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MY FATHER, PRINCE KROPOTKIN

BY ALEXANDRA KROPOTKIN

MORE than one hundred years have passed since the day on which Prince Peter Kropotkin was born in Moscow, on December 9, 1842. He lived to be nearly eighty, dying in his native city, to which he had returned after forty-one years of exile. The Russia he loved so well had in the meantime discarded the Tsarist régime for another which he found equally tyrannical and distasteful.

Prince Kropotkin is known chiefly through his philosophical interpretation of anarchism as "a society made orderly by good manners rather than by law, in which each person produces according to his powers and receives according to his needs." He is also known to scientists for his very considerable contributions to geography and to social psychology. He discovered the true direction of the mountain ranges of Siberia and Asia, and he made researches of the first magnitude in the field of instinct among animals and primitive people, which he brought together in his classic, *Mutual Aid*.

But the writer, as his daughter, is more interested in his character than in his worldly stature. There are things — vital things, it seems to me — about my father that are not as well known as they deserve to be.

A few days after my father died, a Moscow friend contributed this spoken epitaph:

"Kropotkin had a passion for justice."

The phrase passed from mouth to mouth, and soon became the accepted summary of the character of my father who sacrificed the privileges of noble birth and worldly comfort to dedicate himself to humanity. Yet, for all the deep admiration behind the phrase, it has always seemed to me to tell only half the truth. Far more fundamental in my father's spiritual and mental makeup than a passion for justice was his *instinct for honesty*. To take any advantage of any situation — whether in personal relationships, in business or politics — in order to score a vic-

tory over a weaker opponent, was to him not only an injustice but a dishonest act. He looked upon dishonesty as the crime of crimes — a cheap and cowardly betrayal of human dignity.

My father's approach to people was always simple and direct. In his contact with strangers he was invariably influenced by the first handshake. The impression gained this way remained with him. He divided human hands into two categories: honest and dishonest. An overly narrow hand, a very limp hand, an evasively offered one — these instantly aroused his suspicion. Nor did the too hearty politician grip deceive him. Sometimes he tried to combat the first impression obtained this way, if further acquaintance revealed the person in a more favorable light, but in the end he returned to his first impression.

I recollect a world-famous writer who came to our house. He was a man of great intelligence, cultured and charming, politically a militant liberal. He became a frequent visitor, yet my mother and I felt a certain restraint in the cordiality of my father's welcome to this man.

"Mmmmm — yes, I like him," said father, when we broached the subject. "But I still don't like his hand."

Years later this famous writer behaved badly at a moment when he could have shown greater courage of conviction than he chose to exhibit. My father blew up in a tempest of fury. One of those exhibitions of anger that only a dishonest action could induce in him — and never failed to induce.

"You see, you see!" he shouted. "I never did trust him. He had a dishonest hand."

Needless to say, there were a certain number of people whom my father accepted as "honest," some of whom even became friends, who did not eventually prove worthy of such faith. Yet, on the whole, as I look back, their number was surprisingly small as compared to those who were welcomed into the real intimacy of our family and who never fell short of his standards of honesty.

Those standards were complicated. They were in many ways puritanical, particularly in matters of sex. Above all, honesty meant to him an awareness of the lives of others — *their* right to happiness.

My father's friendly faith in people has been labelled "Christian" by Oscar Wilde (that always annoyed father, because he contended that you could not promise honestly to *love* your neighbor, who

might turn out to be a scoundrel). Others have called this faith of his "childlike." Neither, I believe, is entirely accurate. What he wanted to believe about people in general, and did believe to his last day, is that most people, given decent environment, are *happier* when they are honest than when they are dishonest. All his theories of voluntary collaboration in a perfect world are actually based on the first premise of human honesty. Perhaps that is why slick politicians, whatever their creed may be, find this Kropotkin Utopia so hard to believe feasible. Honesty is so unspectacular.

Father was far too much of a realist, and far too acute an observer of human nature, to think that honesty can ever flourish healthily side by side with fear of any sort. But he knew also that lies and dishonesty of all kinds are not induced by fear alone. Fashion too, he saw, can foster dishonest thought and action. What we today call "smartaleck" wisdom often made him laugh. It also could anger him. He considered flip smartness of word actually dishonest. He would quote a Russian proverb, "A slick wordster will betray father or mother to coin a smart phrase."

The admiration so often bestowed on those who made a success of

sharp trading maddened him even more. So long as dishonesty in any form is socially admirable, he maintained, so long will it flourish. But neither the smart half-truths of easy wit, nor the story of devious worldly achievement could unleash the truly titanic wrath he flung about when anyone resorted to sophistry in a serious argument of any kind. Heaven help you if you tried to score a point in an argument by resorting to a trick of inverse logic. By the time I was old enough to commit such a heinous sin I was too old to be actually punished. In my early childhood the only serious punishments I rated were for the occasional telling of a lie. Yet when, as I grew older, I made use in some argument of what father contemptuously designated as "casuistry" I was sure to be in the dog-house for days. I was made to feel that my isolation was the direct result of my own proof that I was too dishonest for honest people to waste conversation on me. He held that a discussion is for the clarification of ideas, not the scoring of points.

Amongst those who were well acquainted with my father his intolerance of sophistry in thought and phrase was a byword. But I witnessed some unfortunate argu-

ments when the reason for his impatience was not so well understood, and when the measure of his wrath seemed to his opponent out of all proportion to the point taken. They did not realize that my father's *intolerance* of dishonesty was also the root of his *tolerance* for many points of view which he did not share himself.

Only on one point was he adamant. Never under any circumstances did I hear him tolerant towards a defense of bureaucracy, or of any form of government fostering bureaucracy. His line of reasoning was forthright. If you defended bureaucracy it was because you yourself yearned to be a bureaucrat and wield official power over defenseless folk. That desire, however disguised, even from yourself, branded you as dishonest. Otherwise, he listened politely.

The most remarkable evidence I had of this attitude came during the last year of his life when we discussed religion. He knew that I was not an atheist, as he was; that to me the world made sense because I had faith in Divine Reason. This faith of mine perplexed him. He found it difficult to disassociate faith from religion as it is indoctrinated by established churches. And the churches were to him what

they had always been — part of the established order, stumbling blocks along the road to a more equal distribution of the decencies of life. He said to me:

“Your approach to this question is quite different from the attitude I had when I was young. It is not like the one many of my comrades had at a later period of my life. I have listened often, as you know, to what your cousins have to say on this subject. You all seem to feel very deeply that there is a pattern of *reason* outside and beyond human reason. I suppose your Divine Reason is what I recognize only as Nature. I can't change my way of thinking. But I respect your faith because you, and other young people like you, have an honest approach to the subject.”

Why do some people endure in memory forever? No one has answered this question better than my father did in his *Memoirs*, when writing of his father's serfs, who befriended him as a small motherless child:

Men passionately desire to live after death, but they often pass away without noticing the fact that the memory of a really good person always lives. It is impressed upon the next generation, and it is transmitted again to the children. Is not that an immortality worth striving for?