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Donald Vose: The Accursed

Emma Goldman

1916

Eighteen years ago I made my second lecture tour to the Pacific Coast. While in Oregon I was invited to Scio, Oregon, a small hamlet. The comrade who arranged the meeting and with whom I stayed while in Scio was Gertie Vose.

I had heard of Gertie through the pages of *Fire Brand* and *Free Society*, from a number of friends, and a few letters exchanged with her. As a result I was eager to meet the woman who, in those days, was one of the few unusual American characters in the radical movement. I found Gertie to be even more than I had expected, — a fighter, a defiant, strong personality, a tender hostess and a devoted mother. She had with her at the time her six year old son, Donald Vose. Another child, a girl, lived with her father, a Mr. Meserve, from whom Gertie had separated.

The stress and travail of life interrupted a correspondence which was a great inspiration for a number of years after my visit. But I knew Gertie Vose had taken up land in the Home Colony at Lake Bajer, Washington, and that her son was with her: that she continued to be the fighter when the occasion demanded. Between 1898 and 1907 I did not get to the Coast and when I finally revisited the Home Colony about six years ago, Gertie Vose was away and so

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was her son.

In May, 1914, while in Los Angeles, I was informed from *Mother Earth* office that Donald Vose, the son of Gertie Vose, had come to our quarters with a letter from his mother begging that we befriend her boy, since he had no one else in New York. *Mother Earth* was then installed in a large house and as we rented out rooms, it was perfectly natural that our Comrade Berkman, in my absence, should have taken Donald Vose into the house. But even if we had lived in small quarters, we should have been willing to share them with a child of Gertie Vose; she who had been my friend for years; she who had been one of the greatest supporters to Berkman in his terrible prison days. How could we refuse her child?

In August of 1914, while in Seattle, I went over to the Home Colony and there was again entertained by Gertie Vose. We talked of the old days and old friends. There I learned how cruelly hard life had been with Gertie; how it had whipped her body, but her spirit was the same, though more mellowed by disappointment, by pain and sorrow. Her one great joy, however, was that her boy had finally gotten into the right atmosphere, that now he would become a man active in the movement. She told me of the glowing reports he was writing about Berk (as he called Berkman), the unemployed and anti-military activities in New York at the time and how interested Donald had become. Poor Gertie Vose! Like the last ray of the dying sun, clinging to the horizon, so Gertie, — old, worn, bruised, beaten, — clung to her son in the hope that he would fulfil her aspiration for humanity. How tragically blind motherhood is; how alien to the soul of its own creation!

I returned to New York, September 15th, 1914. I found confusion, entanglements and burdens in *Mother Earth*. To save the situation the house had to be given up and our whole life reorganized. The stress and strain of the situation absorbed me completely. I forgot even that the son of Gertie Vose was living in the house. I reproached myself for such neglect of him. One evening I went to his room and there for the first time in eighteen years saw the boy I

had met as a child of six. My first impression of Donald Vose was not agreeable; perhaps because of his high pitched, thin voice and shifting eyes. But he was Gertie's son, out of work, wretchedly clad, unhealthy in appearance. I stifled my aversion and told him that as I was about to give up the house, he might go to the little farm on the Hudson belonging to a friend of ours which I had been permitted to use for a number of years. (This farm, like a ghost, is traveling the country as E. G.'s estate.)

He said that as a matter of fact he had planned to leave for the Home Colony earlier in the summer, but at that time he was waiting for Berkman, who had contemplated a Western trip and was prevented from doing so through the Anti-Military and unemployed agitation. Later Donald Vose lost his job as a chauffeur and was now expecting money to take him West. The main thing, however, which delayed his departure from New York, Donald said, was the message given to him by some one in Washington for M. A. Schmidt, the delivery of which was imperative.

Fate works inexorably. The last Saturday in September Matthew A. Schmidt called at the house to meet a few friends, Lincoln Steffens and Hutchins Hapgood, Alexander Berkman and Eleanor Fitzgerald made up the party of that afternoon. Matthew Schmidt was about to leave when Donald Vose returned to his room. With him was Terry Carlin. I told Schmidt that Donald Vose had a letter for him from a friend in Washington, whereupon Schmidt asked to see Donald and also Carlin, whom he had known in California. The meeting of the three men took place in the presence of the other guests and lasted not more than ten minutes. The conversation was general. Schmidt departed and nothing more was thought of his meeting with Vose.

A few days later we moved to 20 East 125th Street. Donald and Carlin went to the farm. I saw Donald Vose after that only when he would call for mail, as my time and energy were taken up with a new course of lectures and the daily grind of the readjustment to our new and hard mode of life. The third week in October I left

on a lecture tour which brought me back to New York the 24th of December, 1914. From that time on persistent rumors came to me about Donald Vose spending a great deal of money on drink though he was not working. Yet he continued to look shabby and would often sit for a long time in the office "to warm up," as he stated. He did not even have an overcoat. When I asked him why he did not get warm clothing, he replied: "I am waiting for my check from Washington." Yet during all that time Donald Vose was dissipating with nearly everyone who was willing to carouse with him. The situation became altogether too suspicious. I wrote to friends in Washington and after a long delay received a reply that no one was sending Donald money. A week later he left for the Coast. Shortly after that Matthew A. Schmidt and David Caplan were arrested. At once we realized that Donald Vose was the Judas Iscariot. Still so appalling is the thought of suspecting anyone of such a dastardly act, that even after the arrest, I hated myself for harboring such suspicions against the child of Gertie Vose.

Soon positive proofs came from the Coast. It was Donald Vose who cold-bloodedly, deliberately betrayed the two men. They who had been his friends; David Caplan who had shared his hearth, his bread, his all with him for two weeks; had betrayed Matthew A. Schmidt, who had befriended him in New York. The thing was altogether too awful. It was the most terrible blow in my public life of twenty-five years. Terrible because of the mother of that cur; terrible because he had grown up in a radical atmosphere, above all terrible that he had been under my roof and that he had met one of his innocent victims in my house.

It is of little consolation that it was utterly impossible to suspect a child of Gertie Vose, recommended by her and kindly spoken of by many people on the coast. For to do such a thing means to suspect one's own shadow. Nor could I console myself with the fact that if Wm. J. Burns had not found Donald, some other despicable tool would have lured our comrades into the net. All that cannot lessen the horror that was mine all year. At least I wanted it known

through *Mother Earth* that Donald Vose met M. A. Schmidt in my house and that it was Donald Vose who had sold him as well as David Caplan.

I shall not now describe my torture, agony, and disgust since the arrest of our comrades. Gladly would I give up ten years of my life if Donald Vose had never stepped over my threshold. But what did his victims do, Matthew A. Schmidt and David Caplan? They who have been described as murderers; Schmidt who was convicted before he was tried! They begged me, yes, insisted, even as late as last month, that *Mother Earth* should not expose Donald Vose. They had broken bread with him and they would not brand him for life as the sneak-thief who had stolen into their hearts and then turned them over, sold them for a few peaces of silver. Thus my hands were tied and *Mother Earth* was gagged. But now that the spy himself has spoken, that he has brazenly taken the stand and face to face with Matthew A. Schmidt has testified in open court that since May, 1914, he was in the employ of W. J. Burns, that he was sent by the latter to New York to trail Schmidt, that he was coached to pose as a radical and that under false pretense he obtained his mother's letter of introduction to Alexander Berkman and Emma Goldman. I must acquaint the readers of *Mother Earth* with the fact that Donald Vose is the liar, traitor, spy who has deceived everyone, myself included, and has used everybody's credulity as a shield to cover his dastardly crime.

Donald Vose you are a liar, traitor, spy. You have lied away the liberty and life of our comrades. Yet not they but you will suffer the penalty. You will roam the earth accursed, shunned and hated; a burden unto yourself, with the shadow of M. A. Schmidt and David Caplan ever at your heels unto the last. And you Gertie Vose, unfortunate mother of your ill-begotten son? My heart goes out to you Gertie Vose. I know you are not to blame. What will you do? Will you excuse the inexcusable? Will you gloss over the heinous? Or will you be like the heroic figure in Gorky's *Mother*? Will you save the people from your traitor son? Be brave Gertie Vose, be brave!