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L’Action Française, the Germaine Berton and Philippe Daudet affair

May Picqueray

Here are now two stories in which I played almost no part, but to which I want to bear witness to, since I lived them from inside the libertarian movement.

First if all, the Germaine Berton case.

Germaine was brown-haired. She was younger than me (born in Puteaux in 1902). I have hardly spent any time with her. We met however at a meeting at the Wagram meeting hall organised by the Action Française.

You might be surprised that I attend an extreme right meeting. But I strongly wished to see with my own eyes someone like Léon Daudet. What I had read about him in L’Action Française seemed so extraordinary that I wondered whether he actually existed.

War was his favourite subject. He talked about it with a truly hysterical violence. At some point, he started to scream:

“Never forget that, above love, there is hatred...”

Even before the clapping flared up, a young boy stood up:

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“No, mister,” he said, “above hatred, there is love. At least, that is what I’ve always been told...”

Not only was he silenced, but the “King’s Comelots” in attendance threw him out, beating him with canes.

Leon Daudet resumed his speech. His language was war-mongering, pushing his troops to war and the restoration of the monarchy. I was absolutely astonished.

L’Action Française, the Royalist newspaper that he directed had for its motto “Tomorrow on their graves... Wheat will grow more beautiful.”

What I found appalling was that the young people who drank his words seemed to be okay to be used as fertilizer.

When we left the meeting, I was frankly feeling sick. Germaine Berton was even more outraged than I was. She told me:

“What a bastard, he doesn’t deserve to live!”

She had not been around the anarchist milieu for long and already had a solid anti-militarist and pacifist training. She often took part in the discussions of her group and always to say something intelligent.

She lived with a bookshop delivery boy, Armand Gohary. I saw him a couple of times, he seemed nice. People said he had important documents on the Red Hat affair¹.

He was found dead in his room, probably murdered.

Taupin, an Anarchist comrade, who was also his friend, “committed suicide”. That was the official version at least.

I hadn’t seen Germaine again, and I hadn’t taken seriously the words she had uttered in her outrage.

I was wrong.

On January 23rd, 1923, some time after the meeting, carrying a revolver in her handbag, she showed up at the Action Française headquarters and asked to see Léon Daudet. He said he was absent and had her meet Marius Plateau. She was introduced in a large room with magnificent blue armchairs, embroidered with fleur-de-lis motifs.

The fact he was a Monarchist did not prevent Marius Plateau from being a vulgar character. He behaved with Germaine with a vulgarity, a baseness and an arrogance beyond description. He accused her of being paid by the police “like all the Anarchists, anyway”. He offered her money “for the information she no doubt had come to give him”, etc.

Angered by his words, she took out her weapon and shoot him down without a word. Then she shot a bullet towards herself, missed, and fell unconscious. The camelots on guard burst in at the sound of gunshots, they believed her dead, or they would have no doubt torn her to pieces.

Le Libertaire had to face the attacks and slander of L’Action Française, and they vigorously defended Germaine Berton, and instead of weekly, it was published daily, what they had planned to do for a while already. They asked Mr. Henri Torrès to represent Germaine Berton. He was starting his career as a lawyer, which did not prevent him to defend her brilliantly. Séverine, Louis Lecoin, and other famous people came to support Germaine Berton and she was discharged.

Léon Daudet and Maurras’s spite, their jingoism, did not attract the sympathy of the jury. On the contrary, and it was an important factor in Germaine Berton’s acquittal.

After her trial, Germaine Berton was no longer seen in the Anarchist movement. She had come back for a short time at the front of the scene during the Philippe Daudet affair. She had claimed that she had been her lover, having met him by chance in the Quartier Latin a few months before.

“Pure invention,” all our comrades who knew her better than I did said. She attempted suicide in the Belleville church then she disappeared from our milieu.

It was a very dark story around the death of Léon’s son. It was on the front page of newspapers during all the end of 1923 and L’Action Française made it into a daily episode serial.

Let’s recall the facts:

A young man of around 15, but who looked much older, showed up at Le Libertaire headquarters, 9 rue Louis Blanc. He asked with insistence to be given a revolver. He intended to “do a hit, kill someone important”. He said his name was Philippe, that he had run away from home, and that he had no money. His parents were members of the bourgeoisie, he did not want to go back to them.

The young anarchist poet Georges Vidal, who received him, talked to him at length, explaining him what anarchism was, that Anarchists did not kill for the pleasure of killing, and that his act should have real meaning for him to sacrifice his life. Then, he took him for dinner, and, to distract and entertain him, to the “Grenier Gringoire”, on the Butte, the cabaret owned by our friend Charles d’Avray. He spent the evening with a group of comrades who welcomed him like a brother. Charles gave him a bit of money to pay for accommodation, but one of the comrades in attendance and his partner took him home for the night. He was called Jean Gruffy.

How come the son of someone like Léon Daudet was attracted by anarchism?

After his death, some journalists deemed he had attempted to infiltrate the anarchist movement in order to avenge the death of Marius Plateau of whom he were one of the most fervent admirers...

Let’s try to keep to the facts:

Although he didn’t manage to obtain the weapon he was demanding, Philippe came back to Le Libertaire. Georges Vidal was not there this time, he met a certain F. who took him to the bookshop owner Le Flaouter, who might sell him a weapon. Indeed, Le Flaouter promised it for the next day.

The bookshop owner received him as planned in the basement of his shop. From this moment on, there is a complete black-out.

The official version was that Le Flaouter sold him a weapon, that Philippe took a taxi on the boulevard, near Bastille, and

asked the driver to take him to the Medrano circus. When they reached Gare de l’Est, the driver would have heard a gunshot from his car, and, looking round, saw his client slumped across the seats in a pool of blood. According to the witnesses who arrived on the scene, the floor of the taxi were already well drenched in blood. The driver made the observations stop and took the “injured” to Lariboisière hospital. There, he was found to be dead and his corpse was taken to the morgue.

The other version, the Anarchists’ version, was that Philippe, believed to be a dangerous Anarchist, was shot down by a police officer, warned by Le Flaouter, in the basement, then loaded in a taxi paid for by the police, everything else being fabricated. Philippe having been dead when the driver made people witness it.

It has to be said that Le Flaouter was very close to a police officer, whom he probably fed information. They played cards together every evening.

The Daudet family, worried about Philippe missing, looked every day at the crime section of the newspapers; their attention was attracted to the suicide of a young an, whose description matched Philippe’s. Léon Daudet, accompanied by a friend, went to the hospital, where he could only identify the corpse.

He held the Anarchists responsible for his death, and launched an extremely violent campaign in L’Action Française, to which Le Libertaire answered blow for blow.

Léon Daudet especially attacked Georges Vidal, who had welcomed Philippe the first time he came. Philippe had given him a letter to his mother, in case something happened to him. This letter, the contents of which Georges Vidal did not know, was opened and addressed to Mrs. Daudet. The name of his father was not mentioned.

Embarassed by what Le Libertaire revealed, all of L’Action Française launched romantic fantasies, in which a tiny bit of truth tried to cover gigantic lies...