

# Part 1, Chapter 05

## The Third Degree

1912

### People :

Author : Alexander Berkman

### Text :

Berkman, Alexander (1912) *Prison Memoirs of an Anarchist*, Mother Earth Press.

## 5

### THE THIRD DEGREE

I

THE CLANKING OF the keys grows fainter and fainter; the sound of footsteps dies away. The officers are gone. It is a relief to be alone. Their insolent looks and stupid questions, insinuations and threats, -how disgusting and tiresome it all is! A sense of complete indifference possesses me. I stretch myself out on the wooden bench, running along the wall of the cell, and at once fall asleep. I awake feeling tired and chilly. All is quiet and dark around me. Is it night? My hand gropes blindly, hesitantly. Something wet and clammy touches my cheek. In sudden affright I draw back. The cell is damp and musty; the foul air nauseates me. Slowly my foot feels the floor, drawing my body forward, all my senses on the alert. I clutch the bars. The feel of iron is reassuring. Pressed close to the door, my mouth in the narrow opening, I draw quick, short breaths. I am hot, perspiring. My throat is dry to cracking; I cannot swallow. "Water! I want water!" The voice frightens me. Was it I that spoke? The sound rolls up; it rises from gallery to gallery, and strikes the opposite corner under the roof; now it crawls underneath, knocks in the distant hollows, and abruptly ceases. "Holloa, there! Whatcher in for?" The voice seems to issue at once from all sides of the corridor. But the sound relieves me. Now the air feels better; it is not so difficult to breathe. I begin to distinguish the outline of a row of cells opposite mine. There are dark forms at the doors. The men within look like beasts restlessly pacing their cages. "Whatcher in for?" It comes

from somewhere alongside. "Can't talk, eh? 'Sorderly, guess." What am I in for? Oh, yes! It's Frick. Well, I shall not stay here long, anyhow. They will soon take me out-they will lean me against a wall-a slimy wall like this, perhaps. They will bandage my eyes, and the soldiers there.... No: they are going to hang me. Well, I shall be glad when they take me out of here. I am so dry. I'm suffocating....

The upright irons of the barred door grow faint, and melt into a single line; it adjusts itself crosswise between the upper and side sills. It resembles a scaffold, and there is a man sinking the beam into the ground. He leans it carefully against the wall, and picks up a spade. Now he stands with one foot in the hole. It is the carpenter! He hit me on the head. From behind, too, the coward. If he only knew what he had done. He is one of the People: we must go to them, enlighten them. I wish he'd look up. He doesn't know his real friends. He looks like a Russian peasant, with his broad back. What hairy arms he has! If he would only look up.... Now he sinks the beam into the ground; he is stamping down the earth. I will catch his eye as he turns around. Ah, he didn't look! He has his eyes always on the ground. just like the muzhik. Now he is taking a few steps backward, critically examining his work. He seems pleased. How peculiar the cross-piece looks. The horizontal beam seems too long; out of proportion. I hope it won't break. I remember the feeling I had when my brother once showed me the picture of a man dangling from the branch of a tree. Underneath was inscribed, The Execution of Stenka Razin. "Didn't the branch break?" I asked. "No, Sasha," mother replied, "Stenka-well, he weighed nothing"; and I wondered at the peculiar look she exchanged with Maxim. But mother smiled sadly at me, and wouldn't explain. Then she turned to my brother: "Maxim, you must not bring Sashenka such pictures. He is too young." "Not too young, mamotchka, to learn that Stenka was a great man." "What! You young fool," father bristled with anger, "he was a murderer, a common rioter." But mother and Maxim bravely defended Stenka, and I was deeply incensed at father, who despotically terminated the discussion. "Not another word, now! I won't hear any more of that peasant criminal." The peculiar divergence of opinion perplexed me. Anybody could tell the difference between a murderer and a worthy man. Why couldn't they agree? He must have been a good man, I finally decided. Mother wouldn't cry over a hanged murderer: I saw her stealthily wipe her eyes as she looked at that picture. Yes, Stenka Razin was surely a noble man. I cried myself to sleep over the

unspeakable injustice, wondering how I could ever forgive "them" the killing of the good Stenka, and why the weak-looking branch did not break with his weight. Why didn't it break? ... The scaffold they will prepare for me might break with my weight. They'll hang me like Stenka, and perhaps a little boy will some day see the picture-and they will call me murderer-and only a few will know the truth-and the picture will show me hanging from ... No, they shall not hang me! My hand steals to the lapel of my coat, and a deep sense of gratification comes over me, as I feel the nitroglycerin cartridge secure in the lining. I smile at the imaginary carpenter. Useless preparations! I have, myself, prepared for the event. No, they won't hang me, My hand caresses the long, narrow tube. Go ahead! Make your gallows. Why, the man is putting on his coat. Is he done already? Now he is turning around. He is looking straight at me, Why, it's Frick! Alive? ... My brain is on fire. I press my head against the bars, and groan heavily. Alive? Have I failed? Failed? ...

II

Heavy footsteps approach nearer; the clanking of the keys grows more distinct. I must compose myself. Those mocking, unfriendly eyes shall not witness my agony. They could allay this terrible uncertainty, but I must seem indifferent. Would I "take lunch with the Chief"? I decline, requesting a glass of water. Certainly; but the Chief wishes to see me first. Flanked on each side by a policeman, I pass through winding corridors, and finally ascend to the private office of the Chief. My mind is busy with thoughts of escape, as I carefully note the surroundings. I am in a large, well-furnished room, the heavily curtained windows built unusually high above the floor. A brass railing separates me from the roll-top desk, at which a middleaged man, of distinct Irish type, is engaged with some papers. "Good morning," he greets me, pleasantly. "Have a seat," pointing to a chair inside the Tailing. "I understand you asked for some water?" "Yes." "Just a few questions first. Nothing important. Your pedigree, you know. Mere matter of form. Answer frankly, and you shall have everything you want." His manner is courteous, almost ingratiating. "Now tell me, Mr. Berkman, what is your name? Your real name, I mean." "That's my real name." "You don't mean you gave your real name on the card you sent in to Mr. Frick?" "I gave my real name." "And you are an agent of a New York employment firm?" "No." "That was on your card." "I wrote it to gain access to Frick." "And you gave the name 'Alexander

Berkman' to gain access?" "No. I gave my real name. Whatever might happen, I did not want anyone else to be blamed." "Are you a Homestead striker?" "No." "Why did you attack Mr. Frick?" "He is an enemy of the People." "You got a personal grievance against him?" "No. I consider him an enemy of the People." "Where do you come from?" "From the station cell." "Come, now, you may speak frankly, Mr. Berkman. I am your friend. I am going to give you a nice, comfortable cell. The other-" "Worse than a Russian prison," I interrupt, angrily. "How long did you serve there?" "Where?" "In the prison in Russia." "I was never before inside a cell." "Come, now, Mr. Berkman, tell the truth." He motions to the officer behind my chair. The window curtains are drawn aside, exposing me to the full glare of the sunlight. My gaze wanders to the clock on the wall. The hour-hand points to V. The calendar on the desk reads, July—23—Saturday. Only three hours since my arrest? It seemed so long in the cell... "You can be quite frank with me," the inquisitor is saying. "I know a good deal more about you than you think. We've got your friend Rak-metov." With difficulty I suppress a smile at the stupidity of the intended trap. In the register of the hotel where I passed the first night in Pittsburgh, I signed "Rakhmetov," the name of the hero in Chernishevsky's famous novel. "Yes, we've got your friend, and we know all about you." "Then why do you ask me?" "Don't you try to be smart now. Answer my questions, d'ye hear?" His manner has suddenly changed. His tone is threatening. "Now answer me. Where do you live?" "Give me some water. I am too dry to talk." "Certainly, certainly," he replies, coaxingly. "You shall have a drink. Do you prefer whiskey or beer?" "I never drink whiskey, and beer very seldom. I want water." "Well, you'll get it as soon as we get through. Don't let us waste time, then. Who are your friends?" "Give me a drink." "The quicker we get through, the sooner you'll get a drink. I am having a nice cell fixed up for you, too. I want to be your friend, Mr. Berkman. Treat me right, and I'll take care of you. Now, tell me, where did you stop in Pittsburgh?" "I have nothing to tell you." "Answer me, or I'll-" His face is purple with rage. With clenched fist he leaps from his seat; but, suddenly controlling himself, he says, with a reassuring smile: "Now be sensible, Mr. Berkman. You seem to be an intelligent man. Why don't you talk sensibly?" "What do you want to know?" "Who went with you to Mr. Frick's office?" Impatient of the comedy, I rise

with the words: "I came to Pittsburgh alone. I stopped at the Merchants' Hotel, opposite the B. and O. depot. I signed the name Rakhmetov in the register there. It's a fictitious name. My real name is Alexander Berkman. I went to Frick's office alone. I had no helpers. That's all I have to tell you." "Very good, very good. Take your seat, Mr. Berkman. We're not in any hurry. Take your seat. You may as well stay here as in the cell; it's pleasanter. But I am going to have another cell fixed up for you. just tell me, where do you stay in New York?" "I have told you all there is to tell." "Now, don't be stubborn. Who are your friends?" "I won't say another word." "Damn you, you'll think better of it. Officers, take him back. Same cell."

Every morning and evening, during three days, the scene is repeated by new inquisitors. They coax and threaten, they smile and rage in turn. I remain indifferent. But water is refused me, my thirst aggravated by the salty food they have given me. It consumes me, it tortures and burns my vitals through the sleepless nights passed on the hard wooden bench. The foul air of the cell is stifling. The silence of the grave torments me; my soul is in an agony of uncertainty.

From : Anarchy Archives.

### **Chronology :**

**November 30, 1911** : Part 1, Chapter 05 -- Publication.

**February 03, 2017** : Part 1, Chapter 05 -- Added to  
<http://www.RevoltLib.com>.

**May 28, 2017** : Part 1, Chapter 05 -- Last Updated on  
<http://www.RevoltLib.com>.

PDF file generated from :

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