

more than a glimpse of them: they were segregated, permitted, as far as I know, no recreation, and fed in their cells.

But on that seventh day, noticing a visible agitation among the prisoners, I inquired during the recreation period, and discovered a story going the rounds that our Communists had been held in jail only until the soldiers could be roused to violence against them. That was why the woman had been kept with them, since they wished to dispatch all together as a warning. The officers had by now succeeded in inciting the soldiers, the Communists were to be taken from their cells that night and shot under the walls.

The best-intentioned of us cannot always, as you gentlemen know, repress a smile at the obviously ingenuous, but I merely mentioned the thickness of the walls and the stoutness of steel and stones. My informants replied that the prison authorities would take care of that. Then, gentlemen I *did* smile. I asked, however, what the Communists thought about it, and was informed that they had not been told, no one in the prison possessing the requisite cruelty to warn them. Again, gentlemen, it was hard to restrain a smile: the jail harbored some of the most vicious eliminations of the social body.

But toward nightfall, the convicts must, after long cogitation, have concluded cruelty to be the better part of valor, for I suddenly heard Peter Thompson say aloud, "Comrade Lot, they are going to take us out tonight and shoot us. That is why they kept us together." From the completeness of the silence, it seemed to me that two hundred listening ears had closed upon his words, and it was in the same silence that she answered, "I knew it from the first."

It is difficult for me, at this distance, to convey to you gentlemen, or to explain, the force impelling me to break that silence of listening men, to join for the first time in a conversation in that jail, surprising myself by an interest, which must necessarily seem curious to you in these, after all, most remote people.

"Perhaps it is not true," I ventured.

The growl that issued from that murderous beast in the cell opposite, called my attention to the fist he was shaking at me for silence.

"It is true," the Communist answered. "Democracy is the most perfect form of government for capitalism because it offers the most perfect illusion of freedom. The democratic guarantees, freedom of the ballot, freedom of speech, freedom of the press and of assembly, are guarantees to nobody but the capitalist and his followers. Freedom to bargain for his job has never meant anything to the workingman but freedom to starve. But democracy is not something that cannot be overstepped. Democracy is a stage in the course of the development from capitalism to Communism. Now Democracy is going to kill us. That means it is afraid of us. That is good."

Of course, of course, you are right—obsession. But those are the only words we had occasion to exchange.

I do not believe, gentlemen, that all the men, who lay silent in their bunks, were asleep, nor can anyone longer tell how the Communists passed the remaining hours. But toward midnight, we heard a disturbance in the outer corridor. The soldiers, with two officers, passed between the cells in an entirely orderly fashion. They carried the keys, and there was no difficulty in removing the Communists, for though the latter attempted briefly to reason with the soldiers against their officers, the futility of the procedure seemed, from certain sounds, to be brought home rather urgently to them.

Then, gentlemen, will you believe it, they began again that absurd song. If I thought it ridiculous before, it seemed doubly so now, for they were in evident pain, and must have realized as vividly as did we that they were being marched to their deaths.

*Arise, ye prisoners of starvation,  
Arise, ye wretched of the earth,  
For justice thunders condemnation;  
A better world's in birth.*

My fellow prisoners cowered in their bunks, feeling, I am sure, as did I, that our citadel invaded, we ourselves were none too safe. But I, having the least to fear, stepped to the bars, and was rewarded by my only glimpse of the five. Thompson, a lean, lined face, sallow, singing, head up. The one I took to be Kubelik, short, swart and stocky. The others nondescript. Except the woman. I am most partial as you gentlemen know, to attractive women, and she was, unfortunately, positively hideous. But, mercifully, she walked with her head bent, for the soldier holding

her arm behind her back, had drawn it up between her shoulder blades. And, mercifully, too, they shut off the lights at that moment, an oversight or an afterthought in the excitement.

The prisoners continued to lie, if anything, more quietly in their bunks. But presently the howling assailed them from another side, this time from below the windows, grew louder, for the effectiveness of this execution as a threat, was postulated you may remember, upon its performance against the very walls of the jail. "The law's delay" for once strikingly amended by civic promptitude. It did not, however, take place under my window, but one a little farther down, so that my ears were spared the full force of their incongruous and ceaseless singing whenever, for a moment, the shouting of the others abated.

The sudden crackle of shots I thought would end it. But, no. One voice hesitated and went on. I think it was Peter Thompson's, although because of the shattering effect of that first volley on the nerves, the dark, the tenseness of the silence in the cells, and an unnatural whining tone, which suggests that he may have been wounded, I am unable to substantiate the fact.

*'Tis the final conflict, let each stand in his place:  
The international soviet shall be the human rrrrrrrrrrr*

The initial r of the word "race," which, I am given to understand is the word that the single rifle shot checked in our Communist's throat, was prolonged appropriately into a death rattle.

That is how they died, gentlemen. And to tell the truth, I had a feeling, singularly light and unsorrowful, that their deaths made no essential difference to themselves, to what they were effecting, or to that for which they stood. Indeed, I felt as I have felt only once before in my life, when I was lying on my back in a small boat, with a cool wind, but a hot sun, playing on my body, and a swell and a strong tide carrying me along with no effort on my part.

Their deaths were not horrifying. What horrified, what appalled me was, that after a brief interregnum of silence, following the end of the song, it was suddenly taken up by a lone voice in the cells which, when it had sung a bar or two, was joined by others. Ignorant alike of the words and tune, the men, who may have heard the *International* twice in all their lives, since the Communists were in the jail, began in a moaning monotone, and with voices whose rusty huskiness suggested that they could not have sung for years, barbarously to mutilate what, as I have already said, is, at best, not a good song.

*Arise ye prisoners of starvation,  
Arise, ye wretched of the earth . . .*

And, of course, reacting blindly, and unfamiliar with what they were attempting to sing, broke off, unfinished. After which a really deep and appropriate silence ensued.

No, gentlemen, I could not feel sorrowful at the death of the Communists. It was not the shooting, it was the outburst in the cells that was hideous. The Communists were obviously men of courage, single-minded no doubt, but capable of a kind of fanatical calm in the face of death, on the basis, however difficult for one of us to comprehend, of certain convictions arrived at by means of an intelligence no matter how limited. Were possessed, I mean to say, of intelligence, conviction, courage. Were, therefore, men, gentlemen, men. Men! Men, do your hear me, you beasts, men!



*Meyer Schlazer*

**"TROUBLE IS—THERE'S SO DAMN MANY OF THEM!"**