

# The Anarchist Banker

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We had just finished having supper. Opposite me sat my friend, the banker—a well-known capitalist and tycoon—absent-mindedly smoking his cigar. The conversation had been gradually petering out for some time and now lay defunct between us. I tried to revive it with an idea that had just surfaced in my mind. Smiling, I turned to him and said, “I know what I’ve been meaning to ask you. Someone told me a few days ago that you used to be an anarchist.

— There’s no ‘used to’ about it. I was and I am. I haven’t changed in that respect; I still am an anarchist.

— That’s a good one! You, an anarchist! In what way are you an anarchist? Unless, of course, you’re not using the word in its...

— In its proper sense? I can assure you that I am.

— You mean to say, then, that you are an anarchist in exactly the same way as all those people in workers’ organizations are anarchists? You mean that there’s no difference between you and the men who throw bombs and form trade unions?

— Of course there’s a difference, of course there is, but it isn’t the difference that you’re imagining. Do you perhaps doubt that my social theories are different to theirs?

— Ah, now I see! In theory, you’re an anarchist, but in practice...

— I’m as much an anarchist in practice as I am in theory. Indeed, in practice, I’m much more of an anarchist than those other people you mention. My whole life proves it.

— What?

— My whole life proves it. It's just that you've never thought about these things clearly. That's why you think that what I'm saying is nonsense or that I'm merely playing with you.

— I don't understand a word of it! Unless... Unless you think of your life as being disruptive and anti-social, and are using 'anarchism' in that sense.

— I've already told you that I am using the word 'anarchism' in its proper sense.

— All right, but I still don't understand. Are you saying that there's no conflict between your true anarchistic theories and the life you lead, your present life? Do you want me to believe that your life is identical to that of those people ordinarily termed 'anarchists'?

— No, that's not it at all. What I mean is that, between my theories and how I lead my life, there is no divergence at all, but absolute conformity. It's true that my life is not like that of those trade union types or of people who throw bombs. It is their lives that are not truly anarchistic, that fall short of their anarchistic ideals, not mine. The theory and practice of anarchism meet in me, yes, in me—banker, financier, tycoon if you like—and there's no conflict between them. You compared me to those fools in the trade unions, to those people who throw bombs, in order to demonstrate that I am quite different from them. I am, but the difference is this: they (yes, they and not I) are purely theoretical anarchists; I am an anarchist in both theory and practice. They are foolish anarchists and I am an intelligent anarchist. Therefore, I am the true anarchist. They, the people in the trade unions, the ones who throw bombs (I did the same once until I emerged from that into my true anarchism), they are the detritus of anarchism, the whores of the great libertarian doctrine.

— Come off it, that's ridiculous. How do you reconcile your life, I mean your life in banking and commerce, with anarchist theory? How can you do that if you say that by 'anarchist theory' you mean exactly the same as ordinary anarchists mean? If I understand you correctly, you're saying that you're different from them because you are more of an anarchist than they are, is that so?

— It is.

— Then I don't understand at all.

— Do you want to understand?

— I do.

His cigar had gone out. He slowly relit it, watching the match as it burned out, then placing the match delicately in the ash tray. Looking up after a moment, he said, "Listen. I was born amongst the working classes of this city. As you can imagine, I inherited neither a good position in society nor good living conditions. What I did have was a sharp intellect and a strong will. Those, however, were natural gifts which my low birth could not take away from me.

I was a worker, I worked, I had a hard life. In short, I was like most of the people who inhabit that world. I wouldn't say that I'd ever gone hungry—though I came close once or twice—which doesn't mean that it couldn't have happened. That doesn't change anything that occurred subsequently; it changes nothing of what I'm going to tell you now, or of what my life was or is.

I was an ordinary worker. Like most people, I worked because I had to and I worked as little as possible. I was intelligent though. Whenever I had the opportunity, I would read, argue about things, and, since I was no fool, I began to feel a great sense of dissatisfaction, an overwhelming feeling of revolt against my fate and against the social conditions that made my fate what it was. I've already said that my fate was not as bad as it could have been, but, at the time, it seemed to me that I was a being to whom Fate had dealt out all kinds of injustices and had made use of social convention in order to do so. I was about twenty years old at the time, twenty-one at most, and that was when I became an anarchist.

He stopped for a moment, turned to me and then went on, leaning forwards slightly. "I was always pretty clear-thinking. I felt rebellious. I wanted to understand my rebellion. I became a conscious and convinced anarchist, the same conscious and convinced anarchist I am today.

— And is the theory you believe in today the same as you believed in then?

— It is. There is only one true anarchist theory. I believe the same thing I always did, ever since I became an anarchist, as you'll see.

As I was saying, I was, by nature, clear-thinking, and I became an anarchist. Now what is an anarchist? He is a person in revolt against the injustice of people being born socially unequal—that's basically what it is. From that springs his rebellion against the social conventions that make that inequality possible. What I'm explaining now is the psychological route, the reason why people become anarchists; we'll get to the theoretical part in a moment. For now, imagine why an intelligent man in my circumstances would feel rebellious. What does he see in the world? One man is born the son of a millionaire, protected from the cradle from all the misfortunes that money can avoid or make bearable, of which there are many. Another man is born poor, just another mouth to feed in a family where there are already too many mouths to feed and not enough food to go around. One man is born a count or a marquis and thus enjoys the respect of everyone, whatever he does. Another man is born as I was, and has to behave with absolute rectitude in order to be treated like a human being. Some men are born in conditions that allow them to study, to travel, to educate themselves, to become (you might say) more intelligent than others who are by nature more intelligent than them. And so it goes on, in all aspects of life.

We can do nothing about Nature's injustices, but why shouldn't we do something about the injustices of society and its conventions? I accept—I have no option but to do so—that a man might be superior to me because Nature gave him more talent, strength, or energy; what I cannot accept is that he is my superior by virtue of artificial qualities, qualities he did not have when he left his mother's womb, but which he had the good fortune to be given as soon as he was born: wealth, social position, an easy life, etc. My anarchism was born out of the rebellion I felt against those things, the anarchism which, as I said, I still hold to, completely unchanged.

He again paused for a moment, as if considering how he should continue. He inhaled the smoke from his cigar, then slowly exhaled, blowing the smoke out to one side of me. He turned to me again and was about to go on. I, however, interrupted him: "Just one question, purely out of curiosity. Why did you become an anarchist? You could have become a socialist or taken up some other similar advanced philosophy. That would have fitted in with your feelings of rebellion. I deduce from what you've said that, by anarchism, you understand (and I think it's fine as a definition) a revolt against all social conventions and formulae, together with the desire and intention to abolish them all.

— That's right.

— Why did you choose that particularly extreme formulation and not one of the other more moderate ones?

— I'll tell you. I gave all that a lot of thought. Obviously, I read about all those theories in pamphlets and I chose anarchism, an extreme theory as you quite rightly say, for reasons which I can sum up in a few words.

He stared into space for a moment. Then he turned to me again.

— The true evil, indeed, the only evil, are the social conventions and fictions which become superimposed on natural realities—everything from family to money, from religion to the State. We are born man or woman, I mean, we are born to grow into adult men and women. We are not born, in terms of natural justice, to be a husband or to be rich or poor, just as we are not born to be Catholic or Protestant, to be Portuguese or English. All these things are social fictions. Now why are these social fictions a bad thing? Precisely because they are fictions, because they are not natural.

Money is as great an evil as the State, and the institution of the family as wrong as religion. It doesn't matter what these fictions are. They could be different things, and they would be just as bad because they would still be fictions, because they would superimpose themselves on, and mask, natural realities. Now, apart from pure anarchism, any system based on the desire to abolish each and every one of these fictions is also a fiction. To put all our desires, all our efforts, all our intelli-

gence into replacing, or contributing to replacing, one social fiction with another is an absurdity, not to say a crime, because it means creating a social disturbance with the express aim of leaving everything exactly as it was before. If we believe that social fictions are unjust because they crush and oppress what is natural in Man, why put all our efforts into replacing them with new fictions, if instead we can put all our efforts into destroying them?

That seems to me conclusive. But just suppose that it isn't; suppose someone objects that this is all very well, but the anarchist system simply isn't practicable. Let's examine that aspect of the problem. Why would the anarchist system not be practicable? All freethinking people base themselves on the principle not only that the present system is unjust, but on the fact that there is some advantage, some justice in replacing it with a fairer system. If we don't think like that, then we are not freethinkers at all; we are merely bourgeois. Now where does that criterion of justice come from? From what is natural and true as opposed to what are social fictions and the lies of convention. Something that is natural is entirely natural, not half-natural, or a quarter, or an eighth. Fine—now, either what is natural is practicable socially, or it isn't; in other words, either society can be natural, or society is essentially fictitious and can never be natural. If society can be natural, then it's possible to create an anarchist or free society, as is only right, because an anarchist society is entirely natural. If society cannot be natural, if (for some reason we needn't bother with here) it cannot be other than fictitious, then we simply make the best of a bad job. Within that inevitable fictitiousness, we make it as natural as possible in order that it can be as just as possible.

Which is the most natural fiction? No fiction is natural in itself, because it is a fiction; in our case, the most natural would be the one that seems the most natural, that feels the most natural. Which fiction seems or feels most natural to us? The one we are used to. (You understand, don't you? By 'natural' I mean what is instinctive; whatever is not instinctive, but bears all the marks of instinctive behaviour, is habit. Smoking is not natural, it is not an instinctive need—but, if we get used to smoking, it becomes natural to us, it comes to feel like an instinctive need.)

Now which social fiction has become habitual in us? The present system, the bourgeois system. Logically, then, we either decide that a natural society is a real possibility and thus become defenders of anarchism, or we decide that it is not possible and become defenders of the bourgeois regime. There is no intermediate hypothesis. Do you understand?

— I certainly do. That seems to me absolutely conclusive.

— It's not quite conclusive. There is another objection of the same sort to deal with. You might agree that the anarchist system can be put into practice, but you might doubt that it can be done suddenly—that is, that you can move from a bourgeois society to a free society without there being one or more intermediate stages

or regimes. Anyone making this objection accepts that an anarchist society is both good and practicable, but he senses that there must be some sort of transitional stage between a bourgeois society and an anarchist one.

Right, let us suppose that this is so. What is that intermediary stage? Our aim is to create a free, anarchist society; that intermediary stage can therefore only be a stage that prepares humanity for a free society. That preparation can be either material or simply intellectual—that is, it can either take the form of a series of material or social changes that slowly adapt humanity to a free society, or it can take the form of a steadily increasing campaign of propaganda or consciousness-raising which prepares society intellectually to want a free society or to accept it.

Let's look at the first case: the gradual, material adaptation of humanity to a free society. It's impossible—more than that, it's absurd. You can only make a material adaptation to something that already exists. Neither of us could adapt ourselves materially to fit in with the social milieu of the 23rd century, even if we knew what it would be like; and the reason we can't is because the 23rd century and its social milieu do not as yet exist materially. Thus we reach the conclusion that, in the passage from a bourgeois society to a free society, the only possible kind of adaptation, evolution, or transition is an intellectual one—the gradual adaptation of people's minds to the idea of a free society. However, in the area of material adaptation, there is one further hypothesis.

— No more hypotheses, please!

— My dear boy, any clear-thinking man has to examine all possible objections and refute them before he can consider himself sure of his doctrines. Besides, this is all in reply to a question that you asked me.

— All right...

— As I was saying, in the area of material adaptation there is still one further hypothesis. And that is a revolutionary dictatorship.

— What do you mean by that?

— As I explained, there can be no material adaptation to something that does not exist materially. However, were there suddenly to be a social revolution, there would exist, not a free society (because humanity is not as yet prepared for that), but the kind of dictatorship that wishes to institute a free society. Something like a free society would then already exist, albeit in a very sketchy, rudimentary form. There would then be something in material existence to which humanity could adapt itself. Were they capable of argument or thought, that is the argument that would be used by the fools who defend a dictatorship of the proletariat. That argument is, of course, not theirs but mine. I propose it as an objection to myself. And, as I will show you, it is false.

While it exists and whatever its aims or its main ideas, a revolutionary regime is materially only one thing, a revolutionary regime. Now a revolutionary regime means a dictatorship of war or, to be blunt, a despotic military regime, because a state of war is imposed on society by a part of that same society, the part that took power by revolutionary means. And what happens? Anyone adapting themselves to that regime, to its immediate, material reality, that of a despotic military regime, is becoming adapted to just that: a despotic military regime. The idea that inspired the revolutionaries, the aims they espoused, have vanished completely from the social reality which is now occupied exclusively by a warrior mentality. So what emerges from a revolutionary dictatorship, and will emerge more fully the longer that dictatorship lasts, is a dictatorial warrior society—that is, military despotism. It couldn't be anything else. And it has always been like that. I don't know a lot about history, but what I do know only confirms my theory; how could it not? What emerged from the political troubles in Rome? The Roman Empire and its military despotism. What emerged from the French Revolution? Napoleon and his military despotism. And you just wait and see what emerges from the Russian Revolution... Something that will set back the creation of a free society by decades, but then what can you expect from a country of illiterates and mystics?

Anyway, that's beside the point. Do you understand what I'm saying?

— Perfectly.

— You'll understand then how I reached this conclusion. Aim: an anarchist society, a free society. Means: a seamless change from a bourgeois society to a free society. That change will be prepared for and made possible by an intense, comprehensive, global propaganda campaign intended to predispose all minds to the idea of a free society and to weaken any resistance. Obviously, by propaganda, I don't just mean the written and spoken word. I mean everything: direct and indirect action, anything that might predispose people to a free society and weaken their resistance to its coming. Thus, having almost no resistance to overcome, the social revolution, when it happens, will be fast, easy, and preclude any need to set up a revolutionary dictatorship because there will be no one to repress. If that is not possible, then neither is anarchism; and if anarchism is impossible then, as I've just proved, the only defensible, fair society is bourgeois society.

That's why I became an anarchist and why and how I rejected as false and unnatural all other, less daring social doctrines.

And that is that. Now back to my story.

He struck a match and slowly lit his cigar. He thought for a while and then went on: "There were several others who shared my ideas. Most were the sons of workers, although there were one or two who weren't; what we all had in common was the fact that we were poor and, as far as I can recall, not unintelligent either.

We shared a common desire to learn, to find out about things, and, at the same time, a desire to spread our ideas. What we wanted for ourselves and for others, for humanity as a whole, was a new society, free from all the preconceptions that create artificial inequalities amongst men and cause them all kinds of humiliations, sufferings, and hardships that Nature would not. For my part, everything I read confirmed me in these opinions. I read most of the cheap libertarian books, of which there were quite a few around at the time. I went to lectures and meetings held by the propagandists of the day. Every book and every speech made me more convinced of the rightness and fairness of my ideas. I say again, my friend, that what I thought then is what I think today; the only difference is that then I just thought it, but now I both think and practice it.

— All right, that's fine as far as it goes. I can see how you became an anarchist and I can understand why. I don't need any further proof of that. What I want to know is where the banker came from, how he emerged from all that without any apparent contradiction. I mean, I think I can more or less guess.

— No, you can't. I know what you're thinking. You're basing yourself on the arguments I've just given you; you think that I found anarchism impracticable and decided, as I said before, that bourgeois society is the only defensible and just society. Isn't that it?

— Well, yes, more or less.

— But how could that be if, right from the start, I've told you again and again that I remain an anarchist, that I not only was an anarchist but I still am? If I had become a banker and a businessman for the reasons you think, I would not be an anarchist, I would be bourgeois.

— Yes, you're right. But then how the devil...? No... Go on, go on.

— As I said, I was (and always have been) reasonably clear-thinking, but I was also a man of action. Those are natural qualities. They were not given to me in the cradle (if I had a cradle); I brought them with me into the world when I was born. Accordingly, I found it unbearable being merely a passive anarchist, just listening to speeches and discussing them with friends. No, I needed to do something. I needed to work and struggle for the cause of the oppressed and the victims of social conventions. I decided to do so as best I could. I started to think how I could make myself useful to the libertarian cause. I started to draw up a plan of action.

What does the anarchist want? Freedom—freedom for himself and for others, for humanity as a whole. He wants to be free from the influence and pressure of social fictions; he wants to be as free as he was when he was born, which is how it should be; and he wants that freedom for himself and for everyone. We can't all be equal before Nature: some are born tall, some short; some are born strong, some weak; some are born more intelligent, others less so. But aside from that, we can



all be equal. It is only the social fictions we live by that prevent our equality. It is those social fictions that we need to destroy.

They had to be destroyed. I was sure about one thing, though: they had to be destroyed in a way that would benefit the cause of freedom and with a view to the future creation of a free society. The destruction of social fictions can contribute to the creation of freedom or to preparing the road for freedom, just as it can contribute to establishing new social fictions which are equally bad because they are equally fictitious. We had to be very careful there. It was important to draw up the right plan of action, be it violent or nonviolent (because in the fight against social injustice, all means are legitimate), by which we would contribute to the destruction of social fictions without, at the same time, getting in the way of the creation of a future freedom and (if possible) the creation of a little of that future freedom now.

Obviously, that fragile freedom is a future freedom, and in present-day terms, it is the freedom of those oppressed by social fictions. We need have no qualms about crushing the 'freedom' of the powerful, of the well-to-do, of all those who represent the social fictions and benefit from them. That is not freedom; that is merely the freedom to tyrannize, which is the opposite of freedom. Indeed, that is what we must strive to combat and destroy. That seems to me self-evident.

— Absolutely. Go on.

— For whom does the anarchist seek freedom then? For the whole of humanity. What is the best way to gain freedom for the whole of humanity? By destroying all social fictions. How can you destroy those social fictions? I explained that before when, in answer to your question, I discussed other possible philosophies and told you how and why I became an anarchist. Do you remember my conclusion?

— I do.

— A sudden, overwhelming social revolution that would force society to leap from a bourgeois regime to a free society, a social revolution prepared for by intense and continuous work, by direct and indirect action, intended to prepare all minds for the coming of a free society and to lull bourgeois resistance into a state of coma. I needn't repeat the reasons which, in anarchist terms, lead inevitably to this conclusion. I've already told you what those reasons are, and you have understood them.

— I have.

— This revolution would preferably take place worldwide, happening simultaneously in every corner of the world, at least in the most important corners—or, if not, spreading rapidly from one corner to the next, ultimately overtaking every nation.

What could I do to achieve that end? I couldn't create that worldwide revolution alone, I couldn't even do so in the part of the country I lived in. What I could do

was to work as hard as I possibly could to prepare for that revolution. I've already explained to you how: by combating social fictions by every means possible, never ceasing from that fight or from spreading the word about a free society, about both a future freedom and the immediate freedom of the oppressed—thus creating, wherever possible, a foretaste of that future freedom.

He took a puff of his cigar, paused slightly, then began again: "Now here, my friend, is where I put my clear thinking into action. Working for the future is all very well, I thought; working so that others should be free is only right. But what about me? Am I no one? If I were a Christian, I would happily work for the future of others because I would get my reward in Heaven—but then, if I was a Christian, I wouldn't be an anarchist, because then such inequalities would have no importance in our brief lives. They would just be the conditions set on our earthly period of adversity for which we would be compensated with eternal life. However, I was not and am not a Christian, and I would ask myself, But who is it I'm sacrificing myself for in all this? More than that, I asked, Why should I sacrifice myself?

I had moments of disbelief—justifiably so, I think you'll agree. I am a materialist, I would think to myself. I only have one life. Why should I bother about consciousness-raising and social inequality and other such things when I could be enjoying myself and having much more fun than I would have worrying about all that? For someone who has only this one life, who doesn't believe in eternal life, who admits no other law than that of Nature, who is opposed to the State because it is unnatural, to marriage because it is unnatural, to money because it is unnatural, to all such social fictions because they are unnatural, why on Earth should he defend altruism and sacrifice himself for humanity if altruism and self-sacrifice are also unnatural? Yes, the same logic that shows me that Man was not born to be married, or to be Portuguese, or to be rich or poor, shows me that he was not born for solidarity either, that he was born only to be himself, and thus the opposite of altruistic and comradely—in short, utterly selfish.

I argued the question out with myself. Look, I would say to myself, we were born as part of the human race and we have a duty of solidarity to all men. But was the idea of duty natural? Where did that idea of duty come from? If that idea of duty obliged me to sacrifice my own well-being, my own comfort, my instinct for self-preservation and my other natural instincts, in what way was the effect of that idea different from that of any other social fiction which produces exactly the same effect?

This idea of duty, of human solidarity, could only be considered natural if it brought with it some selfish reward, because although, in principle, it went against natural egotism, were it to reward that egotism it would not then be contradictory. To give up a pleasure, simply to give it up, is not natural; to give up one pleasure

for another is. If there are two things and you cannot have both, then choosing one of them is fine. Now what selfish, or natural, reward could I gain from my dedication to the cause of a free society and the future happiness of mankind? Only my awareness of having done my duty, of doing something for a worthy end, and neither of those things could be termed a selfish reward; neither of those things is a pleasure in itself. It is a pleasure, if it can be called that, born of a fiction, as, for example, is the pleasure of being immensely rich or of being born into a good social position.

I confess, my friend, that I did have the occasional moment of doubt. I felt like a traitor, disloyal to my doctrine, but I soon overcame it. The idea of justice, I thought, was here inside me. I felt it to be natural; I felt that there was a duty superior to a mere preoccupation with my own fate. And so I carried on as before.

— That decision hardly reveals tremendous intelligence on your part. You didn't resolve the difficulty. Your actions were prompted by a purely sentimental impulse.

— You're quite right. But what I'm telling you now is the story of how I became an anarchist and how it is that I continue to be one—because I do. I am merely faithfully describing to you the doubts and difficulties I had and how I overcame them. I agree that, at that moment, I resolved a logical difficulty with sentiment, not reason. I will explain how that apparently insoluble difficulty found its complete and proper solution, later on, when I came to a fuller understanding of anarchist doctrine.

— How odd.

— I know. Now allow me to continue my story. As I told you, I encountered a difficulty and, for good or ill, I resolved it. Immediately after that, pursuing the same line of thought, another difficulty arose which also caused me considerable problems.

It was fine that I was prepared to sacrifice myself with no truly personal reward in sight—that is, with no truly natural reward. But what if the society of the future did not turn out as I hoped, what if there never was a free society? In that case, what was the point of all my self-sacrifice? It was all right to sacrifice myself for an idea with no prospect of any personal reward, without gaining anything for myself by my efforts, but to sacrifice myself without even the certainty that what I was working for would one day exist, without that idea coming to fruition by my efforts... That was a bit much. I resolved that difficulty via the same sentimental process by which I resolved the other problem, but I warn you that, just as with the first problem, when I reached a full understanding of what anarchism meant to me, the solution I found then was both logical and automatic, as you will see later on. At the time, I avoided the problem with a couple of empty phrases, something along the lines of 'I was doing my duty by the future and the future would do its duty by me.'

I tried out this conclusion, or rather conclusions, on my comrades and they agreed with me; they all agreed that it was necessary to go forward and to do everything possible to create a free society. It's true that one or two of the more intelligent among them were a little shaken by my exposition, not because they didn't agree with me, but because they had never seen things so clearly, nor been made aware of the complexities of the issues. In the end, though, they agreed. We would all work towards the great social revolution, we would work for a free society, whether the future justified our efforts or not. We formed a group, made up of interested people, and launched a major consciousness-raising campaign—well, as major as our limitations allowed. For quite a long time, in the midst of difficulties, confusion, and occasional persecution, we worked together for the anarchist ideal.

Having got that far, the banker paused for a little longer than usual. He didn't even light his cigar, which had again gone out. He suddenly smiled like someone who has reached an important juncture in his argument; he looked at me hard and then went on, speaking more clearly, more emphatically. "At that point," he said, "a new problem arose.

'At that point' is a manner of speaking. I mean that after the consciousness-raising program had been going on for a few months, I began to notice a new complication, and this was the most serious of all the complications I had previously met with; this really was serious.

You'll remember that, by means of a rigorous rational analysis, I had decided on the correct course of action for us anarchists—a course of action, or courses of action, that would contribute to the destruction of the social fictions without, at the same time, getting in the way of the creation of a future freedom, without getting in the way of the minimal freedom enjoyed by the people currently oppressed by those same social fictions, a course of action which, if possible, would create a partial freedom as of now.

Having established those criteria, I never forgot them. At the time of the consciousness-raising program I was telling you about, I discovered something else. Something happened within the group (there weren't many of us, about forty if I remember rightly): a tyranny was created.

— A tyranny? But how?

— It took the following form. Some gave orders to others and made the latter do whatever they wanted them to do; some imposed themselves on others and obliged them to be whatever they wanted them to be; some used cunning tricks and devices to lead others into areas into which they did not want to be led. None of this had an impact on any particularly serious matter; there were no serious matters they could affect. But the fact is that this happened all the time, every day, and not only in matters relating to the consciousness-raising program, but outside that too, in

ordinary matters of everyday life. Some drifted into being the boss, others into being the subordinate. Some were bosses by dint of imposition, others by trickery. You could see this in the most simple of examples. Two men would walk down a street together; they would reach the bottom of the street where one intended to go to the right and the other to the left; each one wanted to go his own way. The one wanting to go to the left, however, would say to the other: 'Why don't you come with me?'; the other would reply quite truthfully: 'I can't; I have to go this way for this or that reason.' In the end, though, contrary to his will and his convenience, he would accompany the other man and turn left instead. Sometimes this was achieved by means of persuasion, at others by sheer persistence, or by some other means. That is, it was never achieved through logic; there was always something spontaneous, something instinctive about this imposition, this subordination. That was just one small example; there were other singular instances, some minor, some major. Do you see what I mean?

— I do. But what's so very strange about that? It seems perfectly natural to me.

— It probably is. That's what I'm coming to. What I want you to understand is that this goes counter to anarchist doctrine. Remember, this happened in a small group, in a group with no influence or importance, in a group that wasn't in charge of solving any serious problem or taking a decision on some weighty matter. Notice, too, that it occurred in a group of people who had gathered together in order to do what they could for the anarchist cause, that is, to do what they could to combat social fictions and to create a future freedom. Have you taken in those two points?

— I have.

— Now just think what that means. A small group of sincere people (I can guarantee that they were sincere), a group set up and brought together expressly to work for the cause of freedom had, in the space of a few months, achieved only one positive, concrete thing—the creation amongst themselves of a tyranny. And what a tyranny! It wasn't a tyranny that derived from a social fiction which, however regrettable, would be understandable up to a certain point, although less so amongst people like us engaged in fighting those fictions. We were, after all, living in the midst of a society based on those fictions, and it wasn't entirely our fault if we couldn't completely free ourselves from their influence. That wasn't the problem, though. Those who started giving orders to others, or leading them into areas where they didn't want to go, were not doing this based on their having money or social position or some entirely fictitious authority they might have arrogated to themselves; they were doing it under the influence of something that went beyond those social fictions. I mean that this tyranny was, in respect to the usual social fictions, a new tyranny, and it was a tyranny exercised over people who were already oppressed by the established social fictions. And it happened amongst people whose sincere wish was to destroy tyranny and to create freedom.

Now imagine a much larger, much more influential group, dealing with important matters and decisions of a fundamental nature. Imagine that group putting all its efforts, as ours did, into the formation of a free society. And now tell me if in that tangle of intersecting tyrannies you can glimpse a future society that would in any way resemble a free society or a humanity worthy of the name.

— Yes, that is odd.

— It is, isn't it? And there are secondary factors that are equally odd. For example, the tyranny of helpfulness.

— What?

— The tyranny of helpfulness. There were, amongst us, people who did not order other people about or impose themselves on others; instead they helped them in every way possible. It appears to be the contrary of a tyranny, doesn't it? But looked at carefully, it's just the same. It's another tyranny. It too goes against anarchist principles.

— Come on! How does being helpful do that?

— Helping someone, my friend, is tantamount to treating them as if they were incapable. If that person is not incapable, then you are making him incapable, or else assuming that he is incapable. You are, firstly, committing an act of tyranny, and, secondly, an act of scorn. On the one hand, you are limiting the freedom of another person; on the other, you are basing yourself, at least unconsciously, on the idea that someone else is worthy of scorn and unworthy or incapable of freedom.

Let us return to the case in point. You can see what a serious matter this was. There we were working for a future society with no prospect that that future society would even be grateful to us; we were putting ourselves at risk without that future society even realizing it. That's all very well. What was not acceptable, however, was that we were supposedly working for a free future, and yet all we had achieved of a positive nature was the creation of a tyranny, a new tyranny, a tyranny exercised by ourselves, the oppressed, over each other. Now that really wouldn't do.

I set to thinking. There was a mistake here, some error. Our instincts were good, our doctrine seemed right; could it be that our approach was wrong? It must be that. But what mistake were we making? I started thinking and I just kept going round in circles. One day, suddenly, as always happens in these matters, I found the solution. It was the finest hour of my anarchist theory, the day on which I discovered, if I can be put it this way, the technique of anarchism.

He looked at me for a moment, but without really looking at me. Then he went on in the same tone.

— This is what I thought. Here we have a new tyranny, a tyranny that does not derive from any social fiction. So where has it come from? From natural qualities?

If that's so, then we can wave goodbye to a free society. If a society in which only the natural qualities of Man operate—those qualities with which we are born, qualities given to us by Nature and over which we have no power whatsoever—if a society in which only those qualities operate is nothing but a conglomeration of tyrannies, who is going to lift a finger to contribute to the creation of such a society? Better stick to the tyranny we know; at least we're used to it, and it will inevitably seem less burdensome than some new tyranny, a tyranny against which, as with all tyrannies that have their roots in Nature, there would be no possible revolt, just as we cannot rebel against having to die, or against being born into a low social position when we would much prefer to have been born into a higher one. I have already established that if, for any reason, an anarchist society were not practicable, then all that remains—because it is the only natural alternative—is bourgeois society.

But did the tyranny that sprang into being amongst us really derive from natural qualities? What are natural qualities? They are the degree of intellect, imagination, willpower, etc., with which each of us is born—I'm talking purely about mental qualities, of course, because natural physical qualities are irrelevant here. Someone who gives orders to another for reasons that have nothing to do with the established social fictions must do so because he is superior to the other in one or another of those natural qualities. He dominates the other person by the use of his natural qualities. But is that use of natural qualities legitimate? Is it natural?

What is the natural use of our natural qualities? To serve the natural aims of our personality. Now, can dominating someone else be considered a natural aim of our personality? Possibly... There is an instance when it could be, that is, when the other person is perceived as one's enemy. For an anarchist, of course, the enemy is any representative of the social fictions and their tyranny, and no one else, because all other men are men like him and therefore his natural comrades. Now you see, the tyranny we had created amongst ourselves was not like that; the tyranny we had created was exercised over men like ourselves, our natural comrades, over men who were our comrades twice over because they shared the same ideal. Conclusion: if our tyranny did not derive from either the social fictions or from natural qualities, it derived from a mistaken application and a perversion of those qualities. And where did that perversion come from?

It must have its origins in one of two things: either Man is naturally bad, in which case all natural qualities are naturally perverted; or else they derive from a perversion resulting from humanity's long co-existence with the established social fictions, all of which are the creators of tyranny and therefore have a tendency to make even the most natural application of the most natural qualities instinctively tyrannical. Now which of these two hypotheses is the true one? It was impossible to determine this in any satisfactory way, that is, in any rigorously logical

or scientific way. You cannot use reason to deal with this problem because it is a historical or scientific problem and depends on knowing the facts. On the other hand, science cannot help us either because, however far back we go in history, we always find Man living under some kind of social tyranny, and therefore in a state which does not allow us to ascertain what Man would be like if he lived in pure and entirely natural circumstances. Since there is no sure way of finding this out, we have to tend towards the most probable hypothesis, which is the second hypothesis. Rather than assuming that natural qualities might be naturally perverted—which, in a way, is a contradiction in terms—it seems more natural to imagine that humanity’s long co-existence with the creators of tyranny, i.e. the social fictions, means that everyone, even someone who has no wish to tyrannize anyone, is born with their natural qualities perverted into a spontaneous desire to tyrannize others. Thus any thinking person would, with almost absolute certainty, choose the second hypothesis, which is what I did.

One thing is then clear. In the present social situation, however well-intentioned a group of people might be, however concerned they all are with combating social fictions and working for freedom, it is not possible for such a group to work together without the spontaneous creation amongst them of a tyranny, a new tyranny, in addition to that of the existing social fictions; without destroying in practice everything they love in theory; without involuntarily standing in the way of the very thing they wish to promote. What can be done? It’s very simple. We should all work for the same end, but separately.

— Separately!

— Yes, haven’t you been following my argument?

— I have.

— And don’t you find it logical? Don’t you find that conclusion inevitable?

— I do, yes. What I don’t quite see is how...

— I’ll explain. I said that we should all work for the same end, but separately. If we all work for the same anarchist aim, we each contribute with our own efforts to the destruction of social fictions which is what we’re aiming for, and to the creation of a free society in the future. Working separately we cannot, in any way, create a new tyranny, because no one has any influence on anyone else and cannot, therefore, either diminish someone else’s freedom by domination or extinguish that freedom by solicitude.

By working separately and for the same anarchist aims, we have two advantages: it will still be a joint effort, and we will avoid the creation of a new tyranny. We will remain united because we are morally united and we are working in the same way for the same end, we will still be anarchists because each of us is working for a free society, but we will no longer be either voluntary or involuntary traitors to our cause—we cannot be—because by continuing our anarchist work alone, we place



ourselves beyond the detrimental influence of social fictions and the hereditary effect they have on the qualities given to us by Nature.

Obviously, this whole strategy applies to what I called the period of preparation for social revolution. Once bourgeois defences are broken down and the whole of society has been reduced to a state of acceptance of anarchist doctrine and all that is required is a social revolution, then, in order to drive that home, we might have to stop working separately. By then, however, we would almost have achieved our aim of a free society, and things would be very different. The strategy I'm referring to applies only to the anarchist influence on bourgeois society, as in the group to which I belonged.

That, I concluded, was the one true anarchist course of action. Together, we were worth nothing of any value, and worse than that, we became tyrants of each other and we inhibited each other and our theories. We would not achieve very much on our own either, but at least we would not be standing in the path of freedom, we would not be creating a new tyranny. What we did achieve, however little it was, would be a real achievement with no disadvantage or loss. Working separately, we would learn to trust ourselves more, be less dependent on others, become freer, and, by our example, prepare ourselves and others for the future.

I was thrilled with this new discovery. I immediately went and explained it to my comrades. That was one of the few times in my life I have acted foolishly. I was so full of my own discovery that I just assumed they would agree with me.

— And, of course, they didn't.

— They rejected it, my friend, they all rejected it—some more vehemently than others, but they all protested, That simply isn't how things are! It is simply out of the question! No one, though, was capable of saying how it is or how it should be. I argued and argued, and in response to my arguments, I received only clichés, nonsense, the sort of things that ministers say in parliament when they have no answers. Then I realized what fools, what cowards I was involved with. They were unmasked. The rabble were born to be slaves. They wanted to be anarchists at someone else's expense. They wanted freedom as long as someone else arranged it for them, as long as it was bestowed on them the way a king bestows a title. Most of them are like that, mere lackeys.

— And did you get angry?

— Angry? I was furious. I lashed out. I laid hold of sticks and stones. I almost came to blows with one or two of them. And I ended up leaving. I isolated myself. I was sick of those sheep. I almost lost my faith in anarchism. I almost decided to have nothing more to do with it all. After a few days, though, I came to my senses. I decided that the anarchist ideal was above such squabbles. They might not want to be true anarchists, but I did. They might merely want to play at being libertarians, but I did not. If they could only find the strength to fight when clinging to each

other and creating amongst themselves a new simulacrum of the tyranny they claimed they wanted to combat, then let them, the fools; that was all they were good for. I wasn't going to become a bourgeois for such piffling reasons.

I had established that, in the true anarchism, each person had to create freedom and combat social fictions by his own efforts. Well, then, that was what I would do. No one wanted to follow me along the true anarchist path, so I would walk it alone, with my own resources, with my own faith, without even the moral support of those who had once been my comrades in order to do battle with the social fictions. I'm not saying it was a beautiful or even a heroic gesture. It was a natural gesture. If the road had to be walked by each person separately, then I didn't need anyone else to walk down it with me. All I needed were my ideals. Those were the principles and the circumstances that decided me to do what I could to combat social fictions—alone.

He paused in his discourse, which had become both heated and fluent. He took it up again shortly afterwards, his voice calmer.

— It is open war, I thought, between me and the social fictions. Fine. What can I do to destroy them? I'll work alone in order not to create, in any conceivable form, any kind of tyranny. How can I collaborate alone in preparing for the social revolution, in preparing humanity for a free society? I have to choose one of two courses of action, the only two open to me; obviously I can't choose both. The two options are indirect action, that is, consciousness-raising, and direct action of whatever kind.

I thought first of indirect action. What consciousness-raising could I do on my own? Apart from the consciousness-raising one is always carrying out, at random, in conversation with this person or that, taking advantage of any opportunity, I needed to know whether indirect action was the path along which I could begin my activity as an anarchist most energetically, that is, if it was the best way to produce real results. I saw at once that it wasn't. I am neither an orator nor a writer. I mean, I'm capable of speaking in public, if necessary, and I'm capable of writing an article in a newspaper, but what I wanted to find out was if my natural talents indicated that, by specializing in indirect action—in either or both of its two forms—I could obtain more positive results for the anarchist ideal than by focusing my efforts in some other direction. Action is always more productive than consciousness-raising, except for people who are natural propagandists: the great orators, capable of electrifying crowds and getting people to follow them, or the great writers, capable of fascinating and convincing with their books. I don't think I'm particularly vain, but if I am, at least I'm not vain about qualities I don't have. And, as I said, I've never thought of myself as an orator or a writer. That's why I abandoned the idea of indirect action as the path to follow in my activities

as an anarchist. I therefore had to choose direct action, that is, I had to apply my efforts to the practicalities of life, to real life. It required not intelligence, but action. Fine. So be it.

I therefore had to apply to practical life the fundamental process of anarchist action which I have already explained—combating social fictions without creating a new tyranny, and, if possible, creating a foretaste of a future freedom. But how on Earth was I to put this into practice?

What does combating social fictions mean in practical terms? It means war; it is war. And how do you make war on social fictions? Even more important, how do you make war at all? How do you conquer the enemy in any war? By one of two ways: by killing him, that is, by destroying him; or by imprisoning him, that is, by subjugating him, by rendering him powerless. I couldn't destroy all social fictions; that could only be carried out by a social revolution. Until then, the social fictions could only be shaken, left hanging by a thread; they would only be destroyed with the coming of a free society and the definitive fall of bourgeois society. The most I could do in that direction was to destroy—to destroy in the physical sense of 'to kill'—one or more members of the representative classes of bourgeois society. I studied this possibility and I saw that it was nonsense. Suppose I were to kill one, or two, or a dozen people who represented the tyranny of the social fictions. What would be the result? Would the social fictions be in any way shaken? They would not. Social fictions are not like a political situation that might depend on a small number of men, sometimes on one man alone. The bad thing about the social fictions are the fictions themselves, not the individuals who represent them, precisely because that is all they are: representatives. Besides, an attack on the social order always produces a reaction. Things don't necessarily remain the same, and sometimes they get worse. Suppose, as is only natural, that I were to be hunted down after that attack; what if I were hunted down and dealt with in some way or another? If I had done away with a dozen capitalists, what would that have achieved? Only my disappearance, if not my death. And even if I were merely sent to prison or into exile, the anarchist cause would have lost a fighter for the cause, whereas the twelve capitalists I had disposed of would not be a loss to bourgeois society because the component parts of bourgeois society are not fighters, they are purely passive elements, for the 'struggle' lies not with the members of bourgeois society but with the social fictions upon which that society is founded. Now social fictions are not people that one can shoot. Do you understand? It wouldn't be like a soldier in one army killing twelve soldiers in the enemy army; it would be like a soldier killing twelve civilians of the nation being defended by that enemy army. It would be senseless killing, because it would not eliminate a single combatant. I could not, therefore, hope to destroy the social fictions in whole or in part. I

would have to subjugate them. I would have to overcome them by subjugation, by rendering them powerless.

He suddenly pointed at me with his right index finger. “And that was what I did!” He immediately withdrew the gesture and went on.

— I tried to see what was the first and most important of those social fictions. For that, more than any other, was the one I should try to subjugate, try to render powerless. The most important, at least in our day and age, is money. How could I subjugate money, or to be more precise, the power and tyranny of money? I could do so by freeing myself from its influence and power, thereby placing myself beyond its influence and rendering it powerless over me. Do you understand? I was the one combating it; if I were to render it powerless over everyone, that would not be subjugating it but destroying it, because that would be putting an end once and for all to the fiction of money. I have already established that a social fiction can only be destroyed by social revolution and dragged along with the other social fictions in the fall of bourgeois society.

How could I make myself superior to money? The simplest way was to remove myself from its sphere of influence, that is, from civilization—to go into the country and live off roots and drink spring water, to walk around naked and live as the animals live. But this, apart from the obvious difficulties involved, would not be combating a social fiction; it would not be combating anything, it would be running away. It’s true that anyone who avoids joining in a fight also avoids being defeated by it. Morally, though, he is defeated, precisely because he did not fight. There had to be another way, a way that would involve fighting, not fleeing. How could I subjugate money by fighting it? How could I shrug off its influence and tyranny over me without avoiding contact with it? There was only one way forward. I would have to acquire money, I would have to acquire enough of it not to feel its influence, and the more I acquired, the freer I would be from that influence. When I saw this clearly, with all the force of my anarchist convictions and all the logic of a clear-thinking man, only then did I enter the present phase—the commercial and banking phase—of my anarchism.

He rested a moment from the increasingly violent enthusiasm with which he expounded his argument. Then, still somewhat heatedly, he went on with his narrative. “Now do you remember the two logical difficulties that I told you had arisen at the beginning of my career as a fully conscious anarchist? And do you remember that, at the time, I told you that I had resolved them artificially—emotionally rather than logically? You saw, quite clearly, that I did not resolve them by logic...

— Yes, I remember.

— And do you remember that I told you that, later on, when I found the true way forward for anarchism, that I did then resolve them logically?

— I do.

— This is how I resolved them. The difficulties were as follows: it is not natural to work for anything, whatever it is, without receiving a natural, that is, selfish reward for it; and it is not natural to put all that effort into something without having the reward of knowing that your aim will be achieved. Those were the two difficulties. They were resolved by the anarchist course of action that my reasoning led me to realize was the only true course of action. The result of that course of action was that I would grow rich; there you have the selfish reward. The aim was to achieve freedom; by making myself superior to the power of money, that is, by freeing myself from it, I would achieve freedom. I would only achieve freedom for myself, of course, but, as I have already established, freedom for all can only come with the destruction of all social fictions, via a social revolution, and I could not make that social revolution alone. The point is this: I aim for freedom, I achieve freedom; I achieve what freedom I can because, obviously, I can only achieve a freedom that is achievable. And you see, apart from demonstrating that this anarchist course of action is the only true one, the very fact that it automatically resolves all the logical difficulties that might oppose an anarchist course of action is still further proof.

So that was the course of action I followed. I set to work to subjugate the fiction of money by growing rich. I succeeded. It took some time because it was a great struggle, but I managed it. There's no need for me to tell you about my commercial and banking life. It might be of interest, especially certain aspects of it, but it's not really relevant to the matter under discussion. I worked, I struggled, I earned money. I worked harder, I struggled harder, I earned more money. In the end, I earned a lot of money. I must confess, my friend, that I did not worry about the means; I used whatever means I could—sequestration, financial sophistry, unfair competition. So what? Was I supposed to worry about means when I was combating social fictions which were both immoral and unnatural? I was working for freedom and I had to use what weapons I could to combat tyranny. The foolish anarchist who throws bombs and shoots people knows that he is killing people, while also knowing that his doctrines do not include the death penalty. He attacks one form of immorality by committing a crime because he believes that immorality is worthy of a crime if it is to be destroyed. His course of action is foolish because, as I've already shown, in anarchist terms, that course of action is wrong-headed and counter-productive; as far as the morality of that course of action is concerned, however, it is intelligent. Now, the course of action I followed was correct and, as an anarchist, I legitimately used all possible means to grow rich. I have realized the limited dream of a practical, clear-thinking anarchist. I am free. I do what I want, within limits of course. My motto as an anarchist was 'freedom', so fine, I

have freedom, the kind of freedom that our imperfect society allows one to have. I wanted to combat social fictions, so I did and, what's more, I beat them.

“Hang on, hang on”, I said. “That’s all very well, but there’s something you’ve missed out. The conditions of your course of action were, as you yourself proved, not only to create freedom but also to not create tyranny. You did create tyranny. As a sequestrator, as a banker, as an unscrupulous financier—forgive me, but you yourself used such terms—you created tyranny. You’ve created as much of a tyranny as any other representative of the social fictions that you claim to fight.

— No, my boy, you’re wrong. I didn’t create any tyranny. The tyranny that could have resulted from my struggle against social fictions is a tyranny that does not come from me and therefore I did not create it. It is intrinsic to the social fictions themselves, and I did not add to it. That tyranny is the tyranny intrinsic to all social fictions and I could not, nor did I try to, destroy any social fictions. For the hundredth time I repeat: only a social revolution can destroy social fictions; until that time, a perfect anarchist course of action like mine can only subjugate the social fictions, and subjugate them only in relation to the anarchist who follows that course of action, because it does not allow for those fictions to be subjugated for long. It is not a question of not creating a tyranny, but of not creating a new tyranny, creating a tyranny where there was none before. Anarchists working together, influencing each other, as I said, create amongst themselves a new tyranny, quite apart from the tyrannies of existing social fictions. I did not create such a tyranny. Given the conditions of my particular course of action, I could not have done so. No, my friend, I created only freedom. I freed one person. I freed myself. Because my course of action—which, as I proved to you before, was the only true anarchist course of action—did not allow me to free anyone else. The one person I was able to free, I freed.

— All right, I agree, but by that token, one could almost be led to believe that no representative of the social fictions exercises any tyranny whatsoever.

— They don’t. The tyranny is wielded by the fictions themselves and not by the men who represent them; they are, if you like, the means those fictions use to tyrannize society, just as a knife is the means used by a murderer to kill. But I’m sure you don’t believe that abolishing knives would do away with murderers. What would happen if you destroyed all the capitalists in the world, but kept Capital? The following day, capital would be in the hands of others and, through them, it would continue its tyranny. If you destroyed Capital but not the capitalists, how many capitalists would remain? Do you see?

— Yes, you’re right.

— My boy, the absolute worst you can accuse me of is that I may have added slightly—very, very slightly—to the tyranny of the social fictions. The argument is

absurd, though, because, as I've already said, the tyranny which I should not have created, and which I did not create, is something else entirely. There's another weak point in your argument: by the same reasoning, you could accuse a general who takes up arms for his country of harming his country by losing a number of men in his own army, men he had to sacrifice in order to win. If you go to war, you both win and lose.

— That's all very well, but there's another thing... The true anarchist wants freedom not only for himself, but also for others. It seems to me that he wants freedom for the whole of humanity.

— Of course, but I've already said that by taking the course of action I've described, which is the only possible anarchist course of action, each person has to free himself. I freed myself; I did my duty not only by myself but in respect of freedom too. Why did the others, my comrades, not do the same? I didn't stop them. Had I the stopped others, then my doing so, that would have been a crime. I did not even try to conceal from them the true anarchist course of action; I explained it to them very clearly as soon as I discovered it. The course of action itself prevented me doing more than that. What more could I do? Force them to follow the same path as myself? I would not have done so even if I could have because that would have meant imposing freedom on them and that is against my anarchist principles. Help them? I couldn't do that either, for the same reasons. I've never helped anyone, because that implies a diminution of someone else's freedom; it's against my principles. You're simply accusing me of not being more than one person. Why do you criticize my achieving what freedom I could? Why don't you criticize those who haven't done so?

— I know. But those men didn't do what you did because they were less intelligent than you, or else lacked the willpower...

— Ah, my friend, those are natural inequalities, not social ones. Anarchism can do nothing about that. The degree of intelligence or willpower of an individual is down to him and Nature; the social fictions themselves contribute nothing. As I said before, there are natural qualities which one can presume will be perverted by humanity's long co-existence with social fictions, but the perversion consists not in the excellence or otherwise of those qualities, which are given by Nature alone, but in their application. Stupidity or lack of willpower have nothing to do with the application of those qualities; it has to do with their degree of excellence. That's why I say that these are natural inequalities over which no one has any power whatsoever, and no form of social modification can modify them either, just as I cannot become tall or you short.

Except... Except in certain cases, for example, when the hereditary perversion of natural qualities has gone so far that it touches the person's actual temperament. It's possible that a certain type of person might be born to be a slave, naturally born

to be a slave, and is therefore incapable of making any effort to free themselves. But in that case, what have they to do with a free society, or with freedom? If a man was born to be a slave, then freedom, being contrary to his nature, would, for him, be a form of tyranny.

There was a short pause. Suddenly, I burst out laughing. I said, “You really are an anarchist, but even after hearing what you say, I still can’t help laughing when I compare you and your fellow anarchists out there.

— My friend, I’ve already told you, I’ve already proved it to you, and I repeat it again. The only difference is this: they are purely theoretical anarchists, I am both theoretical and practical; they are mystical anarchists and I am a scientific anarchist; they are anarchists who bow the knee and I am an anarchist who stands up and fights for freedom. In short: they are pseudo-anarchists and I am an anarchist.

And with that, we got up from the table.

Lisbon, January 1922



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1922

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