

The two pens

Ricardo Flores Magón

1915

Behind the window of a display case, the gold pen and the steel pen waited for someone to buy them. The gold pen rested indolently in a rich jewel case that increased its glamour; the steel pen confirmed its modesty at the base of a cardboard casket. Pedestrians, poor and rich, old and young, passed again and again by the display case, casting greedy glances towards the gold pen; nobody looked at the steel one. The sun crashed its rays upon the gold pen, which gleamed with sparkles like glowing embers in its chenille cushion; but it was unable to impress even a dim tone of beauty upon the dark proletarian pen. Regarding its poor brother with pity, the rich pen said:

“Poor mangy thing! Learn to be admired.”

Accustomed to great struggles for the highest ideals, the proletarian pen deemed it unworthy to answer that foolishness. Emboldened by the silence of the humble pen, the bourgeois pen said:

“Why don’t you try, you squalid thing, to look like me, to be a gold pen?” And it shone in its chenille like a star in the satin of the sky.

The proletarian pen could not repress a smile, which angered the bourgeois pen, making it break out in nonsense like this:

“Your smile is a smile of impotence. It fills me with pity. Could you be used, like I am, to sign bank notes for millions and millions of dollars? I occupy a place of honor in mahogany and cedar writing desks. In palaces, the elegant writer signs his articles with me. Using me, the minister authorizes important documents for the entire nation. The president endorses his decrees with a signature which only I shall delineate. War is not declared unless an august hand takes me in its fingers, and has me fix its sovereign signature on paper. Peace can not be agreed upon

with mangy steel pens: they must be golden. With a gold pen, the young aristocrat composes his verses of love to the genteel lady.”

Patience has its limits for a steel pen. Thus, the modest pen, from the base of its cardboard casket, raised its clear, sincere voice, and, as it was sincere, it was also handsome and grand, to say:

“Above all things, the pen is grand because it makes it possible for a great mind to free itself from the prison of its skull, to go out and shake other minds that sleep caged in other skulls. It makes them welcome the great mind with hospitality, granting it entrance. Doors should be opened and accommodations should be furnished for all who bring light, hope, valor ... But you, vain pen, you are the disgrace of our species. I would rather break my tips than lend myself to sketching the signature that endorses a bank order for thousands of millions of dollars. An order like this is the result of a pact made between bandits. My place is not on a mahogany writing desk. I prefer a pine table, upon which the people’s scribe outlines the robust phrases that announce to the world an era of liberty and justice. I am the pen of the people, and like them, I am strong and sincere. The minister does not touch me to underwrite documents that sanction exploitation and tyranny. Neither does the president grasp me to authorize laws that command slavery and the torments of the humble, nor to order criminal wars, nor to humiliating peace treaties. But when the thinker takes me between his creative fingers, when the poet and the sage touches me with his fecund, anarchist hands, making me engrave in blank notebooks his bright meditations like the idea of class struggle, I feel my molecules tremble with emotion, an emotion that is pure, strong, sound. This is my pleasure, because, as I am humble, I move in the world of talent, sincerity, and honor. My power is immense, my influence is gigantic. When the proletarian writer takes me in his hands, the tyrant trembles, the priest is terrified, the capitalist turns pale; but liberty smiles with the smile of the dawn; the downtrodden dream of a better world, and the valiant hand nervously caresses the firearm of vengeance and redemption. In my cardboard casket, I feel grand and noble. As humble as I may seem to you, I stir people. I knock down thrones, I upset cathedrals, I humble gods. I am light for the darkness of the mind. I am the bugle that calls the humble to arms, and converts them to magnificence. I resound for the revolutionary militia, gathering the brave in the trench and summoning the *men* to the barricades. You serve to endorse the decrees of the tyrant; I to endorse the proclamations of the rebel. You oppress, I liberate.”

The crash of an car motor, which broke through the front of the shop, prevented the rest of the proletarian pen’s engaging discourse from being heard.

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