherine Karg Harker. The poem, *A Future Thought*, was also read. A great many people came to the house. She was loved by many.

Wm. Holmes

* * *

It's aw a muddle. That is how I feel, thinking of the death of her. Why should she have died, she, who was so full of energy and purpose, and so many to live on who are not now, and never were, and never will be, anything but aimless, listless, useless, lumps of organized dust! The old, old question,—as senseless and as useless as aught a human being can ask, and bound to beget the answer, There is no sense at all in anything. It's aw a muddle.

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 honor 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.

I did not believe she would die. Even when I saw the word consumption in *Free Society*. Does it always seem like that? That those we want to live, *must* live? That it is not possible they should go? Even tho we know the disease spares no one whom it seizes.

And yet I had a premonition of it—not death, but great illness. Some weeks ago when I criticised an article of hers in *Lucifer* and she did not reply, I said to a friend: Why does she not reply? It is not Kate Austin's way to be silent. I am sure she is sick.

But when I saw her last article on Czolgosz I thought I was mistaken. It was so full of rebellion, so like the last letter she had written me. It did not sound like one who wrote from a bed. That last letter! It was just after my Rocket of Iron appeared, and she wrote to me: Did you mean our Leon? It was an October vision. And then she wrote how she had sorrowed for the boy, the boy whom all had cursed, who to the last had been outraged by his jailers, and, worst of all, outraged in thought by those who should have understood him.

And I think from then on she was more of a revolutionist than ever. I could not always go with her. We cannot go all the way with any other living soul. At some point we shall always be alone. But even when I could not go with her, I could admire her. She never went weakly. Even to the edge of death her heart was strong. In her, as in him she mourned in her last words to all of us, were incarnate the vital forces of our movement,—the never-ending movement of the ages toward human liberty.

Voltairine de Cleyre

* * *

Ever since we members of our colony learned thru Mrs. Harvie that Sister Kate Austin was dangerously ill at a farm house near Kingman, where she and Sam had to stop on their trip to Colorado for her health, we in common with all others who knew, feared the worst. We were all aware of the circumstances, and the dreaded, expected word that Kate was dead, left a sadness in each heart that time can never erase.

We all knew Kate and Sam Austin, for they and Sister Isa stopped with us a couple of days going and coming to and from the Freethought assembly at Ottawa a year ago. They took possession of us, and we took possession of them. We found them old Missouri folks, who did not have to be sighted in order to get acquainted. And we talked—we talked ourselves to bed at

night only to renew it early in the morning. We had read Kate Austin, Caplinger Mills, Mo., so often in *Free Society*, that we were wondering if she would look as she read. She did. Homely at first sight, but her acquaintance wore so wondrously well, that soon look, action, words and paragraphs all blended, and we were charmed with her personality—glad to know her.

I was with them at Ottawa; noted the circle of friends she gathered at once, and held all thru the assembly; rode back with them overland; we told stories, sang old time songs, enjoyed the camp fires and the bivouac in the school house, where Kate and I filled the orthodox blackboard with strange interrogations for it to ponder over, while Sam and Isa got breakfast. The second night out we were in Freedom again; old and young gathered in the factory building, danced and had a good time till midnight. Some of our rather sanctimonious neighbors inquired the next day who those noisy people were we had visiting.

I went to see Caplinger Mills, and the home of Sam and Kate. At Christmas time I was of a party of guests at their house. I noted the absence of any sort of government in the house or about the farm, yet scarcely in all my sixteen years of teaching have I seen such a free family. And never have I lingered with a more thorobred community than at Caplinger Mills, Mo. I asked several why it was. Well, said one, you know there is Sam and Kate Austin. That about tells the story. Last June with company I was there again. Kate was not well. Deep breathing and chest exercise seemed to help her. Her voice got clearer. Charlie's and Ralph's watermelons were not quite ripe, but the huckleberries in the woods and J. D.'s ice cream were to taste. The downhill rides and slides on the go-cart and oak slab were features that made Kate forget she was ailing.

We had planned to inaugurate a free thought annual gathering at the Austin home, but the departure for Colorado nollied it. Perhaps it will evolve into an anniversary in which all who hold Kate's memory dear will gladly gather.