Chapter --

VANZETTI AND THE CORDAGE

The extremists who have used the Sacco-Vanzetti case as a text represent it as a murder engineered by a decadent ruling class ("hangmen in frock coats") to eliminate two radicals ("goddam agitators") who were interfering with their betters and obstructing their exploitation of the proletariat.

Eugene V. Debs charged the mill-owning, labor-sweating malefactors of Massachusetts with having Sacco and Vanzetti framed, pounced upon, thrown into a dungeon and sentenced to be murdered by their judicial and other official underlings.

"The ruling class (in New England) unable to estimate the economic and social forces which were sweeping them into oblivion, attributed all their ills to foreign agitators. If not for men like Sacco and Vanzetti - if not for Giovanitti and Galleaia and Tresca - Boston, they believed, would still be the hub of the universe." (Lyons, p. 32)

This indictment of the ruling class generally and of Massachusetts manufacturers was made particular by applying them to the Plymouth Cordage Company and to Vanzetti's connection with its 1916 strike.

"It (peddling fish) was better than working at the great Cordage works that owns North Plymouth. Some years ago he (Vanzetti) had tried to organize a strike there and been blacklisted. The officials and detectives at the Plymouth Cordage Works, the largest cordage works in the world, thought of him as a Red, a slacker and trouble-maker." (Dos Passos, p. 58).

"In 1914 Vanzetti had a job loading rope coils on freight cars with the outside gang of the Plymouth
Cordage. The Plymouth Cordage is the largest in the world, and virtually owns Plymouth and the surrounding towns where colonies of Italians and Portugese worked (at that time for a maximum of nine dollars a week) tending the spinning machines that transform hemp shipped from Yucatan into rope and binder twine. On January 17, 1916, there was a big walkout, the first in the history of the Cordage. Vanzetti was one of the organizers of the strike. After the plant had been shut down for a month in the busiest season, the company conceded a raise. Since then wages have risen to round twenty-five a week (in 1927). Vanzetti was always in the front, picketing, making speeches. He was the only employee who did not get his job back when the strike was settled." (Dos Passos, p. 71)

"Plymouth was dear to the traditions of settlement of men seeking freedom of conscience. The slums of Plymouth seemed to him a stain upon those traditions. The unendurable conditions in the cordage factory, where he loaded great coils of rope day after day, seemed to him a mockery of that freedom.

"Two thousand foreigners, mostly Italian, turned the sisal hemp brought from Yucatan into binder twine and rope. They received an average of $12 a week and lived in miserable hovels. The ferment among the New England workers reach them. In 1916 they suddenly struck. No one called them out. Things just got to the point where they had to quit. The usual alarms in the press followed; the usual contingents of police appeared.

"These workers called for Galleani to lead them. Vanzetti helped in the bitter fight which followed. When it was finished - and a slight wage increase had been won - the workers went back. But the employers would have none of Vanzetti. He was a 'goddam agitator.'" (Lyons, p. 34-5)

"The first trial of Vanzetti alone, took place in Plymouth, where he had been a leader in a bitter strike against the largest industrial plant in town - the cordage works." (Lyons, p. 57)

"Vanzetti was known to the political powers of Plymouth. He was one of the foreign agitators who struck against the largest cordage company in the world, the company which practically owns Plymouth. This was one of the first biographical details featured in the papers after his arrest." (Lyons, p. 58)
In a communication signed by Vanzetti dated July, 1927, addressed to the International Anarchist Defense Committee, 72 Rue des Prairies, Paris (France) this appears:

"The Plymouth Cordage Company is the feudal lord of Plymouth and its institutions, so that when the company is against anyone there its will is done. The company knew of my innocence of these two crimes, but it wanted to eliminate me because it feared me as an uncorruptible anarchist and for my capital crime of not having betrayed its workers during their strike in 1915, when they worked 54 hours weekly for a pay of $9.00 — this in 1915, just think of it! My Judas Iscariot, John Vahey, in the vestment of defense counsel, is a stockholder in the Cordage Company and a great friend of Thayer, even more of Katzmann, both deadly against me; since Katzmann and Vahey are partners, are not these explanations enough of why Mr. Vahey should have been against me? But not for Judge Grant who shook his head at it and answered, afterwards, by referring to Vahey as a 'well known, distinguished, criminal lawyer,' which is a shameless lie. So I said, 'I beg your pardon, Judge, I referred to Vahey of Plymouth, not his brother in Boston (who has a certain declining reputation),' 'I understand,' replied Judge Grant, 'and I know very well both of them.' Yes, and he is their great friend, and he will hang us to uphold Iscariot Vahey's reputation."

These accounts of working conditions at the Plymouth Cordage Company, the novels of North Plymouth, and Vanzetti's part in the 1916 strike are proved grotesque and untruthful by the following quotations from Samuel Eliot Morison's "The Ropemakers of Plymouth, A History of the Plymouth Cordage Company, 1824-1949," Cambridge, Massachusetts, 1950. Professor Morison is one of those who were convinced that Sacco and Vanzetti were innocent of the South Braintree crime and that Vanzetti was also innocent of the holdup in Bridgewater, and he cannot be charged with prejudice against them.
First as to the working conditions and the housing:

"North Plymouth was never a dreary mill town, but a pleasant and salubrious site equal to those shores of Plymouth and Duxbury Bays which have been taken up by summer homes of well-to-do Bostonians . . . ."

"William E. Nazro was in charge of a special employees' welfare department. Nazro, an architect by training, had been reading Ruskin. He believed that wage-earners like other people had a yearning for beauty and for betterment. He regarded industrial welfare work as 'the seed for one of the greatest educational processes the country has ever known . . . .'

"In seeking motives for the welfare program we are about to describe, a cynic or a Marxist would say that it was a shrewd move to keep the proletariat contented with low wages. And everyone must admit that employee benefits did pay the employer. Plymouth Cordage could not raise wages above those paid by its many competitors and survive; but it could and did withhold from profits the modest sums necessary to give its employees greater happiness and security. Yet there was a lot more to it than mere calculation. The present writer, who knew Augustus P. Loring, has no hesitation in declaring that his natural benevolence, and his recognition of the essential worth of the working man, were the main motives behind the numerous welfare activities at Plymouth. A portly, ruddy, jovial man who reminded one of Dickens' Mr. Cheeryble, Loring exuded cheer and good will to friends, neighbors and employees alike. He had many charitable interests, notably Near East Relief of which he was a director and a prominent contributor; he would talk for hours to anyone who would listen, about welfare in Plymouth or rehabilitation of displaced persons in Greece. Except for sailing, in which he delighted, Loring took no part in the clubs, sports, or other social activities common to Bostonians of family and wealth; next to his own family, the Plymouth Cordage employees were closest to his heart. Even in his old age, in the depth of the great depression, he was more concerned with the welfare of the employees than with that of the company . . . ."

"The Loring Library, presented in 1909, one of the first evidences of the new social policy at Plymouth, was wholly paid for by Augustus P. Loring and stocked with some three thousand books by himself and his brother and sisters. They saw to it that good selections of German, Italian and Portuguese literature were included, so that employees in the course of their Americanization would not forget their native culture."
"From time to time since 1825 the Company had built tenements of the normal mill-village type for its workers, but in 1899 it started an ambitious housing program of very different and superior quality, with 21 two-family homes of the architecture then vaguely called 'colonial.' Each family unit comprised five to seven rooms and a cellar, a modern bathroom, a front lawn with place for a flower garden and a back yard big enough to grow vegetables and raise poultry. The Company also laid sidewalks and a sewage system at its own expense, since the town would not. The rents were very moderate. And, more important, the appearance, finish and accommodations of the houses were of the sort then sought after by the younger business and professional men with incomes much larger than any factory operative could earn, so that to live in them gave an employee's self-respect and standing in the community . . . .

"After housing came educational activities. The earliest was a free kindergarten for employees' children, opened in 1900; a special building was constructed for it later, and the enrollment reached ninety or one hundred. A carpentry school was opened for boys and classes in sewing, dressmaking and millinery, basketry and drawing, for women and girls. A cooking school was opened by the Company in 1901, 'to teach young girls how to prepare good food economically,' the average attendance between that year and 1927 was between fifty and one hundred. At various times, classes in canning and preserving were held . . . .

"The earliest service of a medical nature provided was a nutrition clinic established by Augustus P. Loring at his own expense around 1900, where children of employees could be examined and their parents advised about diet. Some years later he was immensely gratified when a state inspector declared the Plymouth Cordage employees' families to be unusually well nourished for factory workers. Following a scarlet-fever epidemic in 1903, the Company engaged two visiting nurses to be constantly in residence. They conducted a clinic and classes in nursing and infant care, and later a resident doctor was engaged to direct the clinic and the nurses . . . .

"When the history is written of that great social movement which, for want of better terms, is called employees' benefits or workers' welfare, Augustus Peabody Loring and William E. C. Nazro will doubtless stand high. As the latter predicted, and as William Bradford had predicted of the Plymouth Colony three centuries earlier: 'Thus, out of small beginnings greater things have been produced.'" (P. 90 et seq., my italics)
So much for the working conditions in the Cordage and the housing of North Plymouth. Nor were these conditions exceptional. In many other New England towns there were many men like Loring who established industries with admirable working conditions and communities where workers could live with self respect and comfort. There were slums but slum people will always create slums. The America of 1920 which the extremists hate and have almost destroyed could be a happy place in which to live and work and was for nearly everybody.

Now we come to the series of misstatements about Vanzetti's connection with the Cordage strike and here again I will quote Morison:

"It so happens that the 1916 strike has received a notoriety beyond its deserts, through the reputed connection with it of Bartolomeo Vanzetti, who with Nicola Sacco was executed in 1927 for the murder of a paymaster and his guard at South Braintree in 1920. The present writer [Morison] who followed this world-famous case at the time, is convinced that both men were innocent of that crime; and that Vanzetti was also innocent of a holdup at Bridgewater, for which he had previously been found guilty at a session of the Superior Court in Plymouth. This is not to say, however, that his statements about the Plymouth strike are correct.

"In a pamphlet written after his conviction for the South Braintree murder, Vanzetti said:

'I had participated in the strike of the Plymouth Cordage Co. workers in 1915 [sic]. This company is one of the greatest money powers of this Nation. The town of Plymouth is its feudal tenure. Of all the local men who took a prominent part in the strike, I was the only one who did not yield or betray the workers. Towards the end of the strike, the "Boston Post" a quasi-exclusive creature of the Cordage Company, said that "About
one hundred Italian Anarchists are keeping the strike on, against the will of all the other strikers." That was an exaggerated half truth. But of all the local men who had taken a big part in the strike, I was the only one who, instead of being compensated, was blacklisted by the company, and subjected to a long, vain and useless police vigilance. And I wholly realized that the Cordage Company would never forget or forgive me for the little that I had done in behalf of its exploited workers."

"This statement has frequently been quoted as true, in spite of its absurd allegations about Plymouth Cordage and the Boston Post. It seems to have been assumed by everyone that Vanzetti was a striker. Subsequently Vanzetti and his sympathizers firmly believed that his later troubles were due to getting in bad with Plymouth Cordage. Now, it is not true that Vanzetti was a striker. In the famous trial he admitted as much, indirectly - that he left the Cordage employ voluntarily because they wished to shift him from an outdoors to an indoors job which he did not like, so he want to work on the state breakwater near Plymouth Rock. Consequently there was no question of his being 'compensated' or taken back to work at the Cordage Company after the strike was over; and all strikers who wished to return to work were taken back, with no questions asked. Moreover, the payroll records of the Company prove that 'Bartholomew Vanzetti' (also called 'Bart Vanzetti') entered its employ some time during the first half of 1914; and left it on 20 January 1915, almost a year before the strike began.

"Vanzetti's participation in the strike rests entirely on his own statement, and on those of fellow anarchists and other sympathizers, several years after the event. His role was certainly an inconspicuous one, for his name is not mentioned in the detailed accounts of the strike published in the local newspaper, or in Preston Clark's full notes; or on the committees appointed by the strikers, or in an article on the strike in the anarchist organ, Revolt; or in the State Board of Arbitration proceedings. Apparently nobody in the Company ever heard of him as a strike leader until he became otherwise famous; and he was certainly not blacklisted, as the Company blacklisted nobody. The probability is that Vanzetti was of the unnamed members of the self-constituted committee which went about to workers' homes on the Sunday preceding the strike, urging the work stoppage by threats and intimidation, and that he continued violent agitation throughout the strike, and was opposed to the settlement.
According to his own testimony at the trial he was working on various odd jobs in Plymouth at that time. As an anarchist, whose object in life was to break down government and capitalism, Vanzetti may well have thought it his duty to start with Plymouth Cordage. But whatever his part may have been in the strike, has no bearing on his guilt or innocence of the murder for which he was executed." (P. 111 et seq.)

Morison also has these two footnotes relating to Vanzetti's part in the strike:

"An article by Irwin Grannich in Revolt, the anarchist organ for 5 February, 1916 (I, No. 5, p. 7) claims that the anarchists were controlling the strike 'through Luigi Galleani, the Nestor of Massachusetts Anarchism' but does not mention Vanzetti.

"Art Shields in The One Big Union Monthly for January, 1921, (III, No. 1, p. 42) states that Vanzetti 'worked night and day writing articles for an Italian paper and raising money for the strikers, the same as he had raised money for the Lawrence strikers four years before.' An article friendly to Vanzetti in Outlook and Independent for 1923 (CL, p. 1076), states that his policy in the strike was unpopular with fellow workers, and that 'more than once he was pushed off the speakers' rostrum by indignant men.'" (P. 114)

In the James-Boda Interview there is this curious interchange:

**James:** When did you first know Vanzetti?

**Boda:** I saw him first at the strike meeting in Plymouth where he made a speech. At that time, the anarchists in Plymouth did not have complete confidence in Vanzetti because he was attending some lessons given by a Protestant minister in Plymouth.