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Events Are the True Schoolmasters

Voltairine de Cleyre

January 1907

I count it as one of the best fortunes of my life that in my early days as an anarchist it was my privilege to know Dyer D. Lum. These thirteen years he is in his grave, and yet whenever editors and contributors of anarchist journals fall to denouncing the actions of the unwise, the ebullitions of the mass, I hear his voice, as yesterday, saying in his short, brusque way: “Events are the true schoolmasters.”

There was in his day, as there is now, a certain percentage of propagandists who think that they possess the truth, the whole truth, and nothing but the truth (a perhaps enviable condition of mind, but certainly an intolerant one). They appear to think that by the application of certain abstract principles they have been able to chalk-line the course of progress, and that if it be strictly adhered to an unquestionable triumph of these principles lies straight ahead. They are essentially reasonable, cool persons, somewhat over-impressed with their lack of sentimentality, having definite “plans of campaign” in their heads. The trouble is that when the plan is put in action, it meets with the difficulties the mathematical builders of Laputa met when

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Mother Earth Vol I, No. 11, January 1907; republished in
Exquisite Rebel: The Essays of Voltairine de Cleyre—Feminist,
Anarchist, Genius by State University of New York Press

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they put up a wall. The planners never look to right or left of the chalk-line to measure the quantities with which they are dealing, or get a relative estimate of their own forces compared with the forces they are endeavoring to guide so straightly. All at once some one of these unreckoned, undisciplined forces flies right across the well-laid-out path; helter-skelter, topsyturvy goes all the patient work, and the “plan of campaign” is smitten in the house of its friends. Do the campaigners give a look around, now, and take in the situation? Do they begin to recognize that their little labored ant-track was just a bit of a groove bearing relation to the path of progress, about as the rut of a toy cart-wheel to the whole road; that the road is by no means straight, but full of hills and holes and curves and angles according to the obstacles met and the powers of the moving quantity? Not they! The plan is all right; so much the worse for the campaign if it disregards the chalk! The planners adjust their blinkers, give a look in their pocket-mirrors that they may behold “the face of Anarchy” undegenerate, lift up their voices, call for clean water, and wash their hands, publicly, clean—very clean. They have nothing in common with these monsters of the depths which the Frankenstein of the State creates for its own undoing. Take notice, Frankenstein; if you lack epithets to vilify them we, the plumb-line anarchists, will supplement your stock. Nothing in common with these unregulated, undisciplined minds which are devoid of logic and filled only with unreasoning sentiments and the desire for foolish and inconsequent talk. Take notice, Prosecutor; if you lack condemnatory arguments we will furnish them. “Our ways are ways of pleasantness, and all our paths are paths of peace.”

What a very pretty thing progress would be if all her ways were likewise; all will admit that unconditionally. However, progress has to do with all mankind, not alone with the calm, the wise, and the patient. There is youth in the world, and youth is generally neither calm nor patient; it does not like to sit in the rear rows and listen to mature considerations rendered in the

tone of a stock-market quotation concerning questions that are burning up its heart, itself silent; if it did, it might learn to be wise and calm,—and also ashy and inert. There is feeling in the world, and a very great quantity of it; and those who do the suffering and the sympathizing may be expected to say and to do many things not within the limits of logic. Sometimes these deeds take violent forms, sometimes they take merely foolish forms; but “Events are the true schoolmasters,” and in the twenty years that have elapsed since 1886, we have seen the wisdom of the wise confounded more than once, and the action of the resolute, the desperate and the foolish break the line of the opposition and make room for wider action and farther-reaching effort.

Through witnessing these unexpected acts and their still more unanticipated results, I have gradually worked my way to the conviction that, while I cannot see the logic of forcible physical resistance (entailing perpetual retaliations until one of the offended finally refuses to retaliate), there are others who have reached the opposite conclusions, who will act according to their convictions, and who are quite as much part and parcel of the movement towards human liberty as those who preach peace at all costs; that my part as a social student and lover of freedom is to get as wide an outlook as I can, endeavor to appreciate the relative values of contending and interplaying forces, try to detect among the counter-movements the net results, the general forward impulse cutting new barriers, and to move with it, quite confident that there is room and enough for me to hold my individual course within that broad sweep. If someone cuts my course, why, then, I suppose I am cutting his at the same time. No doubt the believers in forcible resistance feel that those of us who eschew force and preach peace are on the wrong track; no doubt the censorious among them think we are a nuisance, a drawback, a damage to the movement, in fact, no anarchists at all. But let us neither read out nor be read

out. The ideal of society without government allures us all; we believe in its possibility and that makes us anarchists. But since its realization is in the future, and since the future holds unknown factors, it is nearly certain that the free society of the unborn will realize itself according to no man's present forecast, whether individualist, communist, mutualist, collectivist, or what-not. Such forecasts are useful as centerizing points of striving only. Vast and vague the ideal persists, and a great social drift is setting towards it; somewhat of conscious anarchism therein, but infinitely more of the unconscious anarchism which is in all men. As well "put a bit in the jaws of the sea," as try to control the movements of that great tide. Then why exercise ourselves because someone conceived a different plan of free association from ours? Why, since no one can know a perfect method, nor even act always according to the best method he himself conceives, why fly to the defense of progress and protect destiny? It is a little too much like a Christian Inquisitor protecting the Almighty against heretics.

I believe that if those who feel called upon to act as guardians of the anarchist movement once realized how little it is in need of their guardianship, what a trifle each individual contribution is, even theirs, they would be content to fight the battle with the enemy as it develops (not as they preconceive it ought to develop); and not think it necessary to turn about and add their stripes to those who will be quite sufficiently beaten by the State, merely because such have not waged war as per the cold-blood, wisdom and experience of the gray heads of others.