

Hell on Earth...

Alexander Berkman's first speech after his release from jail

Alexander Berkman

June 6, 1906

Alexander Berkman was released from prison on May 18, and went direct to Detroit, Mich., where he delivered the following address on May 22:

I suppose you have heard the story about the little boy who was asked one day by his mother whether he had said his morning prayer, and little Johnny replied that he had, and then asked: "Mother, why is it my prayer is so long? Mary is such a big girl, and she has only got a little prayer". His mother said, "Why, Johnny, how's that?" and then the little boy told her that when Mary was called in the morning she prayed like this: "Oh, Lord. I hate to get up." That's how I felt when my name was called. Not that I am not glad to be with you again, my friends: far from it. But, you see, I am a little out of practice, so to speak. I am of a naturally "retiring" disposition, and I have passed so many years in solitude that now I don't feel quite comfortable in the limelight. Besides, I suppose you know that I haven't done very much speaking of any kind during that time, either public or private. Some of you, tho, may not realise the absolute silence of the prisoner's life. I will illustrate this point, for the benefit of those among you whose education along prison lines has not been as liberal as my own.

About a year ago, after having served thirteen years in the state prison of Western Pennsylvania, I was transferred to the County prison to serve the last year of my sentence. I suppose the judge who sentenced me wanted me to visit all the prisons of the state, that my prison studies might be complete: or maybe he hoped that I'd never live to see the workhouse — but that's another story. When the Sheriff brought me down to the workhouse the officer in charge took my pedigree, and then he asked me what my occupation was. I was about to tell him that I had been working thirteen years steady for the same firm, but the Sheriff did not give me a chance to speak. He told the workhouse officer that I was a linguist. I suppose the sheriff had been absorbing all the nonsense that the Pittsburgh papers published about me at that time. The Officer said "a linguist? What's that?" "Oh" said the Sheriff, "he can speak half a dozen languages". Then the officer of the workhouse came up to me and said; "young man, let me tell you something: we only speak one language here, and damn little at that." Under such circumstances you will understand that I am somewhat out of practice: in fact, I have almost forgotten how to talk at all. And, therefore, I am not going to make a so-called speech to you tonight, but I just want to talk to you a little.

First of all, I want to tell you how glad I am to be again in your midst. And you, my friends, are evidently pleased to see me, but, great as your pleasure may be, mine far exceeds yours. And I think I may say that I have been a good deal more anxious to see you than you were to see me; indeed, I have tried pretty hard on several occasions to come to you, but I have not heard of any of you trying to get into the place where I was; tho, I must admit, that I don't blame you in the least for not trying to break into hell.

Speaking of hell reminds me of an incident that happened to me on the morning of my release. I left the workhouse on the 18th of May, and when I reached the Pennsylvania railroad station a newsboy handed me a paper. I took it, and as I glanced over it, a big headline in large black letters attracted my attention. The headline read: "To Hell and Back". Well, to say that I was surprised is putting it mildly: why, I was dumbfounded. You see, some years ago, when my friend Carl Nold was keeping me company in the Western penitentiary, we conceived the idea of writing a book of our prison experiences. The greater part of the book was written in prison, and we were just waiting for my release to begin the publication of the book. The title of the book was to be "To Hell and Back". Now, you will understand my surprise when I saw that headline in the paper. I wondered how it leaked out, for it was known only to Nold and myself. But I was soon enlightened. Perusing the article in the paper, I found that to Hell and Back did not refer to our book at all, it proved to be a sermon by a Protestant minister of Pittsburg, a certain Rev. Russell. Now, I don't know where and how the reverend managed to steal the title of our unpublished book, but I do know that his title was not at all appropriate to his subject. In that sermon the preacher tries to prove that there is no hell. Well, if there is no hell, then how did he go to hell and back, as the title of his sermon would lead one to believe. And if there is a hell, and he went there, why, I am quite sure, the preacher would have never come back. But Pastor Russell did not take the trouble to investigate the matter on the spot; he is trying to prove that there is no hell by — why, by the Bible, of course. Now, you know, the Bible is a peculiar book; you can prove almost anything by it. Not long ago I met an old man — he was a preacher before he put on the stripes — and he tried to convince me that we were approaching the end of the world. I asked him why he thought so. Then he proved to me — by the Bible — that it had been predicted that the world would be filled with oil in preparation for the great conflagration which is to consume the world. "And now" said my preacher in stripes, "you can see the truth of the biblical prediction, for John the Baptist Rockefeller has saturated the world with Standard Oil and Lawson is applying the match. Behold the prophesy coming home"! I pointed out to the old fellow that Lawson, instead of dipping the matches in sulphur, has merely coated them with Amalgamated Copper and so they are water soaked and won't burn. But the preacher wouldn't have it that way. Like most preachers he needed a ladder to see the point of a joke.

But to return to Rev. Russell. When I read his claim that there is no hell, I really felt sorry for him. Why, what would become of religion, of the Christian religion especially, if there were no hell, or, at least, the belief and fear of hell? Religion without a hell would be like playing the Merchant of Venice with Shylock left out. Reward and punishment, heaven and hell, are the heads and tails of God's bribe money, and if there is no hell then there is no heaven, and then — goodbye Christianity.

But preacher Russell is wrong. There is a hell; there are scores of them. I, myself, have just escaped from a hell — a hell where the fires of the law's vengeance burn with a thousand hungry tongues; a hell where the hot flames of persecution burn into your very soul; a hell where the brimstone of brutal humiliation stifles the very breath of life; it is a hell where man's inhumanity

to man turns the milk of human kindness into the gall of hate, despair and revenge, and in that hell is the worm that dieth not — the Shylock of the tyrant law. That hell is called a prison. And what is a prison? A prison is the model on the lines of which civilised society is built. Indeed, what is this so-called civilised society of ours but a large prison, a capitalistic hell as wide as the world. The same tyranny and oppression, the same injustice and persecution, hold sway in this large prison as in the smaller one, only on a larger scale. As is that little prison, so is the world filled with the cries and groans of the unfortunates whom the devils of the law-god are raking into the fires of this capitalistic hell: innocent victims are slaughtered by the thousands to satisfy the greed of the rapacious beast of capital: the blood of the widows and orphans is mercilessly pressed into the wine for the rich man's drink, and the wailing of starving babes is heard in the swish of the silk dress worn by the millionaire's wife. It is the hell of a civilisation where the masses must starve because there is too much food on hand, where they must go naked because there is too much clothing produced, where they must be homeless because there have been too many houses built, and where we must all remain abject slaves for the greater glory of capitalistic liberty. Even nearer is our society approaching the perfection of its model — the prison of iron bars and stone walls. Liberty has become a hollow mockery: justice is but the sport of the counting room, and right is laughed to scorn by might. The hand of tyranny is at the throat of our very manhood, and the heel of oppression is crushing the last spark of man's native courage and independence. The curse of capitalism has entered the very vitals of our social body, and its fatal breath has spread over the wide world, contaminating with its foulness everything it touches. It has corrupted every member of our social body, so that today there is not a single institution in our society — not one single institution — that is not rotten from top to bottom, rotten to its very core.

But what is the cause of all this? Why is our society so rotten? Why is our civilisation such a failure? The reason is simply this: our so-called civilised society is built on the cursed foundation of lies; it is built on the triune [triple] lie of religion, law and private property, those three sister curses that have turned a beautiful world into a veritable hell — a hell of wild beasts, where every man is an Ishmael, with the hands of every mother's son turned against his brother.

We have become the victims of a false civilisation, blind slaves of the gods of our own creation. We have lost all sense of the real purpose and aim of life; we have sacrificed our manhood and our individuality, and today we are nothing more than the dupes of the priest, the victims of the law, the abject slaves of or capitalistic masters. Religion has hypnotised our minds, the law has stifled our native independence, and, oh, what a pitiful and terrible sight we are, standing there helplessly gazing at the empty sky toward which the finger of the lying priest is pointed, while the iron hand of the law is securely binding us, hand and foot, ready victims for the vulture of capital that is sinking its ferocious claws into our bodies, mercilessly tearing our flesh and sucking the very lifeblood of our being.

Fellow men, if we are not to perish utterly, if we are to be saved, if we are to be freed we must break this fatal spell; we must smash the chains that make us helpless victims of tyranny and oppression; we must speedily awaken, free our minds, and liberate our bodies, that we may stand forth, ere too late, in the full glory of our strength, in the free manhood of the masses — the honest producers of the world — that we may conquer the world for those to whom it belongs — the free and independent Brotherhood of Labor.

Before I close, I want to tell you again how happy I am to be back again among you, my friends and comrades. I have passed so many years in the exclusive company of a select circle of thieves

and brutes — some in stripes, but more in brass buttons — that now it does my heart good to be where I can look into the faces of honest laboring men (“Tis no reflection on the gentlemen of the press or of insurance, if any be present).

Yes my friends, I am glad to be again in your midst: and I am glad to be able to tell you that I have come out of that hell sound in body, and, what’s more important, sound in spirit also. The sentence of twenty two years that the bloodhounds of the law imposed upon me, the living death of my prison existence, and all those special persecutions that I had to suffer on account of being an anarchist — all these have failed of their purpose: they have failed to kill me, and they have not succeeded in breaking my spirit, and I am here tonight to throw my defiance into the teeth of the accursed enemy, defying the beast of capital, its handmaid the law, and the whole brood of their filthy hirelings to do their worst: and here tonight I want to declare as publicly as I can that I am an anarchist, my undying hatred toward all tyrants and oppressors of mankind, and my eternal, active enmity toward the assassins of justice and liberty.

That I am here tonight, and have survived those fourteen years of hell torture, is owing to that grand and noble ideal, whose wonderful power has sustained me during all those years of torture and persecution. What is persecution? What is imprisonment, or even death? How weak, how insignificant, how helpless are all the tyrants of the world, even in their wildest fury, to quench the fires of liberty that burn in the heart of every true man and woman the world over.

Has persecution ever stifled the voice of truth? Has imprisonment ever conquered the genius of justice? Have the gallows, the guillotine, and the gibbet ever triumphed over the heroic spirit of liberty? No: a thousand times no. The blood of the persecuted and tortured victims of tyranny has ever fertilised the valley of liberty and the greatest heroes of freedom have sprung from the very graves of its martyred dead.

Clad in the armour of our grand and noble cause, we are invulnerable, invincible, are immortal, and death itself is but our servant. In our ideal we possess the greatest of all blessings, the consciousness of being right, and knowing that we are right we have the scornful contempt of the conventional mob and we bid defiance to the enemy and dare him do his worst, confident as we are in the final triumph of our cause, knowing that in the not far distant future we shall plant the flag of anarchy on every hill and in every dale and we shall proclaim to the world a free and universal brotherhood.

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