

Lord Derby announced<sup>1</sup> himself authorised by the Prime Minister to express surprise that the Prime Minister's remarks had been considered ambiguous; and to state that if young men, medically fit, and not indispensable to any business of national importance, did not come forward voluntarily before November 30th "other and compulsory means" would be taken to enlist them, before calling upon the married men who had attested to fulfil their promise to serve. No marriage contracted after Registration Day, August 15th, would secure a place in the married groups. Whether a man were indispensable or not would be decided by the competent authorities and tribunals. Asquith still evaded Parliamentary questions as to whether the single men would be conscribed before the attested married men were compelled to go. Meanwhile the net of compulsion tightened. The position of the attested men who had been scheduled as engaged in vital services and supplied with badges on that account was now reviewed. Few men could consider themselves safe.

The No Conscription Fellowship of men of military age with a conscientious objection to serving in the War had begun forming before the passing of the National Register Act. In the autumn of 1914 Fenner Brockway, the editor of the I.L.P.'s *Labour Leader*, proposed in a letter to that paper the enrolment of a fellowship of men who would refuse Conscription should it come. Names rolled up, and Mrs. Brockway acted as honorary secretary. From early in 1915 unostentatious little advertisements were inserted week by week in the *Labour Leader* by Mrs. Clara Cole, of the Dial, Kemsing, who had formed a "League Against War and Conscription," and appealed for names of persons who would join a "united protest in case Conscription is thrust upon us." When Conscription drew near Brockway's organisation was formally inaugurated in London as the "No Conscription Fellowship," for men of military age. Mrs. Cole added 500 names she had collected to those Mrs. Brockway had been enrolling. The fellowship decided to do no public propaganda against Conscription, but to resist it, if and when it came.

<sup>1</sup> Press Bureau, November 11th.

## CHAPTER XXXII

### THE RENT STRIKE VICTORY—JOHN MACLEAN

RENTS were rising. Evictions were rife despite the Emergency Courts Act.<sup>1</sup> Rent strikes developed. At Wellington, Somerset, a soldier's wife had notice to quit and could find no home for her children. The owner began to demolish the house. The woman ran out and threw herself into a stream, where she was found in a fit. At Godalming an ejectment order was granted against Mrs. Gunter, the wife of a soldier imprisoned in Germany. The soldiers at Whitley Camp raised a subscription for her.

There were rent strikes round us in the East End. Appeals from the strikers came to us daily. In all cases we succeeded in preventing evictions, and in getting the demands for increased rent withdrawn. In munition areas, where the drafting in of workers from other districts had created great shortage of housing, the strife was greatest. On Tyneside the *Daily Chronicle* reported that men were paying 18s. a week each for the half-share of a bed, which as soon as they rose from it, was occupied by two further tenants, employed on another shift.

From the wretched one- and two-roomed "houses" in the great jerry-built barracks of Partick and other Glasgow districts, 15,000 people marched to the City Hall with banners, demanding municipal housing and complaining of rent increases of 20 per cent. Glasgow's disgraceful housing conditions had long been notorious. The entire Labour Movement, Left, Right and Centre, supported the procession. Despite the protests of the Labour councillors, the majority of the City Fathers refused the processionists a hearing.

A few days later the landlords applied for twelve eviction warrants against the rent strikers. Three warrants were granted, but the remainder were adjourned for a week, on representations being made that rioting would ensue if soldiers' wives or munition workers were turned out.

Protests were made in Parliament. Dr. Addison, the assistant and constant apologist of Lloyd George, repeated his oft-made, oft-broken promise, that the Ministry of Munitions would ease the rent situation by giving financial aid to the municipal authorities to erect additional

<sup>1</sup> On June 16th, 1915, in the House of Commons, W. C. Anderson drew attention to the case of a soldier's wife, Mrs. McHugh of Shettleston, whose husband lay wounded in Rouen Hospital, whose son was home on sick leave, and two of whose five younger children were suffering from pneumonia. This woman had got into arrears with her rent owing to her husband's illness. A warrant for her ejectment within 48 hours had been granted.



and her husband, Stephen, were living in a barrack dwelling in Hoxton, to aid and learn from their poor neighbours. She came to me offering £1 a week to pay the rent of a centre for our Federation in Hoxton. Her husband, Stephen Hobhouse, was soon in prison as a Conscientious Objector, though he was physically unfit and might readily have secured exemption on that ground. In 1913 he had worked amongst the refugees in Constantinople and Bulgaria. In August 1914 he formed an emergency committee of members of the Society of Friends, to assist poor foreigners of every nationality in the grievous troubles which overwhelmed them stranded here in war time. When tried by Court Martial for refusal to put on military uniform, he declared himself an international Socialist.

Clara Gilbert Cole was the daughter of a boot manufacturer who many years before had suffered business misfortunes through unwillingness to adapt himself to the harsh conditions of modern commerce, and from refusal to produce anything save honest, hand-made all-leather wares. Left an orphan without means, she had become a postal servant in Manchester and met there Herbert Cole. He was a student of the Manchester Municipal School of Art, then, as always, a cheerful centre of the cult of beauty in the dark ugliness of Cottonopolis. Like many other students of his day, Cole was deeply influenced by Walter Crane, then Principal of the Manchester School, as well as by the other Pre-Raphaelites, William Morris, Rossetti, Holman Hunt, and Frederick Shields, the Manchester artist, then in the height of their artistic power. The two young people drank inspiration from the same fount. Clara Gilbert, with her unusual slender loveliness, her deft fingers and vivid imagination, was like a caged bird in the post office. Herbert Cole had been taken up by a Manchester builder, and was painting saints and angels on church walls and making cartoons for stained glass, but his ambition was to illustrate books.

Clara and Herbert were soon married, and bearded Fortune together in London. Success came immediately. He was at once employed on the *Pall Mall Magazine*, and after, in steady succession on illustrations which became famous, for *Gulliver's Travels*, *The Ingoldsby Legends*, *The Ancient Mariner*, *Froissart's Chronicles*, *Fairy Gold*, and a host of others. These brought great profit to his publishers, but to himself only a modest outright payment for each set of drawings, and no further benefit from the huge circulations his work achieved. He remained the most unassuming and kindly of the devotees of art, eking out the modest sums made by his rapid craftsmanship in teaching at the Camberwell School of Art, where he gathered round him an ever-growing band of affectionate students; whilst Clara still did the work of their simple household, wrote poems, and filled her mind with social causes. They had a talented son, Philip, with a passion for architecture.

When the War came they were stunned and shocked by it. Soldiers on their way to the Front marched through the village of Kemsing where they lived, camped in the fields, and dug trenches on the downs. A war hospital was opened. Clara helped to nurse the wounded. Then one day she protested: "I will nurse men for life, but not to send them back to the trenches!" She wrote and got printed a

pamphlet: "War won't pay!" and distributed it broadcast amongst soldiers and civilians. The Police went round and collected the copies of it from all who had them. They took no proceedings against her. "Poor lady!" They thought her driven crazy by the sight of wounded men.

Clara had persevered with her new hard task. She started a League against War and Conscription, and through it got in touch with the "Stop the War" Committee C. H. Norman and Scott Duckers had founded, and with Mrs. A. Cunningham in her "Women's Union for Peace." When Conscription came Clara stood in Trafalgar Square with a badge "Stop the War," and a banner against Conscription. She was arrested and brought into Court; but the charge was dropped, though she many times repeated the demonstration. She and Herbert had seen my articles in the *Clarion* years before, and now were reading the *Dreadnought*. He had heard my father in the old Manchester days. Herbert came over to see me and brought me a sheaf of her poems, and so our friendship began. Before the War was over Philip reached military age, and served imprisonment as a Conscientious Objector. From his cell he sent delicate pen drawings to his parents on the blue official sheet of paper, his sole monthly communication with the outer world.

Tragedy followed tragedy. In May the Battle of Jutland, around which raged so many controversies in high places, sounded its knell of mourning to wives and mothers. 5,769 British men and 328 officers were killed in it. Of the Germans 2,385 men and 160 officers. In June the mysterious exit of Kitchener in the *Hampshire*, unchronicled as the humblest Tommy reported missing, conveyed with an impression of terrific menace the ruthlessness of Fate. Often the vision flashed to my eyes of him, a lonely figure, glimpsed in the lightnings of tempestuous night, drenched by the spray of gigantic waves crashing into the vortex, buffeted by the howling violence of the hurricane, fronting the wrack, with arms folded on his breast, erect and stern. Rumour grew fertile: German spies had compassed his destruction; he had been removed by order of the Government for his incompetence; he had withdrawn himself, and was still alive.