

THE WALSALL ANARCHISTS

Trapped by the police

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This is the testimony of David Nicoll, part of the rich tapestry of anarchism in the working class struggle, here and abroad, that the Kate Sharpley Library exists to commemorate.

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THE
Walsall Anarchists.

TRAPPED BY THE POLICE.

Innocent Men in Penal Servitude.

The Truth about the Walsall Plot.

N.B.—These Revelations were suppressed by the Police when they raided the Offices of the “Commonweal,” on April 18th, 1892.

The truth about the Walsall plot

by **DAVID NICOLL**

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David Nicoll was arrested when his wife died in her bed, and he was charged with the murder of her infant son alone to face the mercies of the night. While he answered to his crimes at the police station before being committed to the Old Bailey, what foul crime had caused him to be treated in this fashion? In democratic England, in the heyday of Victorian family values, he had written a pamphlet denouncing the training of a group of comrades including a dear friend of long standing whom he admired for his self-sacrifice and devotion to the cause. He was arrested in writing and publishing this pamphlet after parliament attacked the influence of it. He was beaten and defeated, lived after his release in a dark hole, and died in obscurity but had it not been for people like him, we would not sleep easily in our beds today for fear of the early morning knock on the door. He was despised by many who had expressed sympathy with the cause because he embarrassed them. He would not remain silent even though it killed him.

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Introduction

David Nicoll was arrested when his wife lay dead in her bed, and was forced by two police constables to leave his infant son alone to face the mercies of the night. While he answered to his crimes at the police station before being committed to the Old Bailey. What foul crime had caused him to be treated in this fashion? In democratic England, in the heyday of Victorian family values, he had written a pamphlet denouncing the framing of a group of comrades including a dear friend of long standing whom he admired for his self-sacrifice and devotion to the cause.

He persisted in writing, and publishing himself, pamphlet after pamphlet attacking the injustice of it. He was broken and defeated. Lived after his release in abject poverty and died in obscurity but had it not been for people like him, we would not sleep easily in our beds today for fear of the early morning knock on the door.

He was deserted by many who had expressed sympathy with the condemned because he embarrassed them. He would not remain silent even though it invited further police prosecution. For that he was called mad.

The testimony of David Nicoll is part of the rich tapestry of anarchism in the working class struggle, here and abroad, that the Kate Sharpley Library exists to commemorate.

THE SKETCH OF THE BOMB.

Romance is not dead yet even in this age of matter-of-fact. It is still around us - is everywhere. Quit the narrow path as chalked out by Podsnap and Co., the proper commercial existence of rising, shaving, and starting punctually to the City every morning, and you will find romance on every side of you. Romance and novelty there are, though sometimes the delightful vision comes to an abrupt termination, changing suddenly like a lovely face in an opium vision, to something horrible and devilish.

This was the fate of some friends of ours, who dreamed of regenerating the world, and found themselves, thanks to the machinations of a police spy, doo

med to a long sentence of penal servitude. Let us tell this strange story of modern life. The facts are remarkable enough, though true.

We will begin by relating a few facts concerning a prominent actor in the affair - Auguste Coulon. Coulon came into the Socialist movement in 1890; joining the old Socialist League, when that body was in Great Queen Street. He had previously taken some part with a Social Democratic Society in Dublin, but left that body and went to France, where he formed some connection with the Possibilist Party. Thence he came into the movement in England, in January

1890. At this time we saw very little of him in the offices of the League in Great Queen Street. He was living at Notting Hill, and joined the North Kensington branch of the Socialist League. Here he posed as a very violent Anarchist. He occasionally visited the Hammersmith Branch of the Socialist League, where he chiefly occupied himself by endeavouring to sell a little French book "L'Indicateur Anarchiste", containing instructions concerning the manufacture of bombs and dynamite. In November 1890, a split occurred in the Socialist League, the advanced section taking the Journal of the League - The Commonweal - with them.

Coulon had been chronically out of work ever since he had been in England. When asked his occupation, he was in the habit of stating that he was a professor of languages. He stated, moreover, in moments of exaltation, that he had been interpreter to the municipal council of Paris. At any rate, this had not been permanent employment, and during his stay in England, Coulon, his wife and family had been mainly supported by the generosity of comrades. After living some time in North Kensington and Hammersmith, he appeared at the Autonomie Club. The real reason of his appearance there was that he had exploited the other districts sufficiently, and there was no more to be got: but he had a very different tale to tell our foreign comrades. According to this story, he had been expelled from the Hammersmith Socialist Society (to which he had never belonged) for his devotion to Anarchism. Our foreign comrades believed this artless tale, and received him with all the honour due to a martyr in the cause. Coulon saw his opportunity. The foreign Anarchists were just starting an Anarchist school for the benefit of Louise Michel. Louise could not speak any language but her own; but here

was a gentleman who could speak several, including English. His aid would be invaluable in the new project. He was out of work, "had great abilities", claimed to have enriched our literature by the publication of a French grammar, and had even been a professor in an Irish school until he had the sack for his "opinions." Here was a man to help Louise Michel in carrying on the new establishment. It is true there was but little money, the post being almost a voluntary one; but men of Coulon's eminent virtues scorn the very idea of such a base thing as gold. "He was willing to sacrifice himself, his wife, and his children for the good of the cause." He was appointed to assist Louise Michel, and through his "abilities" soon became, not only director, but had the entire business of the establishment in his hands. He managed everything, received all monies, and his name appeared in advertisements and circulars, as prominently as that of Louise Michel herself. His position at the school put him into communication with all the groups in the country, and they naturally looked upon him as a person to be trusted. He was as advanced as ever, - "the present system was to be destroyed at once, and robbery and dynamite were to be employed as methods."

Well, after Coulon had been at his new post a few weeks, he confided to me that he did not see how Anarchism was to be obtained except by robbery. I was very hard up at the time, and doubtless he thought the suggestion would be tempting; but I took very little notice of it, and he did not pursue the subject further. But at this time he met someone else who unfortunately was more easily allured by him. Our comrade Charles, was, like so many others in England, out of employment, and in a desperate mood. He met with Coulon, and listened too readily to the tempter. Coulon had money; whether from the police, or from the funds of the

school, I do not know, but he gave Charles some assistance. Charles, one of the noblest fellows alive, had, like many other fine natures, suffered much from the ingratitude of those he had befriended, and was therefore charmed with Coulon's "generosity." This is a man after my own heart he thought, and after he left London for the North, he still kept up a correspondence with Coulon. After leaving London, Charles stayed at Sheffield for some time, and helped Dr. Creaghe to start The Sheffield Anarchist, an advanced Anarchist paper, but found no work until he went to Walsall about the month of July. Even as far back as this the police were dogging their victim.

It was one summer evening that Charles walked into the Socialist Club at Walsall. He was known by repute to the members, through the Socialist papers, and to Deakin, the secretary of the club, through having met him at the Socialist Congress at Paris in 1889. Charles was heartily welcomed, and ultimately became a member of the club. As he was unemployed, one of the members of the club, John Westley, a brush manufacturer, made him his traveller. Charles continued at this work for some time till he obtained the post of clerk at Mr. Gameson's iron foundry. Meanwhile, the first of May in France, and the stormy period that followed had driven a number of refugees upon our shores, among these being Victor Cailes, and George La Place. Victor Cailes had taken part in the tram strike at Bourdeaux; he was also wanted by the French police for inciting to "incendiarism, murder, and pillage," on the first of May, in his native town of Nantes. George La Place had left France to avoid the conscription.

Now Coulon, in order to make himself popular, undertook to find work for these and other unfortunates. He wrote to all the provincial groups asking them if they could find

work for some of the refugees. Coulon knew Cailes was an enthusiast, and he destined him for Walsall. He wrote to Charles, asking him if he could find work for two men at Walsall. Charles read the letter to Deakin, and to the rest of the Walsall comrades at the club. They agreed to take one and find work for him; but to their surprise two were sent down. La Place was unable to find work at his own trade of opera-glass making, and after a stay of some weeks returned to London. One of the members of the club undertook to teach Cailes, who was a stoker, the trade of chain-making; and he was employed for some time in this work; but not succeeding. Westley tried to teach him brushmaking.

When the International Congress was held at Brussels towards the end of August, Deakin was present. On returning, he went to the Autonomie Club (August 29th): it was Saturday night, and the refreshment bar was full. Deakin was soon chatting to a group of Anarchists to whom he was known. Someone asked after Charles, "Oh, he's all right," said Deakin, "he's at work in an iron foundry." "Oh, he will do to make bombs for us" cried Coulon, who was present.

Two months afterwards a mysterious letter, signed "Degnai," and enclosing a sketch of a bomb, arrived at Walsall.

HOW TO MANUFACTURE PLOTS.

The mysterious letter was addressed to Cailes, and inquired concerning the sketch of the bomb, whether these

could be made in Walsall. Cailes knew neither the name, nor the writing; and as Deakin afterwards stated in his confession wrote to A. Coulon, 19 Fitzroy Square, London, the address of the International School (of which Coulon was then one of the principals). Coulon replied, that it was all right. Deakin was informed by Cailes, and Charles, that the bombs were for Russia, but what was in the letter he did not know, as he had but a very superficial knowledge of French. Charles and Cailes explained the letter to him. It was agreed to get the things made after the letter had been shown to Westley, and a rough wooden pattern was made. This pattern was afterwards shown to Ditchfield. It was decided afterwards curiously enough to get the things made at Mr. Gameson's where Charles was working. It seemed then likely enough that Coulon would be a true prophet when he exclaimed, "He will do to make bombs for us." But Ditchfield first got the patterns made. When these were done they changed their intentions, and a letter was sent to Mr. Bullows, ironfounder, Walsall, with the iron patterns which had been made by a friend of Ditchfield's. They were accompanied by a letter, signed "George Laplace" asking for the lowest price for three dozen castings, according to pattern sent. Mr. Bullows did not want the job, and demanded, what seemed to him, the prohibitive price of twenty shillings per cwt. A letter was sent to Mr. Bullows saying that would do. Bullows then took the pattern to a caster, but the patterns were so unskilfully made, that the work could not be proceeded with. He wrote to "Laplace" at the address given, "54, Green Lane," but as the postcard came back through the dead letter office. He did not proceed further with the castings. "54, Green Lane" was Cailes' address, but he had removed, and left no direction for his letters to be sent to. Meanwhile, Coulon was busy in Lon-

don. It was in October that he got hold of a number of young enthusiasts, (one of whom had some knowledge of Chemistry) and persuaded them to form a Chemistry Class, in which the "Great God Dynamite" was worshipped in secret. The class consisted of mere boys, and one of them, M—— was sent to Mowbray, and the writer, asking if we would join. We declined with thanks. We were too old birds to be caught with chaff. Coulon wanted a big haul, and to secure the editor and publisher of the Commonwealth, not to mention other Anarchists, would have doubtless entitled him to a splendid reward at the hands of his employers. The big game could not be caught and the class was dropped. To have arrested half a dozen youths of sixteen would have been ridiculous.

But Coulon burned to distinguish himself, he provided the lad M—— of whom he pretended to make a confidant, with two bottles, one containing nitric acid and the other glycerine, so that he could start manufacturing dynamite on his own account.

The other enthusiast C——, medical student, under the direction of the arch conspirator, translated Most's "Revolutionary Warfare": this was to be privately printed and distributed, to all the Anarchist groups in the country. As this book contains simple directions concerning the manufacture of dynamite and bombs, we can imagine that if the police had made a general raid upon the Anarchists of the country, how this could have been utilized.

If a man had a copy of this book in his possession, he would have been a conspirator, no matter how innocent he might be of the conspiracy at Walsall. Another simple enthusiast in the country was recommended to collect ginger beer bottles "for bombs!" The day of Revolution was at hand, and it was necessary to strike terrible blows at the

enemy.

Meanwhile, Coulon was contributing to the *Commonweal*. He wrote the "International Notes." There are very few men in our movement who understand several languages, and Coulon possessed this accomplishment. He did not possess a polished literary style, but it was as good as that of the average penny-a-liner. What he lacked in literary polish, he made up for in fire, or rather in explosive force. He was for ever talking about Dynamite. One would think he lived on bombs. Like most geniuses, he preferred to blush unseen. He was not anonymous, but he signed his notes A.C., which amounts to the same thing. Once he took a fancy to XX., but another contributor who had adopted this signature objected; he had no desire to be confounded with Coulon.

Here are a few examples of what this contributor called Coulon's ravings:-

"(1) *Commonweal*, October 24th,
"International Notes.

"Our Austrian comrades beat the record this time! Dynamite seems to grow as thick there, as rotten potatoes in Ireland. Only last week, I mentioned two bomb explosions, in Ruchenburg, and here again, we record another infernal and diabolical machine, that has thrown terror and dismay into the minds of the capitalist class. do we ever think of the brave men when we are drinking and dancing in our clubs? Do we ever inquire about the lovely little ones who are here in London, whilst their courageous fathers are shivering in an Austrian dungeon? Stand up! The day is coming when the fight will not be carried on by a few but by the multitude of white slaves, for the regeneration of mankind - XX."

This is Coulon as double X.

Here is something under his own signature:-

"*Commonweal*, Nov.21st, 1891,

"International Notes, Belgium.

"We have still in mind that at the beginning of this year, a large quantity of Dynamite, a full cartload, was seized at Searing by the police. The authorities could not seize it all, and that which was left in the hands of our comrades, has been used at different times. They have blown up a police station. - A.C."

Good old Dynamite.

One more will be enough.

"*Commonweal*, Dec.5th,

"International Notes, Spain.

"Out of the twenty-five comrades arrested in Cadiz, for throwing a bomb on the first of May, nine have been sentenced to terms of imprisonment, from three months to four years. No voice speaks so loud as Dynamite, and we are glad to see it is getting into use all over the place -A.C."

In the same issue, A.C. produces a letter from some French comrades (whether in the same line of business as himself he does not say). These, after reading the remarks of some Anarchist orators at South Place who objected to too much Dynamite from a disciple of Coulon, said, "It is time to prevent these milk-and-water people from speaking in the name of Anarchy if we do not wish to fall into a greater slumber than we are in already."

Coulon's French friends seem to object to anyone talking but themselves. In this they resemble the despotic governments who employ men like their great and glorious

leader.

There is still another story about this great conspirator. I am an Anarchist and believe in unlimited free speech, even from "milk-and-water orators". This is why I, in my capacity of editor, endured Coulon's "Dynamite" notes so long in spite of remonstrances from several comrades. At last, however, my patience gave way. At length he sent me in a paragraph celebrating the blowing up of a cow in Belgium as a great and revolutionary act, and as I would not publish it, Coulon has never forgiven me.

Thus the great conspiracy was worked up. Violent paragraphs in *The Commonwealth*, a book on explosives in the Press, the bombs at Walsall, a Nitro-Glycerine in the hands of a mere child in London, Voila, the wide-spread conspiracy of which Mr. A. Young, the council for the Treasury, spoke in awe-struck tone at the commencement of the case. Coulon understood his trade; I admire his genius. I exclaim in breathless admiration, "What a scoundrel!"

MELVILLE THE MYSTERIOUS.

But still the question puzzles me; had Coulon these remarkable abilities? His literary communications do not show them, but that is no proof. There are plenty of clever fellows who might get up a plot, but cannot write decent English. Other people beside myself who have observed Coulon closely have not discovered any remarkable qualities. One of these people, a well known Socialist, a novelist, and a sharp student of character, said that Coulon struck him as a man whose intellectual faculties seemed almost

destroyed by a vicious life, and that he showed no characteristic save that of a certain amount of low cunning. Certainly, no one ever dreamed that he possessed sufficient abilities to get up a plot like this. Did he merely carry out the instructions of a wretch of greater cleverness? Did he get any useful tips from the Inspector of Police, Melville, who had had experience?

"I have been connected with this dynamite business for eighteen years." Melville told Ditchfield. Coulon had only been in Melville's employment for two years, and had, as far as I can learn, no previous experience. It seems to me, as it does to many others who know Coulon's almost total lack of intellectual capacity, and knows at the same time the really splendid abilities of Melville, that Coulon could not have done it himself. Melville must have helped.

But now let us introduce this great personage, William Melville, a really remarkable and astute man. A Spy of the School of Fouche, he speaks French and Italian like a native. In person he is a very big man, extremely stout, with a fine forehead, a clean-shaven face, slight moustache, and two cold, enquiring, grey eyes. He is on terms of perfect intimacy with the police agents of foreign governments. Melville and his gang have dogged the steps of the foreign refugees for years. It is only lately that English police agents have followed the example of their foreign associates in manufacturing plots.

In London at this time there lived an Italian shoemaker, Jean Battola by name. He lived next door to Coulon in Fitzroy Square, and they were in constant communication. Battola could not speak a word of English, and had probably never heard of Walsall, yet the police say that he wrote the mysterious letter signed "Degnai" which enclosed the sketch of the bomb.

Now Battola was not an acquaintance of Cailes, for Cailes did not know his writing. On receiving the letter, Cailes wrote to Coulon asking about it, and Coulon replied that it was "all right". Supposing Battola wrote the letter, did he not do it at Coulon's suggestion? Battola, an exile, burning with hatred against the tyranny that had driven him from his native land, might easily be worked upon to assist Coulon in his nice little plot of manufacturing "bombs for Russia." But the bomb-makers at Walsall seemed to have little relish for their work, and according to Deakin's confession, Coulon was writing, to hurry them up, from 19, Fitzroy Square. In truth he kept up a vigorous correspondence with the Walsall people, "pressing" them to hurry on with the bombs. We have the statement of Chief Constable Taylor, in cross examination at the Police Court, that "some letters of Coulon's were found in a bag belonging to one of the prisoners." Cailes told Mr. Thompson, after his condemnation, that these letters compromised Coulon. We wonder if the police have preserved this correspondence.

At last a letter arrived from Coulon informing the Walsall men that a man would call on Saturday, December 5th, for some of the bombs, which it was expected Bullows would have completed by this time. On December 2nd, the man arrived in the person of our friend Battola. Directly he gets to Walsall Railway Station, Melville suddenly appears. He evidently expected Battola, and the latter was followed to the club and watched during the whole of his stay in Walsall. The castings were not ready, the models not being according to instructions. After staying a short time, Battola returned to London. From this date, all the prominent members of the club were shadowed by detectives. This was taken as a joke, and the members treated them in the way in which Eugene Wrayburne served Mr. Headstone in

Dickens' "Mutual Friend." They took the detectives for long walks into the country by the banks of the canal, where discussions were held as to the advisability of giving them a ducking then. In fact, they made the detectives' lives unbearable by dint of chaff, insult, and ridicule. So the game went merrily on.

THE DISCOVERY OF THE CONSPIRACY.

On January 6th, 1892, Cailes asked Deakin to take a bottle of Chloroform up to London. Deakin being a clerk on the London and North Western Railway, had a pass. Battola should have met him at Euston, but they missed each other. Inspector Melville was there and followed Deakin. The latter on his way to the Autonomie Club, was rushed upon by several detectives, and arrested. This was followed by a raid upon the Anarchists at Walsall. Charles, Cailes and Ditchfield being thrown into prison. Westley and Battola were arrested on January 13th. Suspicion immediately rested on Coulon, who had for some time been in bad odour. He had become a petty tyrant, and there were even graver charges against him, The result had been his dismissal from the International School at the end of October, though he had remained on the premises for a few weeks pending his search for a new residence. He moved into Fitzroy Square, a highly respectable dwelling for a man "with no visible means of subsistence."

On Sunday, January 10th, the storm burst upon his head. A meeting was called at the Autonomie Club on the question of propaganda, and Coulon was openly charged with betraying the Walsall men. "You do no work; how do you get your living if you are not a police spy?" he was asked. He replied, "I am a true Anarchist; I live by plunder." The explanation was not considered satisfactory, and he was expelled from the club.

COULON THE SPY.

While this was going on, I was in prison; for nothing very serious, it is true. Only for taking part in a shop assistants' agitation, carried on against a shopkeeper named Haile, in the Harrow Rd, who would not close at 5pm. on Thursday. Judge Edlin had given me a month with the option, and I was released after three days confinement, as my fine was paid.

When I came out I found everything in confusion; some crying out against Coulon, others saying he was innocent; and as I was totally ignorant of the existence of the conspiracy, (like everyone else connected with The Commonweal,) I thought it extremely improbable that Coulon could know anything about it; therefore I reserved my opinion. Coulon remained in London, till the Thursday that Batolla was arrested, professing all the time to be very much afraid of arrest. He disappeared directly after Batolla was taken.

I still remained incredulous as to Coulon's part in the conspiracy till Deakin's confession was published. Then I

saw at once who was the instigator and the betrayer of the plot.

How came it that Coulon was allowed to walk about London for a week after the others were arrested? How was it that the police allowed the head centre of the "Great Conspiracy" to escape? Perhaps Inspector Melville will kindly explain. Directly I came out of prison I started a defence fund for our comrades, and was afterwards appointed secretary of the Defence Committee, fresh facts coming daily to my notice. The lad M——told me how Coulon had supplied him with materials for making explosives. He told me also that his father, who is not an Anarchist, had discovered and destroyed them. This confession may not be thought to be worth much, but we have the evidence of the father to confirm it. A few months afterwards the boy left his home, and the father came to a friend of mine, a well known Anarchist, and said, "It is true I have been strict with him, but what could I do? Why sir, I found stuff in my house that might have given me ten years." What do the police and the agents deserve who supply people with this "stuff"? This evidence is valuable as M——'s father is an honest workman, a Radical, but strongly opposed to Anarchism.

But soon more evidence came to light. The friend of a wealthy French Anarchist had an interview on a matter of business with Coulon's brother, who has a shop in the neighbourhood of Old Street. They mentioned Coulon, and the brother, who was unaware that the gentleman knew anyone in the Anarchist movement. said, "Yes, my brother is in the pay of the police. He tells me he has been in the employment of Melville for two years. But I did not think till now Melville was at Scotland Yard, I thought he was a private enquiry officer."

I saw the gentleman to whom the statement was made

by Coulon's brother; he is not an Anarchist, and being in a good way of business, did not wish to be mixed up in the affair; but he repeated what he had heard before Mr. Thompson, the barrister the Defence Committee engaged to defend the prisoners.

We provided Mr. Thompson with these facts and some letters that Coulon had written to various people in England, since he had bolted, when Mr. Thompson went down to encounter the great Inspector Melville at Walsall Police Court. One of these letters bore the address of a Calais Hotel.

Mr. Thompson took the great Inspector by surprise. Melville is a clever fellow, but he makes a fool of himself sometimes, and he did on this occasion. His admissions are interesting. I like to give a full and fair report, so I will quote that of Mr. Chamberlain's organ The Birmingham Daily Post, which certainly cannot be suspected of a leaning towards Anarchism.

"In cross examination by Mr. Thompson, Inspector Melville said he had some experience of these cases. He was in the Gallagher case, and he had met a man named Curtin. He had not been engaged in any cases abroad, but he had made enquiries abroad as to foreigners. But not on behalf of Government. Among the foreigners he had enquired about, there was not one named Coulon. He knew a man of that name who was a well-known Anarchist. He had often been in Coulon's company, but not at Scotland Yard. To his knowledge, Coulon had never been there. he could not swear that he had never given Coulon anything to do for him, but he did not remember having done so." (Melville has a bad memory.) "He would not swear that he had not paid Coulon money, for he had paid lots of Anarchists money. Memory bad again!

Mr. Thompson: - 'Have you paid him any money?' Witness asked the bench if he were to answer such a question, and Mr. Young, the prosecuting counsel said that if the questions were designed merely to get the name of the informer, they could not be put. Mr. Thompson:- ' My theory is this, that any suspicious element in the case is the work of this man Coulon, who is an agent of the police' (Loud applause). The Mayor:- 'If there is any more of that we shall clear the court. We decide that on the ground of public duty, the question should not be put."

"Birmingham Daily Post,

February 10th 1892

"Melville certainly did not come out well. He was quite upset, as Mr. Thompson and others can bear witness, and he was finally forced to appeal to the magistrates for protection - which he got. We fear poor Melville had a 'guilty conscience'". At the hearing on Monday, February 15th, Mr. Thompson continued his cross-examination. I continue my quotations from the Birmingham Post.

"Mr. Thompson asked him if he had made any enquiries about the man Coulon since the last examination. Mr. Young objected to the question (quite naturally) as the magistrates had already decided against it on the ground of public policy. The bench overruled the objection, and the witness said he had not made enquiries. Mr. Thompson:- ' If I give you his address will you act upon it?' (Thompson here produced the Calais letter and held it in his hand). ' I do not know what the information is - will you arrest him, in other words?'

"That is rather strong you are mistaken altogether!' 'Well you need not answer it unless you please.' He had heard that a man named McCormack was convicted of drunkenness last week at Birmingham, had said that he was employed by the police - but the advocate had gone

upon the wrong tack. Mr. Thompson:- ' I have gone upon the right tack, and you do not like it.' Mr. Young objected. Mr. Thompson:- ' If the Inspector objects, I will not press it.'"

One would have thought that the address of a gentleman who has repeatedly incited people to use dynamite, who supplied a young boy with the materials for explosives, and got up a conspiracy for which men have been sentenced to a long term of penal servitude, would be of some consequence to the police, but Inspector Melville does not think so. Perhaps if Coulon was arrested, he might declare that he had only acted 'according to instructions.' But no one would believe such an atrocious libel as this upon Inspector Melville. English detectives never get up the plots they discover. What do you think, Inspector Melville?"

TEN YEARS' PENAL SERVITUDE.

Comedy mingles with tragedy in all the affairs of life, and the Walsall case is no exception. Comedy, did I say, might be roaring farce, such as we find in the playing of the comic man in an old-fashioned melodrama, with plenty of blood and fire. The name of McCormack has been mentioned. Let me explain. McCormack was a poor wretched creature from the slums of Drury Lane, who divided his time between penny-a-lining and newspaper selling. he also indulged occasionally in a little thieving. It may be said that he made the best of his opportunities in this direction. McCormack had hung about the Socialist movement, had

occasionally spoken at unemployed meetings, and had been assisted by several comrades, especially by Charles, who would always give liberally to any whose only claim was their need. McCormack followed Charles down to Walsall.

Westley gave McCormack a job at travelling, and supplied him with sample brushes, but McCormack pawned the brushes and got drunk on the proceeds. Finding at last that McCormack was irreclaimable, they let him go, and nothing more was heard of him till the arrest of the men at Walsall, when McCormack at once volunteered as an informer.

Chief Constable Taylor, of Walsall, was a simple joskin who was highly elated at being concerned in an important case. He saw an opportunity to distinguish himself.

Melville employed a Coulon and became famous, why should Taylor not have a McCormack? McCormack was accordingly provided with a lodging in the police station, and received a temporary pension of two shillings a day from Government. He made a statement which was sent to the Treasury, and Chief Constable Taylor said in open court that the Treasury were so pleased with it that they sent back instructions to send him about his business. But McCormack was a good enough witness for Chief Constable Taylor and Inspector Melville. The latter must have known his character well, but he was good enough for a witness against Anarchists. It is true he had been kicked out of every newspaper office in London for lying, - it was said that he had once invented the story of his own suicide - but what did that matter, he was a good liar, what more can you want in a police witness?

But McCormack had another weakness. He had been hospitably received by some Social Democrats at Birming-

ham, and had walked off with a suit of clothes, and a watch belonging to them; and these facts could be proved. Our comrades at Walsall were rather incautious about expressing their delight at McCormack being called as a police witness, and perhaps that reached Melville's ears, and that was the reason McCormack was sent about his business. Besides, Mr. Thompson had just been engaged for the defence, and he knew all about McCormack's previous character. This was awkward, so McCormack, after receiving two shillings a day for some weeks, and being always treated with great deference by the police, was suddenly sent adrift.

McCormack, like Coulon, had been very fond of talking about "bombs" but nobody had paid much attention to him. He went off to Birmingham with a light heart in search of an Editor who wanted some copy, and in the Birmingham Daily Argus for Saturday, February 16th, 1892, appeared "The Adventures of a Police Spy," wherein the public were informed that the London Anarchists were in the constant habit of making Dynamite and pouring it into ginger beer bottles. Titus Oates was not in it with McCormack.

Well, McCormack, got some money, the editor got some "copy", and the public parted freely with their "ha'pence". Then McCormack got drunk. This was a mistake. When you get drunk your enthusiasm runs away with your discretion, especially when you get up in the crowded streets of Birmingham to address a large crowd on "Anarchy". A clever constable took McCormack for a "conspirator", but found he was drunk and ran him in. McCormack appeared gracefully before the "beaks" next day on a charge of being "drunk and disorderly." He told the bench that he had been employed by Scotland Yard in getting up "evidence" against the Anarchist prisoners. He said, with much pa-

thos, "he had worked (?) hard for the police, as Inspector Melville of Scotland Yard could testify." It is embarrassing sometimes to be claimed as a friend, and no doubt Melville thought so. "The bench" imposed a fine of five shillings or seven days on this friend of Melville's. McCormack did the seven days. Exit McCormack.

A strong suspicion began to be prevalent at this time among the Anarchists that Coulon was not on the Continent. Some even said he was still living in his new expensive abode at 29, Fitzroy Square, which his wife, although she had no visible means of subsistence, still kept on. We presume Scotland Yard paid the rent. The lad M—— volunteered to go to Madame Coulon as a friend of her husband's and try to get into communication with him. He succeeded. Coulon wrote to him, but not on foreign note paper. It was ordinary sermon paper, very like that which Madame Coulon used for her own correspondence.

Some comrades approached the house one evening for fun; directly they approached, five or six policemen appeared on the scene. Coulon's house was evidently well protected, M—— then went to Madame Coulon, told her that he must see her husband, that there was a plot against Coulon's life, and he could only warn him by a personal interview. Alarmed for her husband's safety, she gave the lad Coulon's address.

The head centre of the Walsall conspiracy was not in France, he was living at Brixton. M—— went to the address and saw him. Coulon was in very comfortable apartments over a tobacconist's shop. His landlord said that Coulon had plenty of money; that when he paid his rent, he pulled out a handful of gold and silver, and displayed it with an air of easy grace. Coulon was also in the habit of taking daily journeys to Westminster, doubtless to Fitzroy Square.

Did he call at Scotland Yard on the way?

Where did the expenses of his two establishments come from if not from the police?

There is little more to tell. Charles, Cailles, Batolla, Deakin, Westley and Ditchfield, were committed for trial. They appeared before "Justice" Hawkins on Wednesday, March 21st, and Saturday, March 31st, and after a five day's trial, Westley and Ditchfield were acquitted, while the others were found "guilty".

Charles, Cailles, and Batolla were sentenced to ten years' penal servitude, while Deakin, who was recommended to mercy by the jury, received five.

The judge, as might be expected from these monstrous sentences, showed, to speak mildly, a strong bias against the prisoners throughout the whole of the trial. This was especially noticeable when he fell foul of Mr. Thompson for questioning Melville about paying money to Coulon.

Melville refused to answer and his lordship supported him. The judge said, "The question could not be to the interest of Counsel's client, and he believed it would be to the detriment of the public service." One would think that the conviction of innocent men for a plot concocted by a scoundrel employed by the police would be to the detriment of the public service. We might also ask if supplying the prisoner Ditchfield, when faint with hunger and cold, with whisky and cigars in order to get the "truth" (their "truth") out of him was also "to the detriment of the public service." We wonder, also, whether Justice Hawkins would think that Melville's threatening the same man with the threat of life-long servitude was also "to the detriment of the public service," or was the shameful trick played on Deakin when, after being artfully worked up to a pitch of high excitement by a conversation with Melville about Socialism he was led

back to his cell, and there in the silence of the night he heard "the voices of Charles and Ditchfield, confessing to the officers." Was this "to the detriment of the public service," Justice Hawkins? It was a mighty clever imitation these "voices" Inspector Melville, "Perhaps you know how it was done?". It is very fortunate that Deakin heard "voices" because it might be hard to convict men of the crime of being dynamiters without that confession, when all they had was some plaster casts, which a child played with as dolls, an old piece of metal, a small piece of mining fuse, a sketch of a bomb, and some incendiary French papers, which are said to be subsidised by the French Police. (No explosive substances were found in their possession).

It was a fortunate thing for you, Inspector Melville, that Deakin suffered from "delusions" that night, otherwise you might have been reprimanded for excess of zeal instead of being rewarded.

If Taylor got £50 for engaging McCormack, how much did Melville get for giving Coulon a job?

The matter stands thus. Four men have been sentenced to long terms of penal servitude who are innocent of any crime - that is any crime known to the ordinary law of England. It is a notorious fact that the Explosives Act is a piece of coercive legislation passed by a rich man's House of Commons in a fit of cowardly panic. These men could not be touched under the ordinary law. The Walsall Plot was got up under the patronage of a Home Secretary of a Tory Government to whom an Anarchist scare would have been very useful, an informer and a detective who both wanted money. They have all obtained their desires. The Anarchist scare is utilized. See recent debates and questions in the House of Commons. Melville has also been rewarded. Coulon as well. Only Melville, it was rather too

bad to recommend Coulon as a teacher of French to a young ladies establishment where the chaste maidens of the middle classes resort! Do you know what the Roman Catholic Priest said about him in Dublin? It is to be hoped that the gentleman to whose genius we owe the idea of an "Irish Matrimonial Agency" has mended his morals since he left Dublin.

If some stories are true, Coulon may be a splendid spy, but as a teacher in an academy for young ladies - well, we would rather be excused. Perhaps, however, he has given over his naughty ways since he entered your service. The secret police have a morality of thier own.

But let us finish. Four men are languishing in prison for a crime to which they were led by an agent of the Police. The principal has escaped; nay, has been richly rewarded for his share in the plot: his victims are buried alive. And this a land of equal justice! This is free England! Our freedom is a lie if this is to go on without protest.

If it is a crime to believe in a free society where there are neither rulers, judges, detectives or informers; then these four men to whose goodness and nobility even their employers testify, are criminals.

If it is not, they have committed no crime.

But surely, those who wish to rid us of such an infamous system as this, which needs wretches like these (Melville, Coulon, & Co.) to support it, have deserved well of the people.

Will you then raise your voice with ours in demanding the release of these innocent victims?

Postscript

In the introduction to the reprint of "Life in English Prisons", we wrote that

David Nicoll was one of the unsung working class heroes of the late 19th century. Living and dying in grinding poverty, he was one of a number of devoted Anarchists who helped build up the working class movement, to be faced with relentless persecution by the authorities and blacklisting by employers, resulting in his death by starvation. He was disdained by the middle class who eventually took over and destroyed the revolutionary movement.

He wrote other pamphlets on the case and on his experiences resulting from his passionate defence of the accused. "A Peep into Newgate" and "The Ghost of Chelmsford Jail" have not been located. He also wrote this essay on the Walsall Trial and the role of the police spy and agent-provocateur Auguste Coulon, as well as others during 1892-5, including "Anarchy at the Bar". his defence at the Old Bailey on 5th May 1892 to a charge of incitement to murder by asking if those who framed and condemned these men were "fit to live".

Nicoll is occasionally remembered in histories of Anarchism written by outsiders because he came into conflict with well-known people like Peter Kropotkin. but he was one of those written down as rank-and-file who, following nobody's lead, build up a movement and push a generation forward.