A Leader

IT WAS in January 1907, shortly after the sanguinary crushing of the revolutionary movement in Russia.

A few friends and I had assembled in a small group for philosophical studies, when we were informed of the presence of a mysterious visitor asking to be admitted.

We went out to meet him, and in the anteroom we saw a man whose clean but very worn clothes, arms held close to his sides, pale face steadfastly turned towards the ground and half-concealed by a black felt hat, made him look like a hunted animal.

At our approach he removed his hat and looked up to cast us a brief, frank glance.

In the half-light of the hall one could scarcely distinguish the features of his waxen face; only its sorrowful expression was clearly visible.

The silence had become embarrassing, and to break it, I asked, “Can I help you, Sir?”

“I have just come from Kiev to see you.”

His voice was tired, deep, a little hollow, with a slight Slavonic accent.

From Kiev to see us! This was something indeed. We were surprised. He thought our silence indicated doubt, and after some hesitation he added in a lower tone, “Yes, in Kiev there is a group of students who are deeply interested in great philosophical ideas. Your books have fallen into our hands, and we were happy to find at last a synthetical teaching which does not limit itself to theory, but encourages action. So my comrades, my friends, told me, ‘Go and seek their advice on what is preoccupying us.’ And I have come.”

It was clearly expressed, in correct if not elegant language, and we immediately knew that if, perhaps out of caution, he
was withholding something from us, what he was telling us at least was the truth.

Once we had brought him in and made him sit down in the drawing-room, we saw him in full light. Oh, the poor face pallid with long vigil or seclusion far from air and sun, ravaged by suffering, lined by anxiety, and yet all shining with a fine intellectual light which haloed his brow and lit his eyes, sad, wan eyes reddened by overwork or perhaps by tears....

Perturbed, we remained silent. But after a while, to find out what he expected of us, we asked him what his occupations were in his own country. He seemed to concentrate, to take some resolve, then slowly said:

“I work for the revolution.”

The reply sounded like a knell amid the luxury of this bourgeois apartment.

However, without betraying our emotion, with great admiration for the courage of his sincerity, we replied:

“Would you tell us how we could be of service to you?”

The fact that our attitude towards him had not changed gave him confidence and he began his story:

“You have heard about recent events in Russia, so I will not say anything about that. But perhaps you do not know that at the centre of the revolutionary activity there is a small group of men who call themselves students, to which I belong. Occasionally we meet to take decisions together, but more often we are scattered, firstly so as not to attract attention to ourselves, and secondly to be able to direct the action personally at close quarters. I am their connecting link; when they want to consult together, they meet at my home.

“For a long time we fought openly, violently, hoping to conquer by terror. All means seemed justified to us in our intense and ardent desire to see the cause of Justice, Liberty and Love triumph. You might have seen me, I who feel in my soul a wealth of tenderness and pity that seeks to relieve the miseries of mankind, I who became a doctor with the sole aim of fighting its
ills and alleviating its sufferings, being forced by painful circumstances to take the bloodiest decisions. It's surprising, isn’t it? Nobody could have believed that I was suffering because of that; nevertheless, it is a fact. But the others pushed me, overwhelmed me with good reasons and sometimes succeeded in convincing me.

“However, even in the heat of action, I was aware that there was something better to do, that our methods were not the best ones, that we were wasting our finest energies in vain, and that in spite of the almost fanatical enthusiasm which urged us on, we might well be defeated.

“The collapse came, mowing us down like corn in a field; and misfortune compelled us to regain possession of ourselves, to think carefully. The best of us are lost. The most intelligent, those who were most able to guide and direct us paid for their courageous self-sacrifice with exile or death. Consternation reigned in our ranks; at last I was able to make the others listen to what I thought, to what I felt.

“We are not strong enough to fight by force, for we are not united enough, not organised enough. We must develop our intelligence to understand better the deeper laws of Nature, and to learn better how to act in an orderly way, to co-ordinate our efforts. We must teach the people around us, we must train them to think for themselves and to reflect so that they can become aware of the precise aim we want to attain and thus become an effective help to us, instead of being the hindrance they most often are at the moment.

“I have told them that for a nation to win its freedom, it must first of all deserve it, make itself worthy of it, prepare itself to be able to enjoy it. This is not the case in Russia, and we shall have much to do to educate the masses and pull them out of their torpor; but the sooner we set to the task, the sooner we shall be ready for renewed action.

“I have been able to make my friends understand these things; they trusted me and we began to study. That is how we
came to read your books. And now I have come to ask your help in adapting your ideas to our present situation and with them to draw up a plan of action, and also to write a small pamphlet which will become our new weapon and which we shall use to spread these beautiful thoughts of solidarity, harmony, freedom and justice among the people.”

He remained thoughtful a moment, then continued in a lower tone:

“And yet I sometimes wonder if my philosophical dream is only a utopia, whether I am wrong to lead my brothers along this path, whether it is only cowardice, in brief, if we would not do better to oppose violence to violence, destruction to destruction, bloodshed to bloodshed, to the very end.”

“Violence is never a good way to bring victory to a cause such as yours. How can you hope to win justice with injustice, harmony with hatred?”

“I know. This opinion is shared by nearly all of us. As for me, I have a very particular aversion to bloody actions; they horrify me. Each time we immolated a new victim, I felt a pang of regret, as if by that very act we were moving away from our goal.

“But what are we to do when we are driven by events and when we are faced with adversaries who will not shrink even from mass slaughter in the hope of overcoming us? But that they can never do. Though we may perish to the last man, we shall not falter in the sacred task that has fallen to us, we shall not betray the holy cause which we have sworn in our heart of hearts to serve to the last breath.”

These few words had been spoken with sombre determination, while the face of this obscure hero was marked with such noble mysticism that I would not have been astonished to see the martyr’s crown of thorns encircling his brow.

“But as you were telling us in the beginning,” I replied, “since you have yourselves been forced to recognise that this open struggle, this struggle of desperate men, although certainly
not without an intrepid greatness, is at the same time vain and foolish in its recklessness, you should renounce it for a time, fade into the shadows, prepare yourselves in silence, gather your strength, form yourselves into groups, become more and more united, so as to conquer on the auspicious day, helped by the organising intelligence, the all-powerful lever which, unlike violence, can never be defeated.

“Put no more weapons in the hands of your adversaries, be irreproachable before them, set them an example of courageous patience, of uprightness and justice; then your triumph will be near at hand, for right will be on your side, integral right, in the means as in the goal.”

He had been listening to me carefully, occasionally nodding in agreement. After a silence full of thoughts, in which we could feel brooding around him all the painful hopes, all the burning aspirations of his companions in strife:

“I am happy, Madame,” he said, turning towards me, “to see a woman concerned with such matters. Women can do so much to hasten the coming of better days! There, in Russia, their services have been invaluable to us. Without them we would never have had so much courage, energy and endurance. They move about among us, going from town to town, from group to group, uniting us to one another, comforting the disheartened, cheering the downcast, nursing the sick and everywhere bringing with them, in them, a hope, a confidence, an enthusiasm that never tire.

“So it was that a woman came to assist me in my work, when my eyes were overstrained by my long vigils spent writing by candle-light. For during the day I had to have some kind of occupation so as not to attract attention. It was only at night that I could prepare our plans, compose our propaganda leaflets and make numerous copies of them, draw up lists and do other work of the same kind. Little by little my eyes were burnt up. Now I can hardly see. So a young woman, out of devotion for the cause, became my secretary and writes to my dictation, as long
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as I wish, without ever showing the slightest trace of fatigue or boredom." And his expression softened and grew tender at the thought of this humble devotion, this proof of self-abnegation.

“She came with me to Paris and we work together every evening. It is thanks to her that I shall be able to write the pamphlet we have spoken of. You know, it is courageous to link one’s destiny with a man whose life is as precarious as mine. To retain my freedom, everywhere, I must hide as if I were an outlaw.”

“At least you are safe in Paris?”

“Yes and no. They are scared of us, I don’t know why. They take us for dangerous anarchists, and we are watched, we are spied on almost as much as in our own country. Yet how can anyone imagine that men whose aim is to make justice triumph, even at the cost of their own blood, could fail to be grateful towards a country such as France, which has always protected the weak and upheld equity? And why should they disturb the peace of a city which is their refuge in the darkest days?”

“So you intend to remain here for some time?”

“Yes, as long as I can, as long as I am not useful to my brothers there, and can be of service to them here by bringing together all the elements we need to take up the struggle again; but this time the struggle will be as peaceful and intellectual as lies within our power.”

“So you will come and see us again, won’t you? Bring us your projects and the plans for your pamphlet. We shall talk about all that again in more detail.”

“Yes, I shall come back, as soon as I have started my work, as soon as possible. I shall be so happy to see you again and to continue our conversation.”

His kind, sad eyes looked at us full of confidence and hope, while he clasped our hands firmly in his.

And as we accompanied him to the door he turned and once more warmly shook our hands, saying in his grave voice:

“It is good to meet people one can trust, people who have
the same ideal of justice as we have and do not look upon us as criminals or lunatics because we want to realise it. Good-bye....”

He never returned.

He excused himself in a hastily written note. Too closely watched, under suspicion, tracked down after he had changed his lodgings many times, this gentle, just man had to return to his own country, a terrible country where perhaps a tragic end awaited him....