
The Last Days with John Reed.

A Letter to Max Eastman in New York, From Louise Bryant in Moscow, November 14, 1920.

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Moscow, Nov. 14, 1920

Dear Max:

I knew you would want details and a story for *The Liberator* — but I did not have either the strength or the courage. As it is — I will be able to write only a very incoherent letter and you may take from it what you wish. Jack's death and my strenuous underground trip to Russia and the weeks of terror in the typhus hospital have quite broken me. At the funeral I suffered a very severe heart attack which by the merest scratch I survived. Specialists have agreed that I have strained my heart because of the long days and nights I watched beside Jack's bed and that it is enlarged and may not get ever well again. They do not agree, however, on the time it will take for another attack. I write to you all these stupid things because I have to face them myself and because it must be part of the letter. The American and German doctors give me a year or even two, the Russians only month. I have to take stimulants and I am not in a bit of pain. I think I have better recuperative powers than they believe — but, anyway, it is a small matter. I once promised Jack that I would put all his works in order in case of his death. I will come home if I get stronger and do so.

All that I write now seems part of a dream. I am in no pain at all and I find it impossible to believe that Jack is dead or that he will not come in this very room any moment.

Jack was ill twenty days. Only two nights,

when he was calmer, did I even lie down. Spotted typhus is beyond description, the patient wastes to nothing under your eyes.

But I must go back to tell you how I found Jack after my illegal journey across the world. I had to skirt Finland, sail twelve days in the Arctic ocean, hide in a fisherman's shack four days to avoid the police with a Finnish officer and a German, both under sentence of death in their own countries. When I did reach Soviet territory I was at the opposite end of Russia from Jack. When I reached Moscow he was in Baku at the Oriental Congress [First Congress of Peoples of the East, Sept. 1-8, 1920]. Civil War raged in the Ukraine. A military wire reached him and he came back in an armored train. On the morning of September 15th he ran shouting into my room. A month later he was dead.

We had only one week together before he went to bed, and we were terribly happy to find each other. I found him older and sadder and grown strangely gentle and aesthetic. His clothes were just rags. He was so impressed with the suffering around him that he would take nothing for himself. I felt shocked and almost unable to reach the peak of fervor he had attained.

The effects of the terrible experience in the Finnish jail were all too apparent. He told me of his cell, dark and cold and wet. Almost three months of solitary confinement and only raw fish to eat. Sometimes he was delirious and imagined me dead. Sometimes he expected to die himself,

so he wrote on books and everywhere a little verse:

Thinking and dreaming
Day and night and day
Yet cannot think one bitter thought away —
That we have lost each other
You and I...

But walking in the park, under the white birch trees and talking through brief, happy nights, death and separation seemed very far away.

We visited together Lenin, Trotsky, Kame-nev, Enver Pasha, Bela Kun, we saw the Ballet and Prince Igor and the new and old galleries.

He was consumed with a desire to go home. I felt how tired and ill he was — how near a break-down and tried to persuade him to rest. The Russians told me that he often worked twenty hours a day. Early in his sickness I asked him to promise me that he would rest before going home since it only meant going to prison. I felt prison would be too much for him. I remember he looked at me in a strange way and said, “My dear little Honey, I would do anything I could for you, but don’t ask me to be a coward.” I had not meant it so. I felt so hurt that I burst into tears and said he could go and I would go with him anywhere by the next train, to any death or any suffering. He smiled so happily then. And all the days that followed he held me tightly by the hand. I could not leave him because he would shout for me. I have a feeling now that I have no right to be alive.

Of the illness I can scarcely write — there was so much pain. I only want you all to know how he fought for his life. He would have died days before but for the fight he made. The old peasant nurses used to slip out to the chapel and pray for him and burn a candle for his life. Even they were touched and they seem men die in agony every hour.

He was never delirious in the hideous way most typhus patients are. He always knew me and his mind was full of poems and stories and beauti-

ful thoughts. He would say, “You know how it is when you go to Venice. You ask people — Is this Venice? — just for the pleasure of hearing the reply.” He would tell me that the water he drank was full of little songs. And he related, like a child, wonderful experiences we had together and in which we were very brave.

Five days before he died his right side was paralyzed. After that he could not speak. And so we watched through days and nights and days hoping against all hope. Even when he died I did not believe it. I must have been there hours afterwards still talking to him and holding his hands.

And then there came a time when the body lay in state with all military honor, in the Labor temple, guarded by fourteen soldiers from the red Army. Many times I went there and saw the soldiers standing stiffly, their bayonets gleaming under the lights and the red star of Communism on their military caps.



Jack lay in a long silver coffin banked with flowers and streaming banners. Once the soldiers uncovered it for me so I might touch the white forehead with my lips for the last time.

On the day of the funeral we gathered in the great hall where he lay. I have very few impressions of that day. It was cold and the sky dark, snow fell as we began to march. I was conscious of how people cried and how the banners floated and how the wailing heartbreaking Revolutionary funeral hymn, played by a military band, went on forever and ever.

The Russians let me take my grief in my own way, since they felt I had thrown all my caution to the winds in going to the hospital. On that day I felt very proud and even strong. I wished to walk according to the Russian custom, quite by myself after the hearse. And in the Red Square I tried to stand facing the speakers with a brave face. But I was not brave at all and fell on the ground and could not speak or cry.

I do not remember the speeches. I remember more the broken notes of the speakers' voices. I was aware that after a long time they ceased and the banners began to dip back and forth in salute. I heard the first shovel of earth go rolling down and then something snapped in my brain. After an eternity I woke up in my own bed. Emma Goldman was standing there and Berkman, and two doctors and a tall young officer from the Red Army. They were whispering and I went to sleep again.

But I have been in Red Square since then — since that day all those people came to bury in all honor our dear Jack Reed. I have been there in the busy afternoon when all Russia hurries by, horses and sleighs and bells and peasants carrying bundles, soldiers singing on their way to the front. Once some of the soldiers came over to the grave. They took off their hats and spoke reverently. “What a good fellow he was!” said one. “He came all the way across the world for us.” “He was one of ours.” In another moment they shouldered their guns and went on again.

I have been there under the stars with a great longing to lie down beside the frozen flowers and the metallic wreaths and not wake up. How easy it would be!

I send greeting to all old friends.
Good luck to all of you.

Louise

Transcribed by Mitch Abidor.

Photograph of John Reed lying in state, October 1920, from John S. Clarke, Pen Pictures of Russia under the “Red Terror,” (Glasgow: National Workers’ Committee, 1921), pg. 207.

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