

Love and Marriage

I'm afraid he'll some day stop loving me'

In March 1918, with the imprisoned Guido a symbol of the repression that war had brought, his friends hastened to show their solidarity, journeying up to Coburg to visit their comrade.

Within the Victorian Socialist Party, Guido belonged to an intellectual, artistic coterie, with whom he drank red wine in cheap Italian restaurants like Fasoli's, Belloti's, the Latin Café and the Florence. 'Are these Bohemian places of resort under observation?' cried a military censor conscious that discussions over pasta and garlic bread could easily turn from the pleasures of art to the horrors of war.

Before his arrest, Guido had spent many evenings at Cole's book arcade, waiting for its manager, Frank Wilmot, to close his counter. Wilmot wrote poetry under the pen name 'Furnley Maurice' and his beautiful 'To God: from the weary nations' captured the disgust and dismay he felt over the European carnage. 'Our heroes lost in trenches or the wave,' he wrote, 'Are dust or rag, but no more dead than we,/Consigning to this universal grave/All that is known of trust and charity.'

With Wilmot, Guido would usually find Henry Tate, a cadaverous musician whose compositions evoked the bird songs of Emerald, the novelist and architect Conrad Sayce and the poet Frederick Macartney. Together, they'd attend a meeting of the Literary Club (which they'd helped

found), or go to Sayce's slab shack in Wallan on the outskirts of Melbourne for long arguments over books, politics and philosophy.

Now the socialist poets left the cafés and came to the gaol, where they joined Nettie and Pietro in the prison waiting room, and their arcane discussions of metre and rhyme and other matters poetical served to convince two nearby soldiers they were speaking thieves' cant. The authorities, perhaps unsurprisingly, decided almost at once that Prisoner Baracchi had seen enough people, and barred thereafter everyone but Pietro from weekly visits.

The prohibition secretly delighted the elder Baracchi. 'From this time onwards,' he wrote, 'no one was allowed with me on my weekly visits and so I had Guido all to myself.'

Despite the social embarrassment of a gaolbird son, Pietro, as always, backed 'the boy' to the hilt.

'I think he's probably a pretty lonely man and I'm sure he's charming and friendly,' wrote Nettie to Vance, after Pietro had visited her to discuss the situation. 'He seems to want to like Guido's friends ...'

Pietro did indeed come to think highly of both the Palmers. Later, Guido told Nettie, 'You and Vance seem to have won my old man's heart. He speaks of you almost every time I see him.'

The affection grew with Nettie's willingness to enlighten Pietro about the hitherto baffling activities of his son, which the scientist now investigated with the rigour he might in other circumstances apply to a new moon or passing comet. As Nettie told Vance: 'Mr B questioned me about all possible societies and movements as we were going back to town. You'd have chuckled at my succinct replies. "What is the Socialist Party?" "The Labor College?" "The IWW?" and women's movement, too. I hadn't time to wonder if he was at

all pulling my leg or what he would prefer me to reply. He's an old dear, anyhow. Says that on every occasion, Guido has beaten him in argument and been right.'

But there were other, more sensitive, matters about his wayward son that Pietro wished to broach—and they mostly concerned the boy's marriage.

Kathleen Baracchi (universally known as 'Toby') was young and beautiful: when Nettie first saw her, she'd openly admired her 'lovely face and body like the changes of a cloud'. But Toby had only been married to Guido for a month when he was arrested, and Pietro didn't know quite what to make of his daughter-in-law.

'Her mother is a Russian, and her father who died some years ago is a cousin of the Tobins of Alma Road,' he wrote, after the wedding, 'but they do not admit any relationship.'

What bothered him even more than her pedigree was her attitude towards Guido. Toby had come with Pietro on his first visits to the prison, even importuning the governor on her husband's behalf. Then, in early March, she'd suddenly left for Sydney—a decision that utterly scandalised Pietro. Her ostensible purpose was to see relatives but he couldn't understand why she'd go on social calls when her new husband was languishing in gaol. Toby's brother had borrowed considerable money from Guido; Pietro now suspected the entire Tobin clan of mercenary motives, and so he sought Nettie's opinion.

As she explained to Vance, she 'tried to console him, the very fine brick', but there was little she could say. No matter how much she liked 'Mr B', she could scarcely discuss with the father the promiscuities of the son—even though they almost certainly provided the trigger for Toby's departure.

Whether Pietro knew that Guido already had an illegitimate son is unclear. In 1914, as Guido made his way

home from Britain, he had embarked on his own Wellsian adventure, in the form of a casual encounter with a Romany girl in Hungary. It should have been simple, an uncomplicated and mutually satisfying relationship between two civilised and equal individuals that came to its natural conclusion when Guido left for Italy to visit Pietro's family.

And so it was—until Guido received word that his gypsy lover expected a child.

Under the circumstances there was little he could do. He discovered he would be a father just as he learned that Hungary and Australia were at war. He could neither write, visit nor send money to a woman in enemy territory. His ship was leaving and he sailed with it, leaving his pregnant lover behind. He saw neither mother nor child again, despite later efforts to find them, and it seems likely both perished in the turmoil of post-war Hungary.

Guido's romance with the novelist Katharine Susannah Prichard arose out of equally turbulent circumstances. At the end of 1915, Guido had accompanied his university friend Tristram Busst to Fremantle, a waystation on Busst's journey to enlist in Britain. Guido joined the shipboard farewell party, and drank so deeply of the occasion that he only awoke, many hours later, to the groaning turbines of a vessel miles out at sea.

He left the ship in Ceylon, its first port of call, where, as he aimlessly walked the streets of Colombo, he encountered a tea planter, staggering home in a gin-fuelled rage. The man knocked him unconscious but his fury gave way to a hung-over remorse, and he ensconced Guido as a guest on his enormous plantation. When Guido eventually boarded the first P & O liner that could take him back to Melbourne, he wore a borrowed pith-helmet and his benefactor's tropical whites and Katharine, returning in triumph from London

after winning a literary prize with *The Pioneers*, sighed in dismay at the sight of yet another reactionary colonialist. Only when the voyage was underway did she discover that the young man she'd taken for an empty-headed planter could talk with as much confidence about the poet Bernard O'Dowd as about the case for female suffrage.

War had temporarily converted Katharine to a conventional patriotism, but a journalistic tour of hospitals in which each bed displayed the ghastly handiwork of Mauser bullets and mustard gas shook her faith in the conflict, and she leapt at the chance to discuss the world's confusion with this sympathetic stranger. She was, according to a journalist at that time, 'slim and willowy', opinionated and independent; Guido was, equally, suave and witty, and their deckside conversations progressed, perhaps inevitably, from the idiom of politics to the language of love.

Guido was not a seducer, at least not in any conventional sense. His charm, as Betty Roland would later write, lay in his 'gift of being able to efface himself, to put aside his masculine aggressiveness and become the listener, the sympathetic, gentle, understanding recipient of confidences'. In London's Freewoman Discussion Circle, Katharine had heard the arguments condemning marriage as a crass economic bargain. Guido's views didn't shock her and, by the time they docked in Australia, she was in love.

Melbourne's small artistic community showered Katharine with accolades throughout early 1916, but her mother, even though she remained unaware that Guido visited the family home in the early hours of the morning to whistle arias outside Katharine's bedroom, still detected signs of 'a broken heart, or a disastrous love affair'. Katharine deflected this maternal concern by taking herself

off to a cottage by the beach. 'What to say? What to do?' she scribbled in her notebook. 'Anything or everything equally futile ... Does he feel as I do? Is he plagued like this? Is there rest or peace for him?'

She absorbed herself in the beauty of the coastline, but its rugged grandeur provided only a temporary balm. 'I have offered three long blue days on the altar of my feeling for you, whatever it is,' she wrote. 'Three days, lying on my back under the ti trees, gazing at the sky. So blue blue it is under the ti trees. My soul wanders its fields, crying like a child ... It cries your name, just that word. Why I don't know—or all that it means.'

When Guido joined her, she revelled in a passion she compared to the swelling ocean. 'His eyes were like the sea today—the same colour grey-blue and almost chopped up into little watchful waves.' Yet she felt no more certain as to where the affair would lead.

Nearly fifty years later, Guido told Katharine's son that his affection for Katharine never diminished from the moment they met. Yet throughout Guido's life, affection and fidelity remained quite different matters, as Katharine seems to have discovered.

'One drinks one's own tears,' she wrote, presumably after a demonstration of his faithlessness, 'but tears are a poor drink. They increase thirst—and are bad for the digestion.'

Later in the year, Hugo Throssell, a strapping war hero Katharine had met in London, briefly returned from the front, and swept her off her feet for 'days of whirlwind love-making'. But she couldn't entirely quell her feelings for Guido, haunted by 'blue eyes, the colour of forget-me-nots ... The blue in them is a finer flower and the pupils large and dark as his soul is. They have long lashes and even when I hate him I love his eyes'.

Their affair continued into 1917, when Hugo returned to the front and Katharine moved back into a little cottage in Emerald.

‘Guido came to see me on Monday,’ she confessed to her good friend Nettie Palmer. ‘We spent all Tuesday together and he caught the train back on Wednesday ... The party was indiscreet, dear, but innocent to a degree and I cannot tell you what it meant to us both. Mother would have hysterics if she heard of it—so the information is just for you, dear. We had two perfect blue days wandering about the hills. I am better in mind and body than I have been for a very long time.’

Though she’d made no promises to Hugo, his letters, with their implicit expectations, followed her, even as she wandered the hills with Guido. Conscious of Hugo’s much more conventional ideas of romance, Katharine realised she would have to choose between them—and that, however pleasurable his company, Guido would never provide the stability Hugo offered.

‘Some men are licensed and retail undiluted essences of hell,’ she told herself. ‘They do it to the best of their ability. They are a danger to society, public nuisances. They ought to be locked up.’

With considerable anguish, she allowed the affair with Guido to subside into a friendship.

The day after Guido’s marriage to Toby in January 1918, Katharine visited Nettie and complained to her of an appalling headache. ‘Sat outside,’ wrote Nettie, ‘and K said her illness had decided her that she needed a rest in the country ...’

A year later, Katharine married Hugo—who remained sufficiently suspicious about the goings-on in his absence to thereafter always refer to Guido as his wife’s ‘greasy, hand-kissing dago’.

Yet it was not Guido's history with Katharine that explained Toby's sudden flight in 1918. What Pietro didn't know—and Nettie couldn't explain—was that up to, and even after, his marriage, Guido had pursued an affair with Lesbia Keogh, the woman who so admired his speech that day on the Yarra Bank.

He'd seen Lesbia in 1915 in Harrison Moore's law lectures, where she sat in front of him. She was small and dark; he'd noticed her graceful, gliding motion and the slight smile on her faintly bluish lips, but he never actually spoke to her during their time together at the Shop.

Lesbia suffered from a heart condition that prevented her blood from properly oxygenating and would, she knew, eventually kill her. The doctors predicted a life expectancy of about thirty, a grim diagnosis confirmed each time she tried to climb the stairs to the lecture theatre and found herself straining for breath. Still, Lesbia possessed a steely determination that allowed her to sail through exams in a male-dominated law school, even as she privately explored an array of ideas never admitted into a respectable classroom.

Her middle-class family's descent into poverty after her alcoholic father's desertion perhaps fuelled Lesbia's passion for politics. Even before the war began, she and her young brother Esmond were debating ethics and reading plays at the Free Religious Fellowship, a discussion circle run by the radical parson Frederick Sinclair. At the Shop, Lesbia formed a passionate friendship with the auburn haired philosophy tutor Katie Lush, another Fellowship member. In her private notebook, Lesbia wrote of her love for Katie:

I can't feel the sunshine
Or see the stars aright

For thinking of her beauty
And her kisses bright.

Together, they tried to counter Dr Leeper's effort to whip up anti-German sentiment throughout the university. The warden had targeted a German lecturer, Walter von Dechend, who was supposed to have gloated in class over the fate of British battle cruisers. Leeper went to the Australian Intelligence Corps, claiming that von Dechend possessed a photographic development room, a safe deposit and an alternative identity as 'Herr Walter'. None of it was true but von Dechend lost his position. Walter Scharf, a talented piano player, was dismissed from the music department and detained in a POW camp.

Katie wrote to *MUM* calling the decision 'pitiful'; Lesbia gathered signatures to an open letter in von Dechend's defence and, in the early meetings of the Historical Society, she debated Menzies almost single-handedly.

By the time Guido came to the Historical Society, Lesbia had dismissed the entire university as intellectually stultifying and morally compromising. She found instead a job in a clothing factory: not because she saw toil as ennobling, but precisely because she felt its tedium a burden she was ethically obliged to share.

'Certain ways of living are wrong,' she told a meeting of the Free Religious Fellowship. 'The life of a typist, the life of a clerk, the life of a merchant, a doctor, a lawyer, seem to some of us pretty well immoral. We don't like to think that we live in houses other people have built for us, eat clothes other people have made for us, eat bread other people have baked for us and that in return for all this service we have added a few figures or talked for a couple of hours.'

Her audience might have thought the 'we' a little presumptive, since few other Fellowship members felt the need to follow their Tolstoyan convictions to such uncomfortable conclusions. Yet, by 1916, Lesbia was working as a machinist, sustaining herself by a bottle of heart-tonic next to her bench.

Guido and Lesbia became friends later that year when, in the aftermath of the first referendum victory, the bookseller Ellis Bird proposed launching a new review of politics, literature and art, and they both attended the inconclusive organising committee.

He had never met anyone like her, a woman who overcame so fearlessly the canyon that separated the university and the working class. She kept dangerous company, too, openly admiring the revolutionary Industrial Workers of the World, whose twelve central leaders had already been arrested (initially for treason, later for incendiarism) even before the referendum. In her workplace, she agitated for the appointment of a female organiser within the Clothing and Allied Trades Union—and then campaigned again to secure equal pay for the position.

If she lacked Guido's depth of theory, she knew, far more than he, how to fight. 'Lesbia was a lovely girl,' he remembered, nearly fifty years later. 'She was very Irish-Australian, you know, very warm and romantic, and at the same time very straightforward indeed. She would never concede anything that she did not thoroughly believe, she'd just contradict it. But she'd do it in a nice way, and she was universally liked. Everyone who knew her liked her very much.'

For Lesbia, Guido was one of the few men who could talk to her of poetry and art without recoiling from her politics, especially now that factory work isolated her from most educated progressives. Lesbia's co-worker May

Francis told how they had once caucused in ‘an exclusive women’s club’—almost certainly the Forerunners Club, to which Lesbia’s beloved Katie Lush belonged—only to be warned by a member not to get the club mixed up with trade unionism. ‘[This] would,’ recalled May, ‘have been viewed as a scandal of first magnitude by the “intellectual” lady members.’

Guido, on the other hand, fully approved of unionism, and, if IWW-ism went a good deal further than his own guild socialism, he still agreed with much that Lesbia said about it. Most of all, he could listen—and that mattered, since underneath her hard political carapace, she hid deep insecurities. Bright from a young age, but saddled with infirmity, she’d yearned for the fullness of life, rather than the invalid’s withered portion. She wanted to dance. She wanted boyfriends. She wanted, eventually, children. But the doctors ruled out motherhood, and Lesbia secretly feared that her heart made even romance impossible. Catching a tram left her exhausted in the gutter. How would she ever trip across a ballroom? Her apolitical sister Estelle, more conventionally beautiful, romanced a steady stream of boys; according to her brother Es, Lesbia ‘would have given anything to be like Estelle’.

When Es went into army camp in late 1914, his army friends provided Lesbia’s first interactions with young men and he, who adored his sister, cringed at her clumsy imitation of Estelle’s coquetry. She developed an infatuation with a trumpeter in the unit and wrote passionate poems about him—even though he, an uneducated working-class boy, found the attentions of a radical woman with a university degree utterly terrifying.

By the time she met Guido, Lesbia had made her break from Estelle’s priorities and she seemed the perfect girl militant, carelessly flouting conventions of gender

and class. Underneath, though, the corrosive self-doubt still lurked, and the sensitivity with which Guido paid attention to her was irresistible.

In return, she led him further into working-class politics. She had been tutoring rough workingmen from the IWW in English expression in a room above Andrade's, the radical bookshop in Bourke Street. Because of her heart condition, Percy Laidler, the shop manager and IWW leader, had to carry her bodily up the stairs, but her education and background provided as much of a barrier as her health. 'She was a dainty middle-class lass,' said much later the communist Norman Jeffrey, one of her students. 'It puzzled me why she identified herself with the IWW ... [The classes] didn't do any of us much good but it was interesting for a bloke like me.'

Nonetheless, she was well enough accepted to introduce Guido to Laidler, a nuggety man with the muscled torso of a physical culturist. Despite the persecution the IWW faced, Laidler was still free. As the censor lamented, he reaped 'a rich harvest by supplying all and sundry with literature, and filling in his spare time by helping the disloyal and undesirable in any mischief they may be contemplating'.

Andrade's functioned as an organising centre as much as a business. The periodicals on the shelves quoted Liebknecht and Luxemburg, Connolly and Maclean, Big Bill Haywood and Elizabeth Gurley Flynn, Tom Barker and Donald Grant: rebels of every stripe and the agitators of three continents. Even Andrade's sideline in conjuring tricks and under-the-counter contraceptives hinted at rebellion: the former evolving from rationalist efforts to expose fraudulent mystics, and the latter a challenge to bourgeois sexual propriety. On Friday evenings, the shop's clientele spilled out into Bourke Street, forming into small

knots of contention on the pavement or settling down at the tables of the Anglo-American Café next door: anarchists, socialists, syndicalists and Labor men arguing their creeds into the night.

One of the louder voices in the kerbside debates belonged to Bill Earsman, a man Lesbia knew well. Bewitched by his thick Scots accent and natty attire (he favoured tan shoes, leather gaiters and a Baden-Powell hat), she'd been briefly in love with him, but the infatuation waned as she compared the blood and fire he breathed in radical circles to the moderation he counselled as an official in the engineering union. Guido, though, meeting Earsman for the first time, saw only his unlimited energy, his evident ability to make things happen.

Earsman planned what he called a 'Labor College': an institute that provided radical education to workers, encouraging them to fight for social change rather than lifting them out of their class. He knew unionists who'd back it. What he needed were educated men, the basis for a teaching staff. Maurice Blackburn, the lawyer and Left-wing Labor parliamentarian, had declared his availability. So had the Fellowship's Frederick Sinclair. What about Guido? Would he join the Labor College?

Guido knew himself the frustration of inadequate direction; he remembered Dick Berry and his skeletons. Here, at last, was his chance to contribute to the movement, an opportunity to put his relentless reading to some use. He would become a teacher.

In early 1917, he moved to a flat in Collins Street, which gave him far more autonomy and allowed him to move at ease between separate sets of friends. 'Baracchi a versatile bird,' noted Hig, with perhaps a hint of jealousy, 'different to everybody.' He dined and drank with Macartney, Wilmot and their coterie and continued to

dally with Katharine Susannah Prichard, even as his friendship with Lesbia grew.

At the Shop, Guido's involvement with the Labor College provoked only incredulity mingled with scorn, and one of Menzies' friends produced a sarcastic ode in which Guido advised his 'toil-stained brethren' as to how to 'chuck up work'. He didn't care. The furore over his anti-war *MUM* article and the ducking that followed only confirmed Lesbia's stance on the bankruptcy of the university.

The more time he spent with her, the more he realised how deep her iconoclasm ran. He talked to her of Ramiro de Maeztu's dismissal of personal agency in favour of social function; she, temperamentally wedded to political involvement as, first and foremost, a moral commitment, found the idea repugnant. Enthusing over Marx's dissection of classical economics, he read her a passage explaining profit as the creation of surplus value; she responded simply, 'I don't believe it's really true.'

For her part, she came to trust him more and more. As Betty Roland wrote, years later, 'when Guido looked at you with that rapt expression so peculiarly his, he made you feel that, to him, you were the only person of importance in the world'. On a picnic in the Dandenongs, Lesbia sang to him, for the first time, some of her poetry, which few of her friends even knew she wrote.

Her doubts about their future pertained more to Guido's readiness for a relationship than to her own. Despite its defeat in the first conscription referendum, the Hughes government had been returned in the elections of May 1917. Its Unlawful Associations Act of late July made membership of the IWW a crime punishable by six months imprisonment, with the onus of proof resting on the defendant. The imminent crackdown

had spurred Lesbia to formally take out IWW membership, not because she expected the Act would be defeated but precisely because she sensed it would not, and thought it right to share the fate of those unjustly punished.

‘We’ll walk in darkness, obscure, despised,’ she predicted. ‘We’ll mourn each other at prison gates.’

Thinking of Guido, she scribbled:

The love I look for
Could not come for you
My mind is set to fall
At Peterloo.

She was bracing for repression—‘Peterloo’, after the massacre of Manchester workers in 1819—and she balked at involving Guido in the coming cataclysm, no matter what she saw ‘dawning in/Deep eyes of blue’.

The Sydney IWW did face mass arrests but the weaker Melbourne branch chose instead to dissolve their organisation, thinking they would constitute it later in a different form, under a different name. The strategy worked no better than Sydney’s head-on approach—but it did avoid the gaolings that Lesbia had expected.

In any case, as the IWW fell apart, the working class began to stir. In July 1917, a strike in New South Wales spread from the transport unions into the mines and then onto the wharfs. In Melbourne, the solidarity of waterside workers with their interstate comrades evolved into a dispute over the demeaning system by which the bosses organised dockside pick-ups. Drivers refused to move black cargo, and the coal lumpers—central to a low-tech economy—walked off the job.

‘The enemies of Britain and her allies have succeeded in plunging Australia into a general strike ...’ announced

the New South Wales state government in August. 'At the back of the strike lurks the IWW and the exponents of direct action. Without realising it, many trade unions have become the tools of Disloyalists and Revolutionaries ... Every striker is singing from day to day the hymns of the IWW and marching to their music.'

The embattled Wobblies could scarcely lead such an immense strike, but their slogans—or echoes of them—found their way onto the lips of many rank-and-file unionists, and the more far-sighted conservatives recognised a mood transcending the normal concerns of trade unionism. The *Argus*, surveying the chaos around the country, summed up: 'There is only one question: who shall rule?'

As the strike raged on the docks, another battle took place on the streets. Throughout August, working-class women protesting surging food prices marched through a city dimmed by coal shortages, jeering at scabs enrolling at the Athenaeum Hall, listening to speakers from the Socialist Party and singing 'The Red Flag'. On the waterfront, unionists fought the blacklegs with boots and pieces of road metal, while a recruiting sergeant speaking at a rally in Echuca voiced the conviction of many employers: 'Agitators who were stirring up industrial strife at the present juncture should be taken out and shot as traitors to their country.'

The simmering violence, despite Lesbia's hesitations, brought her and Guido closer together. It was a mass struggle now, no longer a skirmish between the IWW and the police, and she couldn't protect him even if she wanted. In any case, he was—perhaps to her surprise—in his element. He spent his Sundays on the Yarra Bank, the traditional 'university of the working class', where thousands of workers listened and compared the agitators

of the Left in an open air forum; he marched in the enormous rally that snaked along the river on 3 September; he debated strategy with anyone and everyone.

In the second part of 1917, he moved from his shared Collins Street flat to Oxford Chambers in Bourke Street: a shift, not exactly into the slums, but away from student digs and into a building often used for Literary Club meetings, which he shared with an assortment of rebels including Nettie's friend Christian Jollie Smith. Christian practised law at a time when the profession remained almost entirely barred to women; later, after losing her legal post, she became Melbourne's first ever female cab driver. The military censor described Christian as the 'seemingly harum-scarum daughter of a highly respectable father' (Thomas Jollie Smith was a Presbyterian minister) but, despite her own radicalism, she'd been initially suspicious of Nettie's enthusiasm for Guido. 'He has not the sort of face one can remember ...' she complained. Even after their formal introduction, she gave Nettie a non-committal answer when asked directly if she liked Baracchi.

But as neighbours, Christian and Guido became at once very close, going bushwalking together, and returning to Melbourne to spend the night reading poetry and talking. 'At 5.30 a.m. we went out for a walk,' Guido explained to Nettie, 'sat in the Fitzroy Gardens till 7 and at 7 had breakfast at Canberra cafe, a workman's early morning eating house in Exhibition Street. We had two more eggs and bacon. Then we walked to the docks and sat down by the river till tea. At ten we came back here and parted.'

Meanwhile, Guido's work at the Labor College, where Katharine Prichard had enrolled as the first student, drew him deeper into political theory. Guido's economics class contained about ten students, mostly trade unionists, sitting for intensive weekly sessions in two- or three-hour

blocks. In his methodical way, he devoted hours to creating a syllabus around Marxist economics, discovering along the way both a talent and a passion for teaching, and laying the basis for what would become an encyclopaedic knowledge of Marx's writings.

The weeks passed, crowded with meetings, caucuses and demonstrations—and in the midst of it all, Lesbia and Guido became lovers.

The impact on the sexually and emotionally unsophisticated Lesbia was overwhelming. Betty Roland, far more experienced when she met Guido, listed the qualities he brought to their relationship. 'Charm, sympathy, a brilliant mind, sophistication, tenderness,' she wrote. 'Particularly tenderness. There was no more wonderful experience in life than to be loved by [Guido]—you were wrapped by a blanket of love, you felt secure, you didn't have to worry any longer.'

Security was precisely what Lesbia lacked, and the promise of it sustained her through the tedium of her labour. For her, Guido's Hungarian son became, not evidence of past promiscuity, but a symbol of her union with Guido and, as such, a talisman against the factory's grind:

All through the day at my machine
 There still keeps going
 A strange little tune through heart and head
 As I sit sewing:
 'There is a child I love in Hungary,
 A child I love in Hungary'
 The words come flowing.

When the struggle permitted, she and Guido walked together in the bush. They argued. They talked of ideas, of people, of books. Guido lent Lesbia a copy of Frederick Macartney's *Commercium*, a collection of clever, satirical

poems about the business world. Lesbia responded with characteristic intelligence. The irony in *Commercium* depended on reader and writer privately acknowledging the absurdity of poetry about business. But shouldn't poets, she asked, write about what they knew? The task of the writer, especially the radical writer, lay not in dismissing the world but in understanding it and so grasping its inner potential for change. As she told Guido, though she was a factory girl, she couldn't hate factories, since upon them the hope of a post-capitalist future depended. She responded to *Commercium* with a simpler but far superior poem, born of watching, in 1917, Melbourne's solidities melt away into the air:

Into old rhyme
 The new words come but shyly.
 Here's a brave man
 Who sings of commerce dryly.

Swift-gliding cars
 Through town and country winging,
 Like cigarettes,
 Are deemed unfit for singing.

Into old rhyme
 New words come tripping slowly.
 Hail to the time
 When they possess it wholly.

May Francis, working alongside Lesbia, knew as much as anyone of her relationship with Guido, since they habitually lightened their labour with whispered confidences. May liked Guido (they remained lifelong friends) but thought him physically unprepossessing. When, towards the end of her life, she pondered his appeal to women, she wrote: 'I did know from Lesbia of what was

the likely reason [why Guido was so attractive] ... in a few cases, at least, I assumed it could be attributed to another reason [than his looks].'

The coyness suggests Lesbia spoke of Guido's sexual talents. Her poetry certainly makes clear the passion she felt for a man who was, in all likelihood, her first lover, contrasting his 'hot and passionate ways' with 'the starry loves/ Of virgin days'. Despite the strikes and the riots and the social turmoil, she wrote few political poems during this time. Sex was new to her. The struggle wasn't, and so she sang of love rather than rebellion.

If Lesbia found in Guido an escape from the political stresses she'd endured for so long, his feelings for her were thoroughly enmeshed with the tumult around them. He'd been taught to see the working class almost as a different species, and he'd been able to accept Wellsian socialism because it promised change without relying upon a labourer who, from the perspective of a Grammar boy, still seemed half-devil and half-child. The *New Age* had convinced him that the wild energy of the proletariat could be constructive, but only when tamed and channelled through the guilds, just as steam might drive machinery if correctly funnelled through a turbine. Now Lesbia showed him the IWW's anarchic celebration of working-class creativity, a philosophy that embraced the larrikin rank and file because of—and not despite—their rude vigour.

She initiated him into a radically different understanding of political agency, and it inevitably shaped the way he saw her. He liked Lesbia. He found her attractive. But he could not separate the relationship from its context, and when he later spoke of her, he remembered 'the rebel girl'—a phrase taken from Joe Hill's chorus about the women of the IWW: 'It's great to fight for freedom/ with a rebel girl.'

That fight for freedom was only part of Lesbia, but her deeper uncertainties lay masked behind the political bravery that gave her such credibility with Guido. When, at a Socialist Party meeting, he declared that the imprisoned IWW leaders possessed 'the heroic spirit of the early Christians', he was clearly speaking in Lesbia's voice, just as, when he briefly took a job in a bootmaking factory, he was spurred by her example—even if his proletarian career came to an inglorious end after a week or so.

She stirred 'my mind deeply,' he wrote, 'and ... set my imagination on fire'.

Though the government, with a mixture of cunning and coercion, saw off both the strikes and the demonstrations of August and September, the political climate scarcely eased, since the defeat of the unions emboldened Hughes for one more desperate gamble. In October, the third battle of Ypres alone cost 38 000 Australian casualties. Reinforcements simply could not keep pace with the carnage and Hughes announced a new referendum on conscription on 7 November 1917—the same day that Australian newspapers carried the initial, confused reports of the Russian revolution.

The radicals entered the second referendum in a mood of deep pessimism. The first referendum had been only narrowly defeated and then, in its wake, Hughes had won an election, outlawed the IWW and smashed the biggest strike in Australian history. Now, he'd worded the ballot to avoid any mention of conscription (the paper simply asked whether the voter favoured sending reinforcements to the troops) and set the poll for a weekday to minimise the working vote, with the electoral rolls closing a bare two days after the announcement of the referendum, so that there was almost no time for 'Antis' to galvanise their supporters.

‘I remember well,’ wrote Guido, ‘the initial despondency I shared with so many: “We’re licked this time,” I said to myself but to no one else.’

In the campaign that followed, Guido spoke on the Yarra Bank each Sunday, often beside Lesbia who, though her heart limited her effectiveness as a soapboxer, insisted on taking her share of platform work. In the midst of the campaign, a throat infection sent her to hospital but, as Guido admiringly noted, ‘after a day or two there, she declared herself well enough to go home, but was sternly forbidden to do so. However, she bribed a maid to bring her clothes, donned them, and like the Arabs, silently stole away, only to break her silence the very next night from a soapbox’.

Politics threw Guido and Lesbia together, but the intense campaigning of November and December also brought its own tensions to their relationship. Guido enrolled in a scheme of Earsman’s to bring the ‘No’ case to isolated rural areas, and left for Gippsland with Frederick Sinclair and the shaggy poet RH Long, who had much earlier explained how:

I do not believe in
A peace that is made
With the Maxim, the bomb
And the bayonet blade.

I cannot quite see how
Goodwill can arise
By bashing in brains or
By gouging out eyes.

Their expedition culminated in Mirboo North where, as Guido and Sinclair tried to put the case against conscription, loyalists pelted them with tomatoes, until they

eventually escaped by car 'through a street where some fights were still in progress and a road along which a considerable crowd chased us ... out of that colourful town'.

Around the same time, Lesbia and May visited Katharine Prichard's Emerald cottage to discuss 'the class struggle and the social revolution throughout the night'. Almost certainly, Lesbia and Katharine compared notes on Guido, so that Lesbia returned full of foreboding.

'I'm afraid he'll some day stop loving me,' she wrote:

All of them say
He'll some day stop loving me –
That's how he's made

If I upbraid
And say he'll stop loving me
He always swears he'll never stop loving me
But I'm afraid.

Still, Lesbia didn't shrink from her rejection of conventional matrimony. 'My loves are free to do the things they please,' she said, in a different poem, 'By day or by night.'

She and Guido loved underneath the sign of the Russian revolution, abominated by conservatives from its first days for threatening the sanctity of marriage, and applauded—by some radicals, at least—for exactly the same reason. If the Bolsheviks sent every human institution spinning on its axis, why shouldn't love itself be remade?

In 1917, few Australians understood much about Lenin and his comrades, other than that they spoke of peace when the leaders of every nation demanded war. The Australian Workers Union, the biggest working-class organisation in the country, editorialised: 'Lenin and Russia have brought joy and hope to a world writhing in pain, bloodshed and misery.' The Soviets themselves might

have been thousands of miles away but, during the anti-conscription campaign, revolution—however vaguely defined—hung in the Melbourne air and, on the Yarra Bank with the newly formed Anti-Conscription Army, Guido let himself dream of ‘emulating the Russian Red Guards’.

On conscription, the tide seemed to be turning their way. When ‘Yes’ campaigners organised in the Melbourne Cricket Ground a last mass rally, tirelessly promoted by the newspapers, working-class voters infiltrated the stands, greeted the Prime Minister with stones and bottles, and drowned out his speech with jeers. ‘In the arena,’ gloated the *Labor Call*, ‘all one could see or hear of Hughes was a wild little man swinging his long arms in acrobatic fashion, reminding you of the jumping-jack of our childhood.’

Still, the ‘No’ activists faced an almost universal opposition from the press. Guido and his university friend Henry Minogue travelled to Geelong to spruik and attracted a huge crowd in the market square. Guido pleaded with passers-by to oppose Hughes and his ‘ring of political brigands’; the *Geelong Advertiser’s* headline charged that the two ‘No’-men ‘Seem Prepared to Let Huns Win and Ravage Australia’. The Melbourne papers maintained the same tone, with column after column of exhortations, threats of dire consequences of a ‘No’ vote and appeals to patriotism, honour and masculinity.

‘Are there any noes?’ asked Nettie Palmer, despairingly, as she walked out to vote on the ‘shimmering hot day’ of 20 December. Much to her surprise, there were. Victoria joined New South Wales, Queensland and South Australia in giving a majority for No, while the overall margin more than doubled since the first referendum. It was a magnificent achievement and Nettie’s one word response (‘Incredible!’) spoke volumes about how unexpected even the campaigners found it.

When the poll closed, the activists enjoyed what Nettie called a 'wild night' in town, before Guido organised a more formal New Year's Eve party in honour of their victory. The post-referendum revelry continued through the holiday period, until in the midst of the merriment, Guido made a remarkable decision.

Scheduled to visit the Palmers, he sent instead a letter. 'I shan't be at Emerald till near evening,' he wrote. 'I am taking a rash and extreme step about 2 p.m. tomorrow and will walk over to you from Upwey after lunch.'

Nettie somehow knew at once what he meant. 'Passed a horrid afternoon,' she wrote, 'wondering precisely who was his wife.' Guido arrived that evening and the Palmers discovered he'd just married Kathleen Tobin, of whom they knew absolutely nothing. She was, they eventually learned, an apolitical pantomime actress: presumably Guido, in the fashion of his student days, approached her at the stage door at the King's Theatre during his holiday spreeing.

Es Keogh flatly described his sister's rival as a 'pretty nit-wit'. Nettie's assessment of Toby was more generous. 'Obviously, she's pretty,' she told her diary, 'with black eyes and shapely lips and ears and neck. But she's far more than that. A little self-conscious and actressy and childishly decided on things she doesn't understand. Delightful though and to be reckoned with.'

What lay behind this extraordinary decision, the abandonment of Lesbia for an overnight marriage to a woman he scarcely knew and with whom he had so little in common? Betty Roland later said that, when she asked Guido why he married Toby, he replied: 'Because she refused to go to bed with me unless I did.' However, this should be set against Guido's anger when Bob Ross, the editor of the *Socialist*, reacted to his marriage by suggesting it 'solved the sex problem'. The remark outraged Guido,

not just for its crassness but for what it revealed about Ross' regard for women. 'Certainly in the Ross family,' Guido said, 'I never saw any signs of Mrs Ross taking any kind of prominent part or even being allowed to.'

By contrast, Guido surrounded himself with strong, talented women. When he loved, he embraced his partner in toto, with an overwhelming passion sweeping other considerations and other commitments aside. He lived each romance as the love of a lifetime—and each time he became smitten, it was like the first time. As Betty Roland wrote, when a new infatuation struck Guido, 'everything that's happened is forgotten and he's oblivious of anything but his irresistible desire to be with the new beloved favourite. And it must be all or nothing ...'

So it was with Toby. He wanted to be with her; she wanted to marry. As a revolutionary, he cared little for the sanction of a legal certificate. If it mattered to her, and it didn't matter to him, why not? Of course, a moment's thought would have revealed any number of reasons, all of which became painfully clear in the weeks to come. But the marriage went ahead.

As for Lesbia, Guido stopped loving her the instant Toby became the woman with whom he wanted to spend his life. He'd never made a commitment to Lesbia and he seemed not to recognise how important he'd become to her: one of her subsequent letters spoke of his assumption that she did not love him. His wedding, officiated according to the semi-secular rites of Sinclair's Free Religious Fellowship, proceeded with Lesbia sick in bed, so unaware of Guido's plans as to be still composing love poems about him.

The next morning, the Palmers received telegraphs for and about Guido, messages that sent him rushing back to town. One of them quite probably came from Lesbia. A few

weeks later she wrote cryptically of her love coming too late—did she wire him with a declaration of her feelings that brought him back to town?

Certainly, the poem she wrote that day renders Guido's strange marriage in an even stranger light:

If I were never to see your face
Never to feel your kisses again
I couldn't bear it. I shouldn't live,
I shouldn't live to bear such pain.

She mustn't bear it. Often I think
O my dear lover, love her again.
She is so darling, how can we bear
How can we dare to cause her pain!

The verb 'were' in the first verse implies that Guido's kisses continued, despite his marriage, while the second stanza casts Toby—Guido's wife of two days—as the woman more likely to be forsaken. The poem suggests that, confronted by the devastation he'd wrought, Guido made love to Lesbia, and consoled her with the impossible assurance that their own relationship would continue.

No wonder Pietro struggled to understand why Toby had fled. Guido had said nothing to his wife about Lesbia, for Toby belonged to neither political nor bohemian circles; she sought a conventional husband, not a free spirit, and pressed him to take a house in Albert Street, East Melbourne—a more suitable address in which to begin respectable family life.

Naturally, her expectations of happy domesticity clashed immediately with Guido's political commitments, which were entirely foreign to her. On the day of their marriage, Nettie had found Guido 'bursting with Anti-Conscription Army plans and IWW criticism' and, Toby

or no Toby, he continued to spend his Sundays agitating with the ACA on the Yarra Bank.

Lesbia, on the other hand, enthusiastically dubbed the ACA 'industrial bushrangers', and her continuing zeal for the group made her relationship with Guido ever more painful. Even if he thought that, philosophically, a marriage certificate made no difference (a view that, in any case, his wife never shared), the world now saw him as a wedded man, which forced Lesbia into the position of a surreptitious mistress. Her emotions seesawed wildly.

'This small body is like an empty snail shell,' she wrote, 'All the living soul of it/Burnt out in lime.'

His arrest that February, less than a month after his marriage, brought all the contradictions to the surface.

The sentence Guido received was initially non-custodial: a fine of fifty pounds on each charge plus a 200 pound good behaviour bond and a stern lecture from the magistrate. 'If I did not believe that you are sadly deficient in mentality,' he explained from the bench, 'it would be my duty to send you to gaol. What you said appears to me to be a lot of silly nonsense, full of vanity, and an overweening craving for notoriety.'

The problem for Guido lay in the implications of the bond. Signing it entailed an acknowledgement of wrongdoing and prevented any further campaigning. Adela Pankhurst, the daughter of the famous suffragette family and a prominent ant-war campaigner, had recently chosen prison over a bond. Should Guido make the same sacrifice?

Toby clearly didn't think so. Only a few weeks ago, she'd married a wealthy and urbane gentleman, not a gaolbird or a political martyr. Haranguing the Yarra Bank was bad enough; a spell in Pentridge was quite something else—and the idea that you would voluntarily go into prison seemed perfectly insane.

Lesbia, on the other hand, assured Guido he had a duty to choose gaol, that anything less entailed a betrayal of principle. 'She took great pains to see that I should go to gaol,' Guido remembered. 'She was dead keen on my going to gaol. She was quite right ... She was a great help to me.'

Once Guido had made his choice, Lesbia resolved to travel to Sydney: partly because the attempts to re-form the IWW were stronger there but also, clearly, to get away from the intolerable Melbourne situation. She wrote to Guido, just before she left, in stammering prose that contrasted markedly with the spare confidence of her poetry. 'You will think I don't love you very much if I can do without you for so long,' she said, 'But I do love you, I do love you. And I want you like Hell.'

Of course, Guido's imprisonment very quickly brought his wife into regular contact with his political friends, people who had known him, only a few months earlier, as Lesbia's partner. Toby seems to have learned enough to suspect her husband's infidelity—and so she, too, took flight to Sydney where, according to Betty Roland, she ran at once into the arms of a former boyfriend.

This was the muddle that Pietro had stumbled upon and which Nettie Palmer, quite understandably, chose not to explain. It was the mess into which, very soon, Guido would be released.