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John Reed: Under the Kremlin

John Reed, American poet, died, a Communist, in Moscow, the capital of the future state, of the disease of the revolutionary present: typhus; he was bitten by a sick louse, a doomed parasite.

Jack could have made a song of that, a laughing song, in the days when he sang and laughed. He was a joyous spirit then; I tried to keep him glad. His father asked me to. Jack's father was my friend, and a brilliant man he was; a wit. He was the leading spirit of the leading club of Portland, Oregon; and he played himself, as he wished his boy to play, till he was bitten, as the boy was, by those same deadly, dying things.

Francis J. Heney came to Oregon, prosecuting timber frauds, seeking with William J. Burns for the proofs of the process by which our forests fell into private hands. The evidence reached up among the commanding men of Oregon, and they controlled, among other things, the machinery of the law. Their U.S. marshal picked the juries. Heney asked Reed—Jack's father—to be U.S. marshal and so see that the panels were free and fair. Reed laughed. He guessed what it meant to him, but he took the job; and he did the job. There were convictions and there were hates. Reed's club hated Reed, who faced the hate and bit it with his wit. He had a tongue, as Jack had. It is a story of breed I'm telling.

One day, several years after the timber-fraud scandal, ex-U.S. Marshal Reed invited me to his club. He led me into the main dining room up to the center table, where "the crowd" lunched. It was the noon hour; most of the crowd were there.

"There they are," said Reed to me, but for them to hear. "That's the crowd that got the timber and tried to get me. And there, at the head of the table, that vacant chair, that's my place. That's where I sat. That's where I stood them off, for fun, for years, and then for months in deadly earnest; but gaily, always gaily. I haven't sat in that place since the day I rose and left it, saying I'd never come back to it and saying that I would like to see which one of them would have the nerve to think that he could take and hold and fill my place. I have heard, and I am glad to see, that it is vacant yet, my vacant chair."

That was Jack Reed's father: tall, handsome, audacious, and a wit; a gay and, later, a bitten, bitter wit. He told me about his boy at Harvard and he asked me "to look out for Jack" when he came out of college into life in New York.

"He is a gay spirit," the father said, "a joyous thing. Keep him so. He is a poet, I think; keep him singing. Let him see everything, but don't—don't let him get like me."

I couldn't. I tried, and not for his father's sake only. When John Reed came, big and growing, handsome outside and beautiful inside, when that boy came down from Cambridge to New York, it seemed to me that I had never seen anything so near to pure joy. No ray of sunshine, no drop of foam, no young animal, bird, or fish, and no star, was as happy as that boy was. If only we could keep him so, we might have a poet at last who would see and sing nothing

but joy. Convictions were what I was afraid of. I tried to steer him away from convictions, that he might play; that he might play with life; and see it all, love it all, live it all; tell it all; that he might be it all; but all, not any one thing. And why not? A poet is more revolutionary than any radical. Great days they were, or rather nights, when the boy would bang home late and wake me up to tell me what he had been and seen that day; the most wonderful thing in the world. Yes. Each night he had been and seen the most wonderful thing in the world.

He wrote some of those things. He became all of those things. He fell head over heels in love with every single one of those most wonderful things: with his job; with his friends; with labor; with girls; with strikes; with the I.W.W.; with socialism; with the anarchists; with the bums in the Bowery; with the theatre; with God and Man and Being. I pulled him out of each such love affair anxiously at first, but so easily and so often that I soon felt he was safe. I thought I could trust the next most wonderful thing to save him from the last most wonderful thing, so I went off on a long journey, to Mexico. So did Jack, but Jack went, as a poet, to Villa, the bandit, while I went, as U.S. Marshal Reed would have gone, to Carranza's side.

I don't know just what it was that finally caught and took the joy out of this poet and turned him into a poem. He loved a girl, one girl, but Louise is a poet, too, and a vagabond, or she was when she left here in boy's clothes last summer to follow Jack to Russia. And he loved the I.W.W. faithfully and the Red Left of the Socialist Party, and like his father, he hated hate and—all that. I really think it was in the breed. Anyhow, he got a conviction and so, the revolutionary spirit got him. He became a fighter; out for a cause; a revolutionist at home here, and in Russia a Communist. He didn't smile any more.

A friend of his and of mine, who traveled and worked with Jack in Russia last summer, said that Jack was "like the other Communists in there": he was hard, intolerant, ruthless, clinched for the fight. I could see that Jack had hurt our friend, who, having said this, brooded a moment. But then said his friend:

"I wish I could be a Communist."

You see, in Moscow, in Soviet Russia, where there are lice and hunger and discipline and death; where it is hell now; they see—even a non-Communist can see something to live or to die for. They can see that life isn't always going to be as it is now. The future is coming; it is in sight; it is coming, really and truly coming, and soon. And it is good. They can see this with their naked eyes, common men can; I did, for example. So, to a poet, to a spirit like Jack Reed, the Communist, death in Moscow must have been a vision of the resurrection and the life of man.