

'Throwing
medals at the
Queen...
What's the
matter, you
run out of
bombs or
something?'

The Same Old Kate

A play by Albert Meltzer



- Pussnik Press -

The Kid's last fight

Unlike many episodes from Albert Meltzer's life, the date of his first brief encounter with Kate Sharpley can be fixed precisely: 13 August 1977. It was on that day that a National Front demonstration in Albert's adopted borough was famously chased out of town, in what has become known in anti-fascist folklore as the "Battle of Lewisham".

Albert described the episode in his autobiography, *I Couldn't Paint Golden Angels* (AK Press, 1996):

At the railway station, when it was all over and I was on my way to work, some fascists were standing around waiting for their train and amusing themselves by taunting a lone Black girl. She ignored them, but when they got provocative a couple of SWP students, who had been on the march, responded to them. I was too far away to hear what was said but the nazis moved in to beat the three up, so I moved down the platform to wade in and help if I could. We had the worst of it at first, as there were six of them, only one of the two students was much use at fighting, the other was more of a liability and the young woman's punches weren't too hefty while I was puffing like a steam engine at the unwanted exercise. However, after a few minutes a dozen or more people came rushing up the tunnel to "bash the fash", having seen the fracas from the other side of the platform. In no time, as now the fascist getting the worst of it, the police arrived. The train came in and we dashed on while the fascists waited under police protection for the next train.

The other passengers were quite friendly, allowing us to mix among them so that nobody could be detected and arrested, though I heard one mysterious remark, "You've got to hand it to the old boy, he's got some pluck". I couldn't see anybody vaguely answering to the description. It occurred to me later whom they meant and now look back on that dust-up nostalgically, in the words of a forgotten film cliché, as the kid's last fight.

Kate Sharpley

One of the passengers was a frail lady in her eighties, going up to Guy's, who was saying "if I had been able to get on the platform fast enough I'd have waded in with my stick". However, when one of the SWPers (inevitably) tried to sell her a *Socialist Worker* she burst in a tirade saying "You lot are as bad as they are" and to my delight and their surprise weighed in with an argument about Trotsky's bloody suppression of the Kronstadt Mutiny. That was my introduction to Kate Sharpley.

This wonderful old Deptford-born character had been in the anarchist movement just before and during the First World War. She had worked for a German baker in South London but gone into munitions in Woolwich during the war and was among the first of the shop stewards movement (it started there, not in Glasgow as generally thought) and was pioneered by women 'dilutees', less respectful of the orthodox leadership which had sold out to the war effort. The physical nature of Glasgow shipbuilding made the shop stewards movement there more a male preserve, but it spread up and down the country in both sexes.

Kate's father and brother were both killed in action, while her boyfriend was conscripted and not heard of again. Neither she nor his parents could discover what happened. Like many of the local group's males of the time, he was first "missing" and then "believed killed". She suspected he was shot for mutiny but there was no proof.

Called on to receive her family medals, she threw them in Queen Mary's face, saying "If you like them so much you can have them". Agitators or women protesters were never a protected species as fascists later became and she was beaten up by police and warned off selling anarchist papers on the streets or face prosecution "as a prostitute". Sacked from her job, she married conventionally in 1922 and disappeared from the anarchist scene.

We met two or three times after that first encounter. Speaking to her was like a telephone call with the past. She knew well people of whom I had only read, like Ted Leggatt and Guy Bowman, or whom I knew in old age, like Sylvia Pankhurst, Ella Twyman and George Cores (she always called him "Mr Cores" as befitting a respectable craftsman), as well as the anarchist draymen, like her dead lover, who had been in the Horse Transport Union in Walthamstow, a forerunner of anarcho-syndicalism which vanished with the trade.

Some of the young anarchist women met her and asked if she had a message for the younger generation. It naturally flattered them when she said, cheerfully, "The kids today are doing better than we did. They wouldn't let the sods get away now with what they got away with me then". I met her grandson's wife when I visited Kate in hospital. She was hostile, thinking I was raking up the dead embers of "Gran's nefarious past", best forgotten. Next time I called I was told she was dead by this middle-aged Sun-reader who thought being told of her grandmother-in-law's political opinions made her an accomplice and might prejudice her children's chances of bettering themselves in life.

There was a move to collect books and archives of the living movement by Brixton Anarchists, some of whom had met her in the

brief period. They resisted the temptation to call the archives after a famous person and named it the Kate Sharpley Library. It started in 121 Railton Road, but was stored away for safe keeping and ten or fifteen years later found a home in Northamptonshire and has now expanded into a formidably viable collection of Anarchist archives.

In *The Same Old Kate*, Kate Sharpley watches the Lewisham events on television in her nursing home. In life, she was aboard the train that took "The Kid" to safety – going into care came later. Albert's wobbly grasp of chronology is symptomatic of his antipathy to research. But if some of the historical details are a bit askew, this short play is still wonderful in capturing the essence of Kate's story. It is also typical of the short comic pieces that Albert liked to write for enjoyment, harking back his days in Blackpool during World War II, when he earned a precarious living selling jokes to music hall comedians.

Albert's death, in May 1996, robbed the anarchist movement of an irresistible life-force. At *Pussnik Press* (cat lovers with an irrepressible affinity with the Russian revolutionary tradition – "tyranny tempered by assassination") we are dedicated to keeping alive the spirit of Albert Meltzer. Other gems will follow.

The Kate Sharpley Library, meanwhile, is alive and well, and largely on assignment in San Francisco: KSL, BM Hurricane, London WC1N 3XX and PMB 820, 2425 Channing Way, Berkeley CA94704 (USA); <http://flag.blackened.net/ksl/Sharpley.htm>. And don't forget The Meltzer Press: PO Box 35 Hastings, East Sussex TN34 2UX.

Now, did you hear the one about the London Mayor who used to advocate direct action? Laugh? I nearly gunned-down five City of London policemen...

"Peter the Painter"

The Same Old Kate

A play by Albert Meltzer

CHARACTERS

Kate, later Kate Sharpley, 16-17 to 24-25 (and as old woman)*

Esther, her friend, same age (and as old woman)

Matilda, same age, daughter of

Herman, the master baker

Jim Robbins, boy friend of Kate, young Anarchist #

Bob Sharpley, who finally marries Kate #

John, apprentice to Herman, who marries Matilda

Kay, helper in old people's home

Police Sergeant

* Actual people; # real but guessed; others fictional



Scene: an old people's home

KATE: Rock cakes? More rock than cakes if you ask me... give them to the birds - no, don't, they'll all have bent beaks... No, no plastic bread and bootsoles - I'll have a grapefruit, the cook can't mess that up...

ESTHER: It's Kate, the same as ever! The same old Kate!

KATE: Well, bother me... poor old Esther!

ESTHER: It's good to see old friends... I was dreading coming here.

KATE: What, your family slung you out too?

ESTHER: No - I've got wonderful children, and grandchildren... but it doesn't do to live with them all the time, you're in the way, I like to be independent...

KATE: I know, mine can't stand me any longer either.

ESTHER: You remember, this is how we first met at old Herman's bakery in the old days,

KATE: Yes, you were the new girl - now you're an old girl, but you're the new girl here... You have to laugh.

Fade back to bakery, 1910

HERMAN: This is the new girl, Esther. Let her learn the pastry. You work here with Kate. The men are working in the bakery, later you can learn it too. Then when you get the skill like them you can also help in the shop when we're busy... a pretty girl is always good to serve in the shop, isn't it?

KATE: So why don't we get at least the same pay as the men when we do three jobs?

HERMAN: Not again, Kate! Always troubles with you! You can stretch these women's rights too wide!

JOHN (the errand boy): Not to say these women's tights!

HERMAN and JOHN laugh

KATE: Very funny. Go on, little John, laugh with the boss - maybe when you've finished cycling round delivering at ten o'clock tonight he'll let you have a stale roll he's got left over...

HERMAN: Quiet, quiet, always troubles! Is this a bakehouse or a beerhouse?

KATE: Bit of a sweatshop at times, if you ask me...

HERMAN: I didn't ask you... well, I didn't ask for that answer... Esther, you're a nice girl, you shouldn't listen to this terrible person. If she wasn't so good with the pastry, I'd sack her. I should get staff from Germany, where they've smashed the unions, not to be like I am, finding work for local people and getting no thanks...

KATE: Bring the customers too from Germany while you're about it...

HERMAN stalks out; ESTHER takes her coat off

KATE: I'll have to get you into the union, it's going to come, you know... don't let yourself be pushed around - like that one - (*indicates JOHN*)

JOHN: Nobody pushes me around.. I look out for myself, I'm going places.

KATE (*Hands him cakes*): Lewisham, Catford, Bromley....

Flash forward to sitting room, old people's home, where we were at first. All watching television news, KAY (the social worker) brings tea.

KAY: Esther was telling me you knew Sylvia Pankhurst - I was studying her for women's studies at college - she fought to get women into Parliament.

KATE: A fat lot they know about what they teach you - her

mother was sold on Parliament, Sylvia was against parliament for all she was on the direct actionist wing of votes for women....

TV is showing crowds in Lewisham attacking Fascists

ESTHER: Oh, look, Kate, there's the high street... isn't it disgraceful, you must admit - well, you never admitted anything, still -

KATE: That's it, wade into 'em....

KAY: Oh, really, Mrs Sharpley, the police are getting attacked and they're only doing their duty...

KAY: The police are only doing their duty

KATE: That's the trouble with them...

it's a question of free speech...

ESTHER: And you always used to be the one for free speech.... We have it in this country, you know, Kay.

KATE: Yes, I know, I was forgetting how they looked after us when we tried saying something unpopular.

Fade back to Suffragist demonstration

SYLVIA PANKHURST on platform -

crowd surging forward

MOCKING VOICES: Blokes for women! You ripped the Rokeby Venus - are you going to have a slash now? Up with the skirts and down with the trousers!

JOHN (*passing on bicycle*): Women's tights! Women's tights!

Police charge suffragists, KATE goes sprawling over road

JOHN: See what Mr Herman'll have to say about making a show of yourself in public.

Bakery

HERMAN: So I'm telling you Kate, this is the last warning; and now forget about all this nonsense. I would have sacked you but my little Matilda begged me not to - I have to consider the customers, who want to know they are dealing with respectable people, all the more so because I come from Germany, I have to be an example for everyone.... Don't start arguing, go away on your picnic with Matilda and Esther....

KATE, MATILDA and ESTHER get on charabanc, followed by JOHN and BOB

KATE: Oh, don't say they're coming too...

MATILDA: Shh...

JOHN: Knickers, Kate!

KATE: Acne, John!

MATILDA: Bob Sharpley's a friend of John's. This is Kate, she's a bit of a Red. but she's quite nice really... this is Esther... Daddy's paying for us...

KATE: He's getting so generous he'll be opening a public convenience next...

JOHN sits by MATILDA; ESTHER whispers to KATE

ESTHER: I think Bob Sharpley's got his eye on you...

KATE: Has he? Let's give them the slip when we get to High Beech.

They arrive at High Beech and get off charabanc; JOHN and BOB go for drinks and come out with drinks for five, and find the three girls have slipped off, MATILDA reluctantly, other two giggling.

MATILDA: Oh, Kate, that was rude... and they're left with the drinks... you're supposed to be chaperoning me, that's why Daddy paid for the trip - and I couldn't stay with two men.

Elsewhere in Epping Forest - near High Beech - a socialist picnic is taking place - banner "WALTHAMSTOW WORKERS" - speeches by SYLVIA PANKHURST, CLARA COLE, GEORGE CORES on socialism, suffragism, syndicalism, feminism, anarchism... KATE excited, enjoying it, other two a bit apprehensive. KATE meets CLARA COLE.

CLARA: Hallo... you from Walthamstow? I don't seem to know you though I'm sure I've seen you around

KATE: I'm afraid we just barged in - nobody seems to mind - we're from Deptford, south of the river - where they eat their young....

CLARA (laughs): Oh yes, I saw you at Sylvia's meeting at Deptford, you're the girl that got knocked over. The crowd got a bit too much for us but we would have been a match for them if the police hadn't sailed in... It was nothing to the way George Cores got beaten up last time he was there - that's him, talking about anarchism - all he was talking about then was atheism - the meek and mild - or it might have been mild and bitter - Christians all but ate him when the police came in and hauled him off to jail for causing a riot.

KATE: Is Mr Cores really an anarchist?

CLARA: They don't eat their young, either - though from the papers you'd think they did... After all these years of books and newspapers and meetings explaining anarchism, you'd think journalists might have some elementary knowledge outside their own caricatures but I suppose it's early days yet. Hold on, it's my turn to go and explain why we're talking about the right to vote but don't think it will make much

difference as such - have a word with young Jim Robbins... This is Kate, a new chum.

JIM gets into discussion on anarchism versus socialism with KATE when MATILDA comes up crying, with ESTHER breathless.

ESTHER: We've got to get away, they're saying terrible things in front of ladies.

MATILDA: One of them said that socialism meant the State taking over everything so he was against it but syndicalism meant the miners took over the mines and the railwaymen took over the railroads... and then someone asked if that meant the loafers would take over the bakeries, and they laughed... They want to take Daddy's bakery away from him and give it to layabouts...

ESTHER: Honestly, Katie, it's worse than that, they believe in free love, and if you don't come with us this minute, we'll go off without you...

KATE refuses, stays with JIM, they carry on laughing and talking together. Other two girls return to public house where BOB and JOHN are still sitting disconsolately. MATILDA cries and apologises to JOHN, explaining why they left. They go off to forest. BOB sits disconsolate, with ESTHER trying to make conversation.

**Syndicalism
meant the
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roads...
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over the
bakeries...**

BOB: Your friend Kate made a real fool out of me.

ESTHER: She's not exactly a friend, we only work together, and it wasn't my fault. Kate's a bit common herself, that's why she goes for all this commonism. Tilda's explained.

BOB (sulking): Tilda's making a fool of herself too. She doesn't take a blind bit of notice of decent blokes any more than Kate. If she can't see that John only wants to marry her because she's the daughter of Herman's bakery and he's the baker's boy, she must be a bigger fool than the pair of you together.

ESTHER: I know a decent bloke when I see one. Anyway, Tilda's got a brother at home with his mother in Germany, and he'll get the business when he leaves school, not her. John's wasting his time, he wouldn't get the bakery even if they got married.

BOB: He wouldn't stay on the errands either. Women make me sick.

JIM brings KATE back and JOHN

brings MATILDA back, they sing merrily on the bus while BOB is still sulking.

ESTHER (whispers to Kate): I think he fancied you were his girl. He wouldn't look at me. Now he's like a bear with a sore head. But, Kate, how you carried on with that lot! What do you think Herman the German will say - John's sure to tell him.

KATE: He'll be more concerned about what his beloved Matilda will tell him about herself.

Switch to KATE at meetings with JIM; they go round handing out leaflets at anarchist meetings.

CLARA: That's Ted Leggatt - he's in the Transport Workers Union trying to organise the carters - but he's not a State socialist or a reformist. He's an anarchist, backs syndicalism against pure-and-simple trade unionism. They put up with him because his nephew's the boxer Bombardier Billy Wells... Though what having a name in the family's got to do with putting up with you is more than I can explain.

KATE: If he gets us a couple of tickets for the Blackfriars Ring some time we'll put up with him too.

JIM and KATE at Ring - in conflict with police over trying to stop open-air meetings - then International May Day. CORES speaking on Chicago Martyrs - KROPOTKIN on Russia - ROCKER, etc. CORES introduces KATE to CHARLIE LAHR, recently from Germany, suggests she get him a job as a baker while Kate with Jim all the time, goes round the sports.

JIM: What did your father say when you came in late last night?

KATE: I told him he was trying to stop me being free to live my own life and he said he wasn't and threatened to throw me out of the house for saying I wasn't. He said the under-manager at the bakery had told him about my carryings-on. I said, what him that cycles round with the errands and learned that meladdo had got engaged to Matilda.

JIM: Herman agreed?

KATE: Agreed? After what she told him about High Beech he would have got this gun out and made them get engaged if Johnny boy hadn't jumped at the chance.

Bakery

JOHN: And another thing, we don't want to hear about anarchism and free love and all those disgusting things. It upsets the customers.

KATE: I can see why you think free love's disgusting - You got paid for yours double quick. Five

Ted Leggatt (right) and Sam Mainwaring (centre) at an anarchist street meeting, circa 1907



bob more and the right to boss us around in the bargain.

JOHN: You'll be more than bossed round, you'll be tossed out now the chief has agreed to take on more people from his home town. There won't be any union talk once we've got Germans working here. Charlie Lahr is only the first.

Strike at bakery, KATE and CHARLIE with placards.

HERMAN (wringing his hands): He comes over to avoid conscription, I give him work; I pay for a picnic she runs away from; never mind I'm so good everyone gangs against me!

JOHN: I'm on your side you, Mr Herman.

BOB SHARPLEY sees KATE outside picketing.

BOB: If your lot get you into a mess don't come to me crying... I mean, do come to me, I'll help you. You make me so mad I don't know what I'm saying. I wonder the police haven't been on to you.

KATE: You're too late, they just have. Anyway I think old Herman will give in soon. He never sold a crumb today and he hates losing money as much as giving it away. All the customers are with us. The police are only watching Charlie because the Kaiser's here on a visit and they think someone will shoot him. It'll save them waiting in the cold when we start work again - old Herman watches the night shift like a hawk, it doesn't need Scotland

Yard. At present the detective has to join the picket to watch him and he hates it, poor sod.

CHARLIE LAHR joins others throwing away picket signs at end of strike. Then he picks up another saying "NO WAR! DOWN WITH THE KAISER".

Cut to another also saying "DOWN WITH THE KAISER" but multitude carrying it, also "WAR!"

Windows of German BUTCHER'S SHOP smashed. Sign in bakery: "UNDER NEW (BRITISH) MANAGEMENT. Our proprietor has volunteered for the Front and when he goes his wife will carry on".

JOHN (now wearing glasses): It's a good job your father had sense enough for once in his life to put the business in my name before the Huns declared war. Just in time too - if it hadn't gone to the Receiver of Enemy Property the oicks would have smashed it up. It made sense anyway, he should have done it before. He must have been senile putting up with the union and that bitch Kate who never tired of calling me names. I hear she got a job in Woolwich Arsenal alongside that job of hers and the pair of them are at their old tricks there.

MATILDA: Oh, she's not all that bad, her heart's in the right

place. She just gets carried away at times.

JOHN: Shut up, you stupid fat German cow before I carry you away. I don't know why I married you. You don't know what you're talking about half the time. She's a slag. Even now she's living with a bloke who hasn't volunteered, and he's fit, not like me. They run down England and all it stands for and she's a self-confessed anarchist, like the magistrate said when they ran her in last week, spouting as usual. She doesn't even try and deny what she is.

Later: HERMAN interned; meets CHARLIE LAHR in Alexandra Palace.

HERMAN: What a terrible thing, I never thought it would come to this. The pair of us finish in prison, for what? All my life I've been loyal and now they intern me saying I shouldn't be. Thank you for getting me some cigarettes. I don't know what to

say, I sacked you... it was John who insisted. What happened to you and poor Kate?

CHARLIE: I opened a bookshop - with all the books I had, what else? Katie's working at Woolwich Arsenal - I couldn't get another job, I was blacklisted even before we became enemy aliens together and the police wanted both of us, thanks to your blooming Kaiser! I wonder if they still have it against me that they once thought I came to Lon-

CHARLIE:
Blooming
Kaiser! They
once
thought I
came to
London to
shoot him...
HERMAN:
Now they'll
say it's a pity
you didn't!

don to shoot him?

HERMAN: Now they'll say it's a pity you didn't! You'll get out of internment before me. For me, even if I did, I've lost everything - the bakery, the house, the lot.

CHARLIE: You should have put it all in your son-in-law's name as soon as war broke out

HERMAN: I did. Now he's got it he tells me it's his patriotic duty to keep it.

The Ring: audience streaming out

JIM: At least now we've both got the sack for organising we can organise some time together.

Police raid and scuffle. A WOMAN tries to give the arrested men white feathers. Hands some to KATE to distribute.

THE WOMAN: They're cowards! Go out and fight, shed your blood for England!

KATE punches her on nose.

KATE: Right! Drink your own blood!

KATE arrested; put in van with JIM.

A year later

CLARA: Kate, I didn't think you'd be out on a demo so soon after Jim got killed. I felt it was suspicious he was killed so soon after they got him in uniform, all our lads seem to have disappeared once the Army got its

hands on them. I suppose they wouldn't knuckle under. I'd like to shout something about it today in front of all the bigwigs. But the security here is too tight to get in.

KATE: I can, I've got an invitation to collect medals for my father and brother, they got killed at the Somme, I'm to meet Her Majesty the Queen, if you please.

CLARA: Oh Kate, where's your pride, you're never going to curtsy to her.

KATE (*grimly*): I'm going to throw the bleeding medals in her sodding face and tell her if she likes them so much, she can have them herself.

In police station cell

POLICE SERGEANT: You're lucky this time, throwing medals at the Queen and you're not going to be charged. What's the matter, you run out of bombs or something? The inspector has decided to let you off because he says we can't show you in court looking like that, they'd think we beat you up. As if we'd do a thing like that unless you deserved it, which you did. I'd say it showed what a desperate fight you gave us, but then I'm a Special, nobody listens to me. I warn you though. You appear round Deptford one more time selling your rotten papers and I'll see you get charged with soliciting as a common prostitute and you know what that means for a girl. This is your last chance.

Later. KATE meets ESTHER, in widow's weeds, and they try to get job in bakery.

JOHN: Well, we're short of staff now. Esther can come back as she's a war widow but no unions or picnics or anything of that sort. As for you, Madam Kate, you'll never work round here again, you slag, not here nor anywhere else where anyone knows your character.

KATE: I must be a real bad 'un - what did I do, rob my father-in-law?

JOHN: It's not worth talking to you, you're ignorant.

KATE: I must be, by your standards.

Old people's home

KATE (*tells Kay*): Oh, we were talking about free speech. I must say I never knew we had it, but perhaps John was right and I was just ignorant... There's me dreaming about the past. Well, I married Bob after that. He was a good enough husband. Every so often I'd go in my room and read about the free society. I kept it from him. He thought we had one, you see, and he'd have beat the daylight out of anyone who said otherwise.

Ends.



Coming soon...
The Anarchist of Bethnal Green