

CHAPTER XLI

CONSCRIPTION OF MARRIED MEN—N.C.F. PROSECUTED—BODKIN— PEACE PILGRIMS

PEACE talk was growing. The Pope had appealed to the warring nations to end the War. The speeches of Karl Liebknecht, widely published by our jingo Press for their denunciations of the German Government, encouraged in our Pacifists the hopeful belief that the peace movement was strong in Germany. A Peace Negotiations Committee was formed, on the initiative of Herbert Dunnico of the Peace Society. The I.L.P., the Society of Friends, the Union of Democratic Control, our Workers Suffrage Federation, the Women's International League, and other societies were represented. A Peace Memorial was circulated:

"We, the undersigned, urge H.M. Government to seek the earliest opportunity of promoting negotiations with the object of securing a just and lasting peace."

763,000 signatures were obtained to this memorial, not without some attempts at intimidation. My old friend Mrs. Brimley and Ethel Tolle-mache, both ex-members of the W.S.P.U. who had joined our Federation because of their opposition to the War, pluckily started out in Leyton-stone on a house-to-house canvass for signatures. They were soon placed under arrest and taken to the police station, where after six hours' detention, they were released, with a warning that the powers of the D.O.R.A. would be used against them should they continue.

Secret Sessions of both Lords and Commons were held, that the Government might advance more pointed arguments for extending Conscription than it was considered politic to publish abroad. On May 2nd Asquith announced that compulsion would be extended to the married men, to rope in 200,000 more of them than could be obtained by voluntary means.

The committeemen of the No Conscription Fellowship, most of whom have since been elected to Parliament, were arrested, and tried at the Mansion House for a leaflet urging the repeal of Conscription. Bodkin, the unconscious comedian, who had become notorious for his absurdities in suffragette trials, declared in prosecuting them that "war would be impossible if the view that war is wrong, and that it is wrong to support the carrying on of war, were generally held." Edward Fuller, a young journalist, who often spoke at our meetings, printed Bodkin's *bon mot* in poster form, as an argument against war. He gave an order for its display

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to a Stratford billposter, who prudently dispatched a copy to the War Office to ascertain if its publication would be permitted. Fuller was thereupon charged with doing "an act preparatory to the commission of an act" prohibited by the D.O.R.A. He was fined £100 and £25 costs, or 91 days' imprisonment, but owing to Parliamentary protests on his behalf, he was released before the sentence was fully served.

Fines totalling £800 were ordered against eight members of the N.C.F. committee. It was agreed that five of them should refuse to pay the fine and suffer imprisonment. They were Fenner Brockway, W. J. Chamberlain, Walter Ayles, a Bristol Town Councillor and afterwards Labour M.P., A. Barratt Brown, afterwards Vice-Principal of Ruskin College, Oxford, and John P. Fletcher.

Conscription was being used as a means of industrial compulsion, to an extent which would have raised an outcry in peace time. When the Dundee jute workers struck work, men who had been exempted from military service, as essential to the industry, were called to the Army at the instance of their employers, as soon as they went on strike.

When the Military Service Act was extended to married men the Lords inserted, and the Government accepted, an amendment permitting the military authorities to claim exempted men a fortnight after ceasing to be employed as munitioners, though six weeks must elapse before they could obtain new employment unless the late employer would grant a leaving certificate. Philip Snowden complained to Parliament, on May 18th, that 300 men of the Labour Company Reserve Battalion Border Regiment were replacing navvies at Morecambe and getting only Army pay for their work. There were many such cases.

From the introduction of compulsory military service, there was a growing demand for the conscription of wealth. George Wardle, a Labour Member of Parliament, declared that the income tax ought to have been raised to at least 7s. 6d. or 10s. in the £; he would cheerfully have paid it, he said, to secure the equality of sacrifice of which so much had been said.

The Press declared that Germany was offering peace terms. In due course the British Press reproduced, from the *Chicago Daily News*, a reply from Sir Edward Grey: "The Allies can tolerate no peace which leaves the wrongs of this war unredressed." So public opinion fed on rumour and rhetoric.

Clara Cole and Rosa Hobhouse set out on a peace pilgrimage, walking through the country to distribute literature against war, including the Pope's appeal for peace. After five days they were arrested at Kettering and sent to prison for five months. Great rage was manifested by her accusers when there was found in Clara's pocket an "Anathema." She had written: "Is there no strength in your cold madhouse to cry halt, cowards, cowards, and again grey-bearded cowards!" Even Rosa was struck with consternation at the production of this denunciation!

Rosa Hobhouse was a Quaker with the mystic's temperament. She

CHAPTER LV

PEACE TALK IN THE CABINET—LLOYD GEORGE OUSTS ASQUITH

THOUGH the Secret Treaties¹ between the Entente Powers were secret still, vast annexationist war aims were gradually being disclosed.

Asquith at the Lord Mayor's Banquet declared the War must continue till Turkey was expelled from Europe, an objective remote indeed from the vindication of "poor little Belgium" and the protection of "the sacred soil of our ally France!" of which we had heard so much when war began! Since the time of Disraeli the Great Powers had intended the despoliation of Turkey. Only their mutual rivalries had deferred the matter so long.

The German Chancellor now alleged that in 1915 England, France, and Russia had entered into a secret agreement, guaranteeing to Russia territorial rule over Constantinople, the Bosphorus, the western shores of the Dardanelles and its hinterland, whilst Asia Minor was to be divided between Britain, France, and Russia, and France was to have Alsace-Lorraine; the International Peace Union now talked of in Britain and the United States was not for international justice but to guarantee the annexations to be made by the Entente in the present war—a grim charge the future was to justify but too well.

David Mason² asked the Prime Minister for time to discuss a motion that in view of von Bethmann Hollweg's repeated statements that Germany was prepared to negotiate for the termination of the War, a commission should be appointed with that object. Bonar Law contemptuously refused. The Commons cheered. If Members experienced regret that the slaughter should continue, they did not show it. Next day Mason raised the same question on the Adjournment, but Members declined to listen: the House was counted out. Philip Snowden posed the direct question whether the secret agreement alleged by the German Chancellor had actually been concluded. The British Government refused a reply; but the Russian Minister, Trepoff, presently confirmed a substantial part of the German allegation, by announcing that the Allies had "established in most definite fashion the right of Russia to the Straits and to Constantinople." He blurted out that it was Russia's intention to hold the Allies to fight with her until German and Austrian Poland had been

¹ Later published by the Russian Bolsheviks when they seized power.

² For his championship of the Suffragettes before the War the Liberal Association which had sponsored him had warned Mason it would seek another candidate at the next election.

wrested from the Central Empires and "united in inseparable union with Russia."¹

People might wonder whether the tyranny of the Russian Czarism might, or might not, be less terrible than that of the Sultan of Turkey. All the world knew the sufferings of Poland in the autocratic grip of Russia. The Socialists in the Russian Duma rose in their places to protest and impeded the proceedings till a dozen of them had been removed. Philip Snowden declared that henceforth he would vote against the war credits, as Karl Liebknecht and his group had done in Germany; but he did not carry out the intention. He explained to the I.L.P. conference that his Parliamentary colleagues considered the step inadvisable.

The selling by auction of the German properties seized in Nigeria was discussed in Parliament. Carson, the Tory, Josiah Wedgwood, the future Labour man, demanded the exclusion of neutral bidders. The Government spokesman, probably in deference to powerful America, answered that it was desired to throw the bidding open to all save enemy subjects, because, since the Germans had been ousted, the British companies had formed a ring, and had driven prices up threefold, whilst paying the native producer less than before. Sir Alfred Moritz Mond, son of a German chemist, whose home would assuredly have been raided had he chanced to be poor, replied with the fervour of a true patriot: "I should have thought it was the British Empire first, the British trader second, and all other considerations afterwards; and the native (an after-thought) in his right place."

Like many another, I was stung to wrathful misery by knowledge that the acquisitive aims of the vast struggle for power were steadily enlarging. One preached, one knew, that the War was being fought for materialistic ends; yet one could scarcely endure the concrete realisation of the fact. Peace, and the popular government of the world to end this capitalist system of ruthless materialism, stood out for me as the two great needs of the hour.

It was announced that certain members of the Government would tour the country to revivify the flagging fires of war enthusiasm. I wrote to the Ministers and to the Press that every week at great provincial meetings, attended by thousands of people, I was putting, and carrying with few dissentients, two resolutions:

"This meeting calls on the Government to introduce a Bill to enfranchise every man and woman of adult age."

"This meeting calls on the Government to stop the War."

I asserted that the campaign of the Ministers must fail to arouse enthusiasm, unless the Government would publish its terms of peace, and give definite assurances that aims of conquest and secret agreements would be abandoned, the War brought to a speedy end, and the whole people enabled, as voters, to pronounce their judgment upon the War at the next General Election.

¹ If the Czarism had not been overthrown, there is no doubt the victorious Entente would have given Russia a free hand to effect the conquests her government desired.