

The Anarchist Library (Mirror)

Anti-Copyright



Benjamin R. Tucker

The Man

Victor Yarros

1950, November.

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Of Benjamin R. Tucker, the founder and leading exponent of individualist, philosophical Anarchism, I have written elsewhere. Of Tucker the man, little has been written by anyone, and I propose to record here impressions and recollections of him based on many years close association with him, personal as well as intellectual and ideological. For two or three years I was associate editor of *Liberty*. For several years I was his next-door neighbor at Crescent Beach, Mass., and a fellow-boarder of his. We had several open clashes in the pages of *Liberty* and we did not hesitate to use harsh words about each other's views on issues not directly connected with essential Anarchism. But our friendly relations were not for a moment marred or interrupted by these avowed and published divergencies. Tucker wanted and welcomed my contributions till the end of his American career as editor and publisher, and in 1893 and 94 he insisted on paying me for my work for *Liberty*, which he valued highly, though I did not need the money and never expected a cent from Tucker.

I first met Tucker at a meeting in New Haven, Conn., where he, at the invitation of a small group interested in his theories

and reading his paper and his pamphlets, read a paper on Anarchism and Socialism. The meeting had been advertised in a labor weekly, *The Advocate*, and was well attended. The discussion that followed the paper was lively and interesting. I do not now recall what my remarks were on that occasion, but they attracted Tucker's attention. In the evening, after a little dinner we gave in his honor and some informal talk, Tucker called me aside and asked what I was doing for a living and whether I had any plans for the future. He also wanted to know what sort of education I had received in Russia and what, if anything, I had done for or in the revolutionary movement. I answered his questions briefly and frankly.

To my surprise, he that I give up-my job, move to Crescent Beach and work for him as printer, proofreader, copy editor and regular contributor. He said he had no doubt I should learn these vocations readily and speedily, and shortly earn enough to live comfortably. He spoke of Boston, only 29 miles east of Crescent Beach, and its facilities and advantages—a good library, a fine stock-company, concerts, recitals and opera season, interesting discussion groups, friends and acquaintances of his who would welcome me. As I had saved over \$700, I could take time to acquire new skills and get along with scant earnings. I accepted his tempting offer then and there. My ambitions were modest and my requirements simple. Journalism was the profession I had chosen in Russia. I had written for a revolutionary journal, and my articles had been praised by mature and educated revolutionists. Here, unexpectedly, was my chance!

A week or two later, I boarded a train for Boston and Tucker met me at the railroad station. We walked a few blocks to a suburban Station and took a train for Crescent Beach.

There I was introduced to Sarah E. Holmes, Tucker's intimate companion, who had agreed to give me room and board for \$5 a week: The room was comfortable, fairly large and quite

Tucker employed a printer with the understanding that he would pay him a certain weekly wage whether he had work to be done or not. *Liberty* was frequently suspended for several or many months. During these periods the printer, to get his pay under the agreement, was required by Tucker to set up pages and pages of type, distribute it and start all over again. There was no benefit to Tucker in this vain and useless labor, but "no work, no pay" was his principle. He might have given the man a holiday or vacation without loss or inconvenience to himself, but that never occurred to him.

Tucker had a friend and warm admirer in Chicago who had made and lost several fortunes on, the board of trade. Tucker, on learning that the man happened to be broke, offered to finance him for speculation in provisions on certain conditions. The profit, if any, was to be divided equally. If losses should be incurred, Tucker would bear them. But under no circumstances should the whole sum intrusted to the friend be risked. At a certain specified point, the operations were to be suspended, and the money left in the account returned to Tucker. The friend [*] failed to keep the contract to the letter. He did continue to speculate till he lost the entire sum. He had felt sure, he said, very sure, that the last operation would yield him and Tucker a handsome profit. Was his breach venial or unpardonable? Tucker angrily repudiated his friend and disciple, roundly abused him, charged him with willful dishonesty and never mentioned his name again. Why, wretch had violated the bond!

Thus Tucker demanded strict fulfillment of contracts, or justice, but he did not love mercy. He could be generous—provided no contract would be violated thereby.

[*] Identified in a handwritten note as Austin W. Wright.

full charge of *Liberty* and edit it “in my best fashion” during his absence. He had complete confidence in me, he said, as editor and writer. He offered to pay me \$20 a week—he expected to return a rich man.

He returned, penniless! Monte Carlo had licked his system without much difficulty. I never said a word to anyone about this queer episode.

In 1896 I moved to Chicago. Tucker remained in New York, publishing *Liberty* irregularly. Then a fire destroyed his printing shop and much of his library, which he had deliberately refused to insure on the ground that the charges of the better companies were excessive and exorbitant.

Fortunately, he had a small but not inadequate income from a trust his fond mother had established for his benefit under severe restrictions. He could live in Europe on that income, and to Europe he retook himself. He corresponded with a few friends in this country, wrote little, remained a plumb-liner, rejected all idea of compromise but admitted that Monopoly Capitalism was powerful and free-banking was not likely to weaken it. The trend toward socialism he recognized and regretted, but its inevitability was clear: to him. However, his duty was to preach the pure and undiluted anarchistic gospel. He occasionally gambled in the morning at San Carlo, taking slight risks.

Tucker was devoted to Pearl Johnson and his daughter, Oriole. They in turn were devoted to him. He was a gentleman and an individualist. He lived up to his contractual obligations in spirit and to the letter. He was too formal and too rigorously literal in his attitude. He despised contract breakers. He accepted no alibis or excuses. Contracts were sacrosanct, the foundation of any free, civilized society. Those who treated them lightly were foes of civilization. They were not Anarchists. There was no health or hope in them.

In all frankness, Tucker at times astonished and oppressed me by his rigidity, lack of kindness and Shylock-like insistence on the “bond.” I will give two relevant instances.

bare, But it had light and air, a cot, a desk and a few chairs; what more did I need or care to possess?

In the evening we dined with Miss Holmes. The food was good and well cooked. The meal was frugal but satisfying. After dinner we talked for an hour and then returned to our respective rooms. Tucker had rented two, cottages, one for himself and his books and printing shop, the other for Miss Holmes. Each cottage was, primitive but new, clean and spacious. Tucker slept on a bed sans mattress—newspapers plus one pillow served his needs. I worked all day and many evenings in Tucker’s cottage. He left at 8 in the morning and returned at about 5 in the afternoon. He worked on the *Boston Globe* as copy editor till all matter for the final evening edition had been sent up. He told me his salary was \$35 a week; which, he said was more than enough to live on. *Liberty* had a small circulation and Tucker practically met all the deficits out of his own pocket, except that he not infrequently received contributions from well-to-do readers and disciples.

Tucker was an exceptionally hard worker. He had no secretary. He often sat at his desk till mid night, writing reading contributions, answering personal and business letters, wrapping and addressing booklets, pamphlets and sample copies. Until I relieved him of proofreading and the making up of the pages of the journal, continued to do these jobs himself. He was a good sleeper, fortunately, and in the morning usually seemed rested and fresh.

I soon realized that he had few intimate friends. He was cold and reserved. He was no mixer and no conversationalist. He seldom attended meetings and hardly ever spoke impromptu. He commanded respect and, in some circles, admiration. He had little time and less inclination for social intercourse.

The publication of *Liberty* was irregular, and Tucker needed and wanted money to insure its future and to build up an anarchistic library. He was full of plans and schemes with that end in view, but he was in no sense a businessman. He believed

that a good idea somehow made its way without costly publicity. This was a strange misconception. He reckoned without the inertia and indifference of the reading public. He never had enough capital to give his intrinsically sound idea a chance. He couldn't wait.

He decided to resign his position on the *Globe* and go into the publishing business. He launched two periodicals—The *Transatlantic*, a monthly of the type of *Littell's Living Age*, but with this important difference; *Littell's* depended wholly on British periodicals, which no copyright law then protected, whereas Tucker intended to procure translations from the French, German, Italian, Spanish and Russian languages. The format, too, was to be more attractive. The second enterprise was a weekly *Bulletin*, devoted to listing, cataloguing and briefly indicating the contents of the current articles in the periodical and daily press.

These were excellent periodicals and there surely was a potential market for both of them. But Tucker did not advertise them sufficiently. He got a few favorable notices for the first number of the handsome *Transatlantic*. How many issues he published I do not remember, but his funds were soon spent, and he had to suspend the publication of that most promising periodical. The *Bulletin* did attract considerable notice, but it too failed because of lack of publicity, and Tucker sold it to a friend who continued it for several months at a loss and then retired from the publishing and editing business, the 1893 depression having hit him hard.

Tucker left Boston and settled in New York, where John Dunlap, the editor of *The Engineering Magazine*, an admirer, gave Tucker a job—the conducting of a bulletin section, limited to technical and scientific periodicals. *Liberty* resumed publication from a New York office and printing shop. At Tucker's flattering request, I continued my work for *Liberty* and had one or more articles in each issue.

The depression cost me my job in Boston, and I too moved to New York. Tucker and I continued our collaboration. We dined together often at a French restaurant—a luxury Tucker permitted himself once a week only. We went to some concerts and operas together, and joined a discussion group of Single Taxers, liberals, Socialists and independents.

Tucker, in addition to his routine job with Dunlap, was engaged to edit *The Home Journal*, an old and conservative weekly, mainly literary. He wrote editorials for it, and I contributed signed literary and critical pieces. But some one informed the timid publishers that Tucker was an Anarchist and the editor of *Liberty*, and that scared them. They became cool toward him, and he promptly resigned his job with them.

Tucker never wrote a line which did not express his convictions. He never forgave me for writing unsigned editorials occasionally for conservative and even reactionary papers. I did not share his extreme view. To write for a paper and its editor-in-chief is not to assume personal responsibility for the ideas expressed. You lend them your style and your superior knowledge of their own side, and make the best case for them. It is not your case, and the public is aware of that fact. You either use the editorial *We* or else you say *The Blast*, or *The Call* thinks so-and-so. Tucker sternly held that this was still "prostitution." I emphatically disagreed.

The money problem continued to worry Tucker. He had learned his lesson with respect to advertising, and no longer entertained publishing projects. One day he told me that he would like to go to Monte Carlo for some weeks and make at least \$10,000. How? By beating the bank. He had devised a "perfect system," he said, to insure success there, and was ready to demonstrate it in his own flat. He had already done so to several friends and would like to persuade me. I consented, and for two hours Tucker played his system and steadily won imaginary dollars. I was impressed but not exactly convinced. He sought financial aid and secured it. He wanted me to take