

# Why Marx Failed Here

By *CLINTON ROSSITER*

America,  
once the darling  
of the world's  
radicals, has now  
become their despair.

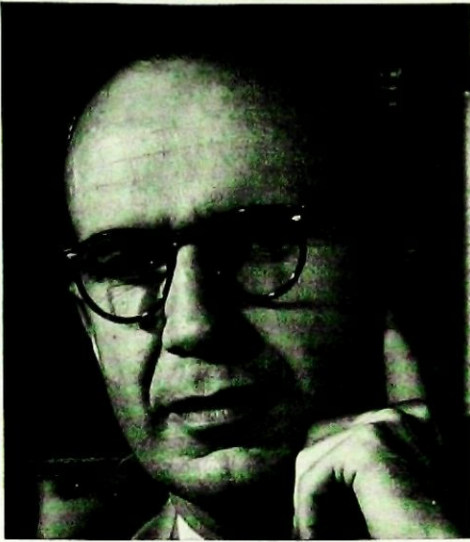
**T**he teachings of Karl Marx are holy writ in one third of the world. In the United States they are an anathema. While Marxism has scored astounding triumphs in the most unlikely places, its record in what Marx himself considered one of the most likely places of all is one of stunning failure. Intellectually as well as politically and militarily, America presents an almost solid front against the man, his ideas and his heirs. Quite the contrary to Marx's prediction that the most advanced industrial countries would be the first to make the transit from capitalism to socialism and beyond to communism, this most advanced of all countries has never been insulated so thickly against the appeals of Marxism nor ever behaved in so thoroughly un-Marxist a fashion.

Even among intellectuals, whom Marx expected to be trail blazers of the coming order, he has had few American disciples and not a great many more admirers. As a thinker he is much quoted by social scientists; as a counselor he is simply ignored. The number of conscious Marxists who have raised their voices influentially in American intellectual or political debate is amazingly small; the contribution of these men to Marxist thought has been negligible.

I do not mean to say that the American mind has been untouched by Marx. A pervasive "Marxist" influence has spread all through the American intellectual community in the twentieth century, and many men who would deny flatly any debt to Marx have thought in "Marxist" categories and employed "Marxist" language. Yet in this instance I use the word—as do most historians of the American mind—to describe a general pattern of realistic, antitraditional, collectivist thought rather than a particular source of inspiration. Even if Marx had never lived, this pattern would exist and exert a powerful influence in America—and, it seems hardly necessary to add, so would the income tax and Social Security.

The failure of Marxism as a doctrine is, of course, only one aspect of the failure of radicalism as a political force in the United States. The darling of the world's radicals in the early





## About the Author

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*the Republic, Conservatism in America* and *The American Presidency*. The book from which the present article was drawn will be published next month by Harcourt, Brace, under the title *Marxism: The View From America*. Professor Rossiter will spend the academic year 1960-61 as Pitt Professor of American History at Cambridge University.

years of its existence, this country has now become their despair. American writers agree almost unanimously on the social, political and personal causes of the failure of radicalism.

First among these is what historians of the early Republic called "the history and present state of the United States of America." However full of rough spots the history—depressions, upheavals, insurrections, wars, repeated acts of exploitation of men and nature—we have had less than our share of misery and frustration, more than our share of happiness and fulfillment. However full of soft spots the present state—racism, corruption, vulgarity, obscurantism—we are clearly the most fortunate and well-situated of the nations of the earth. The appeals of radicalism have gone unheeded in America because the promises of radicalism have been largely fulfilled. The isms of Europe have foundered, as the German Marxist Werner Sombart once noted, "on the shoals of roast beef and apple pie."

Friedrich Engels, the good Sherpa of Marx's assault on the summit of capitalism, put his reluctant finger on a related reason for the hard times of radicalism in the United States. In a letter of 1892 to Friedrich Sorge, a German revolutionary who had settled down in Hoboken to teach music and spread socialism, Engels complained of the staying power of America's "bourgeois prejudices," which he found to be almost as "strongly rooted in the working class" as among businessmen. He saw clearly, as Marx apparently did not, that the bigness, uniqueness, success and freshness of the American experiment had created a popular state of mind unusually hostile to comprehensive radicalism. If he were alive today, he would see that the hostility has grown to frightening proportions—frightening, that is, to the hopes of Marxist radicalism.

At least part of this hostility is a simple and understandable reaction to the savagery of Marx's judgments on our whole way of life. Upon us, it must be remembered, he unleashed the brunt of his major attack and upon us the attack continues in undiminished violence. Indeed, it almost seems as if Marx

were as vibrantly alive and censorious today as he was 100 years ago. We have no social arrangement—our welfare capitalism, the ascendancy of our middle class, the variety of our groups and interests—for which he can say one kind or even understanding word. We have no institution—church, family, property, school, corporation, trade union and all the agencies of constitutional democracy—that he does not wish either to destroy or to transform beyond recognition. We have no ideals or ideas—from the Christian ethic through patriotism to individualism—that he does not condemn out of hand. The essence of Marx's message is a prediction of doom for the liberal, democratic way of life. He announces that prediction not sadly but gladly, not timidly but furiously, not contingently but dogmatically—and, of course, so do his heirs. Khrushchev was a faithful grandchild of Marx when he laid to rest all doubts about our future by promising happily, "We will bury you." This is not the most effective way to persuade the minds of Americans.

Our hostility to radicalism has not, to be sure, prevented our borrowing useful ideas piecemeal from radicals in our midst. A major cause of the decline of the Socialist Party, and of a dozen other radical parties that have orbited crazily around it, has been the cannibalistic tastes of the Republicans and Democrats. Indeed, everything about American politics—the broad appeal of the two major parties, the costs of political campaigning, the widespread refusal to adopt proportional representation, the statutory difficulties of getting on and staying on the ballot in many states—seems to be loaded against the rise and prosperity of third parties.

Not all the troubles of the American Left have arisen from conditions outside the movement. At least two reasons for the failure of radicalism, and especially of Marxist radicalism, were bred in the bone: first, the intense and self-defeating sectarianism of the Marxists and their fellows in dissent, which led Marx himself to complain that the "Yankee Socialists" were "crotchety and sectarian"; and

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## Why Marx Failed Here

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second, the alien stamp, which has been imprinted for at least three generations on the purposes and personalities of most radical groups in this country. Few of our leading radicals have been Americans in birth, interests, inspirations or even language, and this visible fact has nourished the natural xenophobic prejudices of the American mind. The easy identification of radicalism with socialism, of socialism with communism, of communism with Soviet tyranny, and of all these isms with subversion and ungodliness, has well-nigh shattered the hopes of any brand of political radicalism in the United States.

There is, I think, one last nail in the coffin of Marxist aspirations in America, one conclusive reason for our refusal to bid Marx and his followers a decent welcome, whether they have come to us as men of learning or men of action. The fact is that the Marxist ideology, whether in the classical form in which Marx and Engels left it or in the Bolshevized version that holds sway in the U.S.S.R., contradicts flatly almost every principle with which Americans have attempted to explain or justify or purify their way of life. Even if Marxism had encountered none of the other difficulties I have mentioned, it would have held little appeal for the minds of men who had been brought up, however carelessly, in the American tradition. Nothing in that tradition prepares men to share Marx's anger, to accept his advice, or to answer his summons—even, to our present disadvantage, to understand his appeal to the less fortunate peoples of the earth. Everything in it, as we learned in the 1930's, forbids most Americans to turn to Marx even in their desperate hours.

Why should this have been so? Why has the giant new theory of the nineteenth century—now the giant new religion of the twentieth—been rudely ignored in one of the few countries for which it was supposed to hold an immediate appeal? Why did we, the people who converted liberalism from a permissive faith into a national monument, shy away skittishly from what Raymond Aron, French political scientist and brilliant critic of Marxism, describes as the "synthesis of all the principal schemes of progressive thought"? Why, even now, do we find it difficult to go to Marx for instruction in those fields in which he was a provocative, if not always trustworthy, teacher? My own answer is that it is not enough to lay out the historical reasons for the failure of Marxism as a basis for political action, nor even enough to prove that our minds are insulated by "bourgeois prejudice" against its collectivist, irreligious, antibourgeois temptations. What we come down to in the end is a fundamental conflict between two bodies of principle, two faiths, two ideologies—if I may use that word in a Pickwickian rather than Marxist sense—a conflict so severe that peace between them has always been and remains today impossible to achieve. More than that, peace between the communist and democratic worlds becomes a far more difficult exercise than the mere adjustment of conflicting economic interests and of suspicious military stances. Ideas do, after all, have consequences.

The contradiction between Marxism and the American tradition shows itself harshly in almost every area over which the human intellect ranges—for example, in psychology, where Marxists talk of human behavior as an infinitely plastic product of social environment, and we talk of indelible qualities that are common to all men everywhere; in sociology, where they insist that the normal relation-

ship among classes is one of exploitation and struggle, and we make much of co-operation and mutual dependence; in economics, which they find to be the domineering influence in the lives and thoughts and values of men, and which we see as only one among three or four primal influences; in history, the wondrous complexity of which they force into a constricting pattern of class struggle and social cataclysm, and which we deal with in terms of multiple causation and mystery; in political theory, which teaches them to fear the power of the liberal state and yet to trust completely the power of the dictatorship of the proletariat, and which teaches us to fear unchained power in the hands of any breed of men; in the principles of constitutionalism, which they regard as a "bourgeois fraud," and we consider the essence of free government; and above all in philosophy, in the basic ideas with which men approach both the large wonders and the small facts of the world in which they live. Their whole doctrine is grounded on a rigid materialism, and ours is a subtle blend of rationalism, idealism, empiricism and pragmatism—all of these approaches to knowledge which the Marxists despise and deride.

This contradiction is one between tempers as well as between ideas, between *how* as well as *what* we and they think. The Marxist temper, as the American sees it, is zealous, dogmatic, revolutionary, violent, amoral and elitist. It is supremely confident of the rightness and the ultimate triumph of the Children of Light, the proletariat; yet, like the Manichaean heretics of early Christianity, it is strangely obsessed with the sins and the staying power of the Children of Darkness, the *bourgeoisie*. The American temper, in contrast, seems easygoing, pragmatic, tradition directed, peaceful, moral and democratic. It is supremely confident of nothing except the fact that no group of men, certainly not the Marxists, has a monopoly of truth. It is more Manichaean than it used to be, but it is still far removed from obsession with ideas and forces other than those it calls its own. It is more apocalyptic too, thanks to

Spengler, Toynbee and Marx himself, but it still cannot believe that America must bury communism or be buried by it.

When this record of intellectual and spiritual contradiction is fully scanned, it seems to display three deep-cutting, irreconcilable conflicts.

The first arises primarily in the realm of ideas—the head-on collision of monism and pluralism. Marxism is the latest and most presumptuous of all those celebrated systems of thought with which learned men, moved by the doubts and fears of the unlearned, have sought to interpret the world in terms of a single principle. It has an explanation of everything; and to everything it grants one explanation. The whole range of man's behavior is explained in terms of the business of making a living, the whole configuration of society in terms of the class structure, the whole sweep of history in terms of the class struggle, the whole phenomenon of classes in terms of private property. Marxism, in short, is a closed system in which all new facts and ideas are made to conform to a rigid, monistic pattern.

The American tradition, to the contrary, is consciously pluralistic. Its unity is the result of a process through which unnumbered diversities of faith and intellect seek to live together in accommodation, if not always in harmony. Man, history, society, politics, nature—all are explained, to the extent that they can be explained, in terms of multiple causation. Our system of ideas is open to new thoughts and fresh evidence. It has its bedrock beliefs in the dignity of man, the excellence of liberty, the limits of politics and the presence of God; but on these beliefs, even in defiance of the last, men are free to build almost every conceivable type of intellectual and spiritual mansion. For this reason we find it hard to grant much respect to a system of ideas as monistic as Marxism. More to the point, we find it increasingly hard to grant it license, for too much evidence is now before our eyes that monism in the world of ideas leads to absolutism in the world of events.

The second conflict arises primarily in the realm of institutions—the head-on collision of collectivism and individualism. Marx talks of classes rather than of

individuals, of systems rather than of persons; he seems to have no respect at all for private man. On both "the individual withdrawn into his private interests" and the family with even a symbolic fence between itself and the community he pronounces a stern sentence of doom. His prescriptions for the society of the future are therefore thoroughly collectivistic. No man, no group, no interest, no center of power is to defy the dictatorship of the proletariat in the period of socialist transition or to remain outside the harmonious community in the endless age of communism. That age would surely be marked by a state of "togetherness" that would obliterate every barrier between man and mankind.

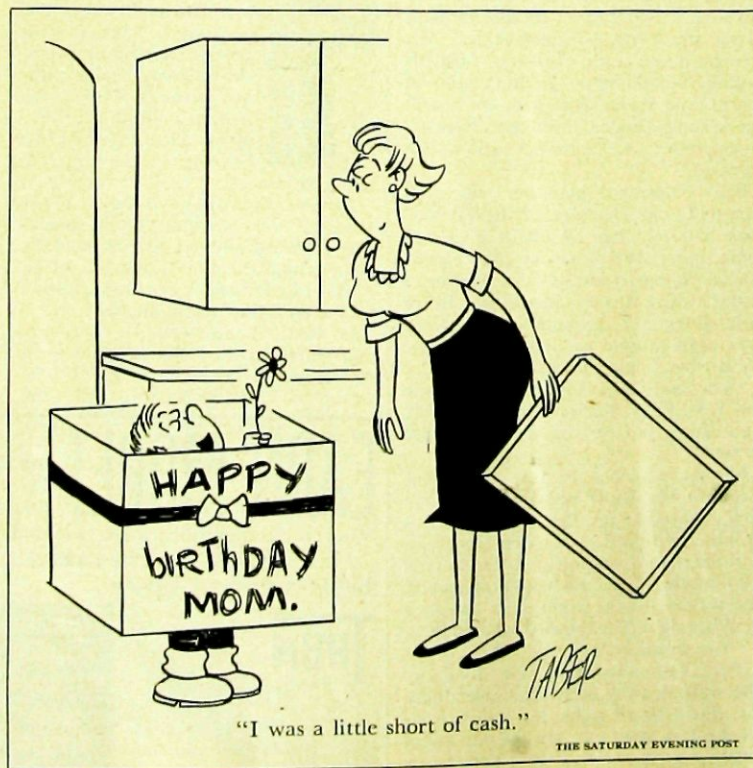
The American tradition is doggedly individualistic. It makes room for the state, for society and for natural and voluntary groups. Yet it leaves a wide sphere to private man, the private family and private groups even in its most socially conscious moments, and it insists on a meaningful, lasting contradiction between the interests of that sphere and those of the commonweal. It is fundamentally a challenge to collectivism at two levels—a challenge in behalf of the free individual, a challenge in behalf of the free group.

The last confrontation is both ideological and institutional—the not quite head-on, yet resounding-enough collision of radicalism with conservatism and liberalism. Marxism is, by almost any standard, the supreme radicalism of all times. It is radical in every sense of that sticky word—because it is revolutionary, because it is extremist, because it proposes to dig down to the roots of all things. It insists that the political and social institutions of the United States and its friends are oppressive and diseased, the values that support them rotten and dishonest; it bids us supplant them with an infinitely more just and benign way of life. So complete is its commitment to the future, so unwilling is it to suffer delay, that it is prepared to force entry into this future by subversion and violence.

The American tradition, like most successful traditions with a broad appeal, is a casual blend of conservatism and liberalism. It is conservative in all the useful senses of that sticky word—because it is cautious and moderate, because it is disposed to preserve what it has inherited, because it puts a high value on tradition as a social force and prudence as an individual virtue. Yet it is liberal too, in most senses of that stickiest word of all—because it is openhanded and openminded, because it really expects the future to be better than the past, because it is interested first of all in the development of free men. Product of a history of ceaseless change and growth, it makes a large place for progress through conscious reform and prescriptive innovation, but not through the kind of revolutionary cataclysm that Marx predicts and prescribes.

In the end, I think, the decisive confrontation of Marxism and the American tradition is one of totalitarianism and liberal democracy. Marx himself was not a totalitarian, for totalitarianism is very much an institutional and ideological phenomenon of the twentieth century, the age of advanced technology and mass man. His teachings, however, were a major intellectual source of the kind of totalitarianism now on display in the Soviet Union and Communist China. One can find with ease in Marx—as one cannot find with any amount of effort in Jefferson or Lincoln—the seeds of the distinctive characteristics of a totalitarian system: the obliteration of all restraints on political

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(Continued from Page 78) power; the penetration of every nook and corner of the exposed and defenseless society by the restless, dynamic power of the state; the ubiquitous control and direction of the individual; and the manipulation of men and power in pursuit of a millennial ideology. One can find in Marx's words of advice to the revolutionaries with whom he associated—on his own terms, I might add—the seeds of most of the distinctive institutions in such a system: the all-encompassing state, the all-directing party, the permanently conspiratorial elite, the monopoly of the media of communication and of the sources of culture, even the system of organized terror.

Most important of all, he was the spiritual father of the Soviet theory of "democracy," which rests squarely upon the concept of a "scientific" leadership that knows what is good for the people much better than do the people, who cannot in any case be trusted to govern themselves. Marx, like his Russian and Chinese heirs, believed in government not *by* but only *for* the people, and for the people in a sense that makes it unnecessary and even impolitic to consult them about their wishes. His prescription for society was undemocratic in its parts and undemocratic in the whole; and the Marxists of the Soviet Union are, to this extent, his devoted heirs. Small wonder that we have rejected Marxism so flatly as an explanation of the human predicament and as a program for its improvement.

Men who turn their backs on Marxism are still faced with the perplexing figure of Marx himself. We may turn away from him too, I suppose, if we take the position that his person and teachings have been swallowed up so completely by the communists that he is no longer a man to whom we dare or care to listen. On the other hand, we may try to separate the thinker from the revolutionary, the gadfly from the godhead, the critic of capitalism from the plotter for communism, the man of the nineteenth century from the myth of the twentieth, and so go to school with him neither more timidly nor less inquisitively than we do, say, with Machiavelli or Nietzsche or Sorel or Clausewitz or even the Marquis de Sade.

If we do, we will learn many things from him. We can learn them elsewhere, to be sure—from farsighted men who came before him and from able synthesizers who have come after—but no one

teaches any of them with such piquancy, or all of them together with such authority as does Marx himself. I think, for example, of his teachings that economic forces exert a profound influence on all aspects of human behavior and social organization, that the course of history is shaped powerfully by the way men organize themselves for production, that neither men nor the ideas they profess can be studied as abstractions apart from the social environment, and that classes constitute one of the most persistent and influential phenomena of society. I think too of his strictures on the social systems of his time, which led him to proclaim

... ..  
**On Carrying  
 Things Too Far**

Though shopping centers  
 often point with pride  
 To parking lots which they  
 are right beside,  
 Just why they do so leaves  
 me at a loss —  
 Those parking lots are seven  
 blocks across!

Curtis Heath

... ..

that toilsome poverty is not the heaven-ordained state of man, that the forms of democracy are not yet democracy itself, that psychological security is not easily found in an industrial system, that capitalism is bound to have its ups and downs, and that private property is property—but also power.

Most important of all, I think of the lessons we can learn from his bad example and from the even worse example of the tough heirs with whom we will be contending both ideologically and politically—let us hope not militarily—for years to come.

The first of these is that we must not be tempted or bullied by the fierce pressure of events into aping the habits of thought we scorn in the Marxists. Let us not, like them, set forth on any delusive quest for certainty, nor even comfort ourselves with the conviction that we have found it, lest we, too, equate dissent with heresy. Let us not, like them, treat all ideas as if they had social significance, lest we, too,

strangle ourselves with the cord of "politicalization." Let us eschew ideology, despise dogmatism and discipline ourselves against extremism. Above all, let us take note of their monumental presumptuousness and make our own advances in the world of ideas and values step by step, hypothesis by hypothesis, test by test, fact by fact.

Second, we must face the communists in the arena of ideas with our own forces marshaled on the broadest possible front. They have framed the struggle of their world and ours as one between "capitalism" and "socialism," and we have let them get away with it much too long. The issue between us is not that simple. In the first place, their "socialism" is a harsh form of state capitalism, and our "capitalism" is a mixed economy that has been civilized by social controls. Far more important than that veiled truth, however, is the fact that it is not alone our economy that divides us from them, but our free, pluralistic, accommodating patterns of government, social relations, culture, science, education and religion. It is high time that we sought to undo the damage we have let Khrushchev do with his insistence—while we flounder about in our own clichés—that "peaceful co-existence" is an accommodation between socialism and capitalism. We will never put our cause persuasively to the uncommitted world until we make clear how much more encompassing the conflict really is. Our struggle with the communists is one of society against society and mind against mind; our chief strength lies in a tradition that insists, in defiance of our own urges toward dogmatism and obscurantism, that both be kept open.

Third, let us rise serenely above the Manichaeism that fogs the Marxist view of reality. We must not resolve all the torments of our century into a two-sided struggle between the forces of pure light and the forces of total darkness, lest we ourselves end up in a state of frenzied obsession with the enemy. We must not make as intense a religion of anti-Marxism as they have of Marxism, lest we suffer the fate of those who identify the absence of evil with the presence of good. Only thus can we keep our minds free and flexible.

Most important of all, we must not slide hopelessly into an apocalyptic view of the struggle between their system and ours, lest we slam the door forever on all hopes of an evolution in communism that would make it possible for East and West

to live together in a reasonably peaceful world. No one in his right mind would predict such an evolution confidently, but hope may still reign where prediction abdicates. The changes that have taken place in Marxism already should be enough to persuade us that other changes are sure to come, changes perhaps so profound in nature that the Soviet system will be transformed out of all recognition. What would be left over would be Marxism only in name, but that, after all, has been the fate of most of the great isms that have held sway in the world. The apocalyptic promise of Marxism, like that of Islam, might then endure for centuries—unfulfilled and unrepudiated.

All this, of course, is speculation about a distant and enigmatic future. For the present it should be comfort enough to remember that I have been contrasting two faiths, and that like all faiths they claim a great deal more allegiance than they will ever get. If we were perfect, if our grasp on reality matched the reach of our tradition, we could look forward confidently to a free, peaceful, prosperous world. If they were perfect, if they never really doubted Marx's promise that they would inherit the earth, we could look forward to abject surrender or inevitable war. But we, unfortunately, are imperfect democrats, and they, fortunately, imperfect Marxists. In the first of those two facts lies the challenge, in the second the hope of a brighter future for America and for the world.

For readers who would like to pursue the subject further, the following books are recommended:

Hook, Sidney  
*Marx and the Marxists:  
 The Ambiguous Legacy*  
 Van Nostrand  
 \$1.25

Hunt, Robert N. Carew  
*Marxism: Past and Present*  
 The Macmillan Co.  
 \$3.95

Mayo, H. B.  
*Introduction to Marxist Theory*  
 Oxford University Press  
 \$1.50

Meyer, Alfred G.  
*Leninism*  
 Harvard University Press  
 \$5.50

## The Wooing of Ariadne

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thighs. She towered over the insignificant apple-core women around her. Her eyes, dark and thoughtful, seemed to be restlessly searching the room.

Be patient, my dove! Marko is coming. "Miss Ariadne," Vasili said. "This is Mr. Marko Palamas. He desires to have the honor of your acquaintance."

She looked at me for a long and piercing moment. I imagined her gauging my mighty strength by the width of my shoulders and the circumference of my arms. I felt the tips of my mustache bristle with pleasure. Finally she nodded with the barest minimum of courtesy. I was not discouraged.

"Miss Ariadne," I said, "may I have the pleasure of this dance?"

She stared at me again with her fiery eyes. I could imagine more timid men shriveling before her fierce gaze. My heart flamed at the passion her rigid exterior concealed.

"I think not," she said.

"Don't you dance?"

Vasili gasped beside me. An old prune face standing nearby clucked her toothless gums.

"Yes, I dance," Ariadne said coolly. "I do not wish to dance with you."

"Why?" I asked courteously.

"I do not think you heard me," she said. "I do not wish to dance with you."

Oh, the sly and lovely darling. Her subterfuge so apparent. Trying to conceal her pleasure at my interest.

"Why?" I asked again.

"I am not sure," she said. "It could be your appearance, which bears considerable resemblance to a gorilla, or your manner, which would suggest closer alliance to a pig."

"Now that you have met my family," I said engagingly, "let us dance."

"Not now," she said, and her voice rose. "Not this dance or the one after. Not tonight or tomorrow night or next month or next year. Is that clear?"

Sweet, sweet Ariadne. Ancient and eternal game of retreat and pursuit. My pulse beat more quickly.

Vasili pulled at my sleeve. He was my friend, but without the courage of a goat. I shook him off and spoke to Ariadne.

"There is a joy like fire that consumes a man's heart when he first sets eyes on his beloved," I said. "This I felt when I first saw you." My voice trembled under a mighty passion. "I swear before God from this moment that I love you."

She stared shocked out of her deep dark eyes and, beside her, old prune face staggered as if she had been kicked. Then my beloved did something which proved indisputably that her passion was as intense as mine.

She doubled up her fist and struck me in the eye. A stout blow for a woman that brought a haze to my vision, but I shook my head and moved a step closer.

"I would not care," I said, "if you struck out both my eyes. I would cher-

ish the memory of your beauty forever."

By this time the music had stopped, and the dancers formed a circle of idiot faces about us. I paid them no attention and ignored Vasili, who kept whining and pulling at my sleeve.

"You are crazy!" she said. "You must be mad! Remove yourself from my presence or I will tear out both your eyes and your tongue besides!"

You see! Another woman would have cried, or been frightened into silence. But my Ariadne, worthy and venerable, hurled her spirit into my teeth.

"I would like to call on your father tomorrow," I said. From the assembled dancers who watched there rose a few vagrant whispers and some rude laughter. I stared at them carefully and they hushed at once. My temper and strength of arm were well known.

Ariadne did not speak again, but in a magnificent spirit stamped from the floor.