

THE PALIMPSEST

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Icaria and the Icarians

On the morning of the fifteenth of March, 1849, the steamboat *American Eagle*, on its way up the Mississippi River, arrived at Nauvoo, Illinois, with some 260 representatives of a French socialist party of which Etienne Cabet was the founder and leader. As the little group of emigrants disembarked from the crowded boat they saw before them the almost deserted city from which the Mormons had departed three years before on their long trail to Salt Lake. Empty houses, dismantled shops, and the blackened walls of the temple were all that remained of the former glory of the Mormon center which in 1844 with a population estimated at 14,000 had been the largest city in Illinois.

If the French had been of a religious turn of mind they would no doubt have believed that this empty city on the bank of the Mississippi was the work of divine providence. It was, indeed, a welcome refuge, for they were weary, sick, and discouraged. They

had left France the year before in several detachments to found in northeastern Texas an ideal community which, long before an actual site had been selected, had been named Icaria — a title derived from a romance, *Voyage en Icarie*, published by Cabet. The site of this Utopia, however, had been badly chosen. The long journey west from the Red River exhausted even the hardy advance guard. Breaking the sod and building houses under the scorching July sun were hardships enough to discourage the strongest men; and to these difficulties was soon added the scourge of malaria.

A few months before as the ship left the harbor at Havre these men had sung of the Icarian fatherland they hoped to found. Now, realizing the impossibility of providing for the larger delegation soon to arrive, they sadly and painfully made the long march back to New Orleans. Here their leader joined them in January of 1849 with more Icarians.

The hardships narrated by the advance guard and the revolution in France led many to return, but the loyal followers of Cabet, 280 in number, determined to go to Nauvoo where homes, at least, were ready to shelter them. Again misfortune dogged their footsteps: cholera claimed twenty of their number on the trip up the river; and it was with sad hearts that the exiles disembarked at Nauvoo, where, for the present, they hoped to establish Icaria, which they fondly hoped and fervently believed was to become the new world order.

Let us visit Nauvoo again six years later and ob-

serve the work of the communists. In the vicinity of the temple ruins some 500 of the Icarians are living and working, discussing their principles and their daily tasks in the French tongue. On the square surrounding the ruins of the temple, even the walls of which have now been blown down, are the community buildings of the Icarians. A large two story building provides a combined dining hall and assembly room, the upper floor being used as apartments. A school building in which the boys and girls are taught separately has been constructed from the stones of the temple, and a workshop, remodeled from the old Mormon arsenal, is also in use. Two infirmaries, a pharmacy, a community kitchen, a bakery, a laundry, and a library provide for the welfare of the community. Several hundred acres of land on the outskirts of Nauvoo are farmed by the communists, while the men who are not occupied in farming work in the flour mill, distillery, and saw mill, or are busy in the workshops at tailoring, shoemaking, or other trades, each group choosing its own overseer. The women, with a few exceptions, work in the kitchen, laundry, or sewing rooms.

Each family has its own apartment, for marriage and the family relation are recognized and fostered. Suppose we observe the life of a family for a day. There is no kitchen in these homes, and the mother does not get the breakfast for the family: instead all go to the community dining room where the meal for all has been prepared by the women assigned to this work. After breakfast the father goes to the

farm, to the mill, or to the workshop. The mother perhaps washes the dishes or prepares the vegetables for dinner. The boys and girls are sent to school where they are taught the usual branches and, in addition, the principles of Icaria — all, of course, in French. At noon they again assemble in the dining hall where a dinner of meat, vegetables, and fruit is served; then after a rest they return to the farm or the shop until the signal calls them to supper. In the evening there may be a meeting to discuss and decide the policies of the community, or the young people may dance. Possibly they may visit together until they are ready to return to their separate homes. On Sundays all unnecessary work is suspended, but there are no religious services.

If you are of a legal turn of mind and wish to know the political and legal status of these French settlers, you find that the society has a constitution — largely the plan of Cabet — which regulates their domestic affairs. The decisions within the community are settled in the general assembly in which all are expected to be present although only men over twenty years of age may vote. The relation of the community to the State of Illinois is determined by the act of February 1, 1851, incorporating the "Icarian Community". Among the names of the incorporators you may observe one well known in Iowa and Illinois, A. Piquenard, the architect of the capitol buildings at Des Moines and Springfield. Although jealously maintaining their French language and customs, the men of the community are

for the most part naturalized citizens of the United States and their relations with their American neighbors are usually friendly.

To the visitor who understands French and listens to the discussions among the men in the workshops and the women in the kitchen, it is evident that somehow the serpent of dissension has entered this garden of communism. One faction represented by some fifty-four voters supports Cabet in his attempt to revise the constitution and resume his former position of dictator; the other, with eighty-one votes in the assembly, but without much power among the administrative staff, opposes this revision as illegal. This party is known as the "reds". Supporters of Cabet are "whites", "cabétistes", or "furets".

Friction is increased by the social groups which have developed among the women and by the class feeling which has appeared among the various groups of workers. The men who work at a distance complain that those who work near the dining hall are served first and receive the best food. All these currents of discontent swell the tide which seems about to engulf the community. Families are divided and men and women on opposite sides no longer speak except when work demands it. In the dining room are tables of the "reds" and tables of "cabétistes". On one occasion five of the party opposed to Cabet enter the dining hall chanting in an undertone from the Marseillaise:

Contre nous de la tyrannie
L'étendard sanglant est levé.

Cabet, now an old man of 68, who had left his family in France to found this community on the soil of a strange land, is indignant at this charge of tyranny and at what he considers the ingratitude of his followers.

Finally the majority party obtain control of the "gerance" or governing board as well as of the assembly. Thereupon the "cabétistes" quit work. Their opponents, taking as their authority the words of Saint Paul — which appeared in French, by Cabet's orders, on the walls of the dining hall — "If any will not work, neither let him eat", notify the insurgents that unless they return to work, food, clothing, and lodgings will be refused them. Then, says a French writer, began Homeric battles around the tables as the "cabétistes" attempted to force their way into the dining hall, to the great damage of the Icarian table ware. Cabet, watching from his room on the second floor, encourages his adherents; but they are finally ousted. A fist fight occurs when the new officials attempt to secure the records and keys from the old administration, while Cabet looks on with a smile, a situation which reminds an Icarian woman — in the opposition of course — of Charles IX at Saint Bartholomew. The climax of absurdity is reached when the new authorities attempt to remove two women "cabétistes" who teach in the school for girls. One of the teachers resists and is dragged out "by the hair" crying for help, while the terrified little girls scream and weep and some

neutral American neighbors watch the scene from the vantage point of the temple ruins.

Again and again the sheriff is summoned to restore order. The mayor of Nauvoo urges a complete separation; and the followers of Cabet withdraw to lodgings outside Icarian jurisdiction and soon after depart for St. Louis, leaving the "reds" in possession of Icaria.

Cabet, disillusioned and broken hearted, died on November 8, 1856, a few days after his arrival at St. Louis. His followers began a new Icaria at Cheltenham, near the city, where they maintained the struggle for eight years. Then with a membership reduced from nearly two hundred to less than thirty, oppressed by debt and sickness, the community turned over the keys of the buildings to the mortgagee and the last of this group of Icarians returned to the world of individualism and competition.

What of the group left behind at Nauvoo? Suppose we visit them some twenty years later. To do this we must travel to a spot some four miles east of Corning, Iowa. Here is Icaria, a little hamlet built on a hill sloping down to the Nodaway River. In the center of a square is the dining hall which serves also as the assembly room. On the sides of this square are rows of small white cottages and the shops, laundry, bakery, and similar establishments. Beyond are some log cabins, still used by those for

whom frame cottages have not yet been provided. On the outskirts are the barns, gardens, and orchards, while a magnificent wood forms an effective background for the whole. One feature of the usual Iowa village, however, is lacking: no church spire breaks the sky line above Icaria.

Perhaps you ask of the years following the departure of Cabet from Nauvoo. What have been the fortunes of the group left behind in the dying city? At first confusion reigned: industry was disorganized and the titles to the property held in Cabet's name could be transferred only by action of the courts. Crops were poor. The panic of 1857 was already in the air. The feud had alienated their supporters in France who were friends of Cabet, so no assistance could be expected from the mother land.

The community had for several years owned about 3000 acres of land in Adams County, Iowa, where they hoped at some future time to establish the permanent Icaria. To this remote and unsettled property the Icarians decided to migrate. The sale of their property at Nauvoo and other legal tangles, however, delayed the final exodus until 1860.

At Nauvoo the French had found plenty of houses, cultivated fields, and neighbors who were friendly as soon as the suspicion resulting from the struggle with the Mormons was allayed. In Iowa log houses, some without floors or windows, were their only shelter against the biting cold of winter. Most of

their land was unfenced and unbroken prairie, and there was not a settler along the trail for forty miles before they reached Icaria. Supplies had to be hauled some hundred miles by team.

At first they endured real hardships. Only the sick had white bread, sugar, and coffee. Milk, butter, corn bread, and bacon formed the menu of the others. Little by little conditions improved. With the outbreak of the Civil War, the price of wool soared. The Icarians had a large number of sheep and wool was easy to transport to a distant market. Troops passing from the Missouri to the Des Moines River and emigrants westward bound paid generously for supplies. The war, however, was not entirely an advantage, for it is said that every Icarian man qualified to enlist was enrolled in the Union army.

For most of the time, however, the members of the community were engaged in a constant struggle against debt and the wilderness. So many became discouraged and left the community that at one time they numbered only thirty-five persons. Despairing of paying for the entire tract or working it with their depleted forces, they had sold some 2000 acres of land, reserving about 1100 acres for themselves. Thus the years passed. A birth or a death, more rarely a wedding, now and then broke the monotony of their existence; and occasionally an old Icarian family returned to the fold.

By 1876 neighbors have moved in around Icaria

and the railroad has brought the community to the doors of the eastern markets; but their manner of living has changed very little. Each morning they assemble in the common dining room for breakfast of porridge, bread and butter, and coffee. For dinner and supper, meat, vegetables, marmalade, cheese, and fruit may be served. The tables are without cloths and the members drink from tin cups. Wine is produced only in sufficient quantities for solemn occasions. Water is the usual drink; and even this indispensable commodity has to be hauled from a distance. Many of the men smoke, but tobacco is not furnished by the community — each smoker must raise and cure his own supply in his leisure hours.

If you knock at one of the family apartments you will be received with the courtesy which a French man or woman seldom loses no matter how rough the surroundings. Below are two rooms — a living room and a bedroom. Upstairs close under the roof are two small rooms for the children.

In the evening when the community assembles in the dining hall for discussion or to enjoy music, a program, or a play, some idea of the personnel at this time may be obtained. Gathered in this rather bare room are some sixty-seven persons, twenty-four of whom are voters. Their dress is plain, but neither peculiar nor standardized. They converse in French, for almost all are French. Some of the newcomers are relating stories of the barricades in Paris during the Commune, or discussing ways and means of en-

larging the communistic society. The men and women who have faced the hardships of establishing their homes in the wilderness look at their hands, calloused and work-roughened, and debate the advisability of admitting others to share in the fruits of their toil. Again Icaria is split into factions. On one side are the conservatives, chiefly older people who prefer things as they are and have little enthusiasm for converting the world; on the other side are the radicals, many of them young people. In this party are some restless agitators, born revolutionists, who demand many changes. They want a program of industrial expansion, the establishment of workshops in nearby towns, and greater freedom in the admission of new members. They demand also that women be permitted to vote in the assembly, partly perhaps because this will increase the vote of their party.

In these discussions there is constant reference to "the little gardens" which are violently condemned by the radical party and, in fact, find few supporters. Earlier in the life of the community each family had been permitted to cultivate a little garden around its log house, where flowers might be raised. Some had planted vines and even fruit trees, and now that these were bearing fruit the radical members could not tolerate this violation of their rules against private property. The possessors of the gardens, however, clung to their little plots of ground. It was not much but it was theirs, they would have said with

Touchstone. The authorities tried to settle the quarrel by a compromise. As each family moved from their log house to a new frame house, the little garden was to be given up. At last only three households maintained their gardens in which the vines hung loaded with grapes. A member of the young Icarian party proposed that these grapes be sold by the community, but his motion was defeated.

This was the signal for open hostilities. The radicals claimed that the community had violated its constitution and announced their intention of withdrawing. Over the division of the community property, however, amounting to some \$60,000, a deadlock developed. The young Icarians had a majority of the total membership but they were outvoted by the conservatives nineteen to thirteen. They could not secure what they considered their share of the property but neither could the old Icarians expel the malcontents since this required a two-thirds vote.

At last the insurgents, some of them participants in the Paris Commune and all advocating more aggressive communism, appealed to the Circuit Court to revoke the charter granted to the community in 1860 on the ground that Icaria was really a communistic establishment instead of an agricultural society as the articles of incorporation provided. The American jury, convinced that the two factions could not live together in harmony and perhaps suspicious of the communistic idea, decided that the charter had been violated; and in accordance with

this verdict the Icarian community was dissolved by a court decree on August 17, 1878.

The property having been divided on the basis of the number of members and the contribution of each in goods and work, the two factions prepared to set up housekeeping anew. The radicals, more aggressive than their opponents, took out a charter under the title, "La Communauté Icarienne", taking care to secure all the rights which had been held illegal under the old charter, such as establishing schools and manufacturing establishments. They offered the older group a bonus of \$1500 for possession of the Icarian village and this was accepted. Thereupon they adopted a program which might have been expressed by the modern slogan, "Watch us grow", framed a new constitution, increased their agricultural and industrial activities, gave women a vote in the assembly, and provided for the admission of new members. Apparently they were not very discriminating for one member wrote in disgust that they had freelovers, Shakers, nihilists, anarchists, socialists, and cranks of all kinds — the word "crank" being one of the American words adopted by the French Icarians.

The result was membership indigestion, and it soon became evident that the community was losing members faster than it gained them. Why was this? the leaders asked in dismay. Some said the withdrawals were due to an instinct similar to that which makes rats leave a sinking ship. This diagnosis was

not far wrong. The community was receiving many improvised Icarians who expected to live at ease far from the degrading "wage slavery" of the cities; and they were both unable and unwilling to cut down trees, build houses, or plough the soil which was exasperatingly full of rocks. Moreover, their families also had to be supported; and the arrival of two skilled mechanics added to the ration list nine additional persons who, a French writer says, had lost none of their Alsatian appetites in the severe climate of Iowa.

Face to face with failure in Iowa, where work was hard, the new Icarians dreamed of a center in Florida, Kentucky, Texas, or California where the trees would produce fruit while the communists planned the further extension of their ideals. It happened that some ex-Icarians were already in California which they reported as a second Eden. The temptation proved too great for the young Icarians. They decided to join their brethren at the community called *Espérance* in Sonoma County, California, the land of leisure, flowers, and fruit. The united community was christened *Icaria-Speranza*. Another constitution was adopted which was a compromise between communism and individualism. Before their migration, however, dissensions among the Iowa Icarians brought them once more into the courts, and in 1886 their society was dissolved.

In the meantime on the bank of the Nodaway the

old Icarians, who had lost both the Icarian name and the village of Icaria, after some hesitation, had incorporated as "La Nouvelle Communauté Icarienne". Thus the old Icarians became the new Icarians. They selected a spot about a mile southeast of their old home and created a second Icaria. Here they lived in peace for another twenty years. Debt was the constant spectre which haunted the community. The monotony of the life and a desire for more individual freedom drove many of the younger people out into the world where the struggle seemed no harder and the possible rewards greater.

About ten years after the schism six of the nine men in the "Nouvelle Communauté Icarienne" were over sixty-one years of age. One of these, A. A. Marchand, had been with the first advance guard in 1848. Another was Jules Maillon who, after thirty years in the community, had returned to France hoping to die in his native land. But everything had changed in France and his relatives looked coldly upon the old man who had returned with empty hands. Disillusioned he had returned to spend his last days at the peaceful hamlet on the Iowa prairie.

As the years passed, the maintenance of the community grew more and more difficult for these old people, and it became evident to even its most devoted adherents that its days were numbered. The final act of the Icarian community as a whole was

the vote on the dissolution of the society in February, 1895. The hearts of those who had toiled and suffered in Texas, at Nauvoo, and on the prairies of Iowa must have been heavy, but the vote was unanimous. The execution of the sentence devolved upon the court which appointed E. F. Bettannier, one of the members, receiver. The assets were distributed among the members according to their years of service in the community reckoning from the age of twenty-one in the case of men and eighteen for the women. Each orphan minor was given \$850. Three years later, on the 22nd of October, Judge H. M. Towner accepted the report of the receiver and declared "La Nouvelle Communauté Icarienne" legally at an end. Some of the members remained as honored citizens in the vicinity but the last branch of the Icarian tree, which was to have flourished and scattered its seeds into the world of individualism, was dead.

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