

## CHAPTER IV

RELIEF DELAYED—"BOTTLING UP" THE PRINCE OF WALES'S FUND—  
"COST PRICE" RESTAURANTS—EVICTION OF WAR SUFFERERS

**S**TILL there was no relief for distress from the great Prince of Wales's Fund, save in so far as it helped, and that most sparsely, to make good the deficiency in naval and military allowances. The Local Representative Committees, which were to administer the Fund, were slowly being formed under the chairmanship of the Mayors. Big committees they were, consisting of all the Aldermen and Councillors and Poor Law Guardians of the locality, with representatives of Trade Unions, employers of labour, the Soldiers and Sailors Families Association, charitable societies, religious denominations, women's organisations. The outside bodies came in more or less by favour of the political parties on the Council.

I was notified that I had been appointed to the Poplar Committee. Its first meeting was on August 17th. Already an age, it seemed, since the outbreak of war. We met in the Borough Council Chamber, a pompous-looking hall, its seats upholstered in scarlet plush and arranged in horse-shoe formation. The members grouped themselves with their parties, the majority business men and employers; the Labour Party only numbered a third of the Council in those days. From the first I was looked on askance by the bourgeois majority, not merely as a Suffragette, who had been a thorn in the spiritual flesh of the Government and had brought the Suffragette turmoil into the locality—but still more, and increasingly, as a persistent hornet, stirring up the local populace to revolt against evil conditions, which long custom had sanctified.

"You are so delightfully noisy!" Susan Lawrence once said to me, when she wanted our Federation to press for something she thought important. It was only by being noisy that we could make any impression against the accepted view that poor people must starve because their Government was at war. Susan Lawrence, like many other successful politicians, preferred to mount the political ladder by a reputation for being moderate, leaving the noisy work to other people.

For the most part it was a committee of thick-set middle-aged men, clad in broadcloth, with gold watch-chains and protuberant corporations, suffering, if at all, from over, rather than under-feeding. Amongst them—mainly silent, and if they spoke, scarcely audible—were a few women, accustomed to act a subdued, subordinate part where public affairs were concerned, as women mostly did in those days. The most

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self-reliant was Susan Lawrence, pleasant-looking and sensible, but devoid of charm and emotional fire. Julia Scurr,<sup>1</sup> her tragic destiny overhanging her—unknown to us—with her red cheeks and black eyes, and the strange immobility of her face, recalled the Dutch dolls of our childhood. With all her limitations—and they were many—there was a mother's kindness about her not discernible in Susan Lawrence, the capable administrator. Mrs. Atlee (whose husband became Under-Secretary for War in the Labour Government of 1924), a tall fair young woman, had the appearance of an early garden suburban. They are much like other people in these days, partly because their notions of dress and living have largely spread into ordinary life; but one used to know them by their sunburn and general air of sartorial emancipation, to which the body never seemed quite to have accustomed itself—and that was partly because our eyes were deceived by stiff conventional standards. One would have thought her a middle class fish out of water without any affinities here in Poplar; but probably she was shy.

Miss Wintour, sitting amongst the Liberals, pale and dreary—as well she might be, working in the wretched forlornness of the Isle of Dogs. No doubt she was essaying an excellent work there amongst the overburdened motherhood though handicapped by her conventions. She was painfully ladylike, and entirely inaudible to most of us, when she attempted, which was but seldom, to address some observation to the Chair.

Warren, the Mayor, presided over the throng, a small, pale, querulous old man, with a little crumpled-looking white face and twitching lips. He clung like a spoilt child to his own way of doing very little, and came near to tears when occasionally he was opposed. Everything was dominated by the city fathers; we others were but extras, imported to satisfy the Cabinet Committee's regulations, designed to please the public, by giving a suggestion of breadth and impartiality to the scheme. The Councillors quarrelled and wrangled over trivial matters of party prestige, and flew into a wordy combat of great noise over the representation of parties on the General Purposes Committee. George Lansbury roared out that the Labour Councillors had been insulted by a remark of one of the others, and a great shouting match ensued—a much-about-nothing, which only the Councillors could understand. I soon learnt that on the larger questions, for which we were gathered together, the Councillors of all parties were inclined to leave everything to the paid officials at the Town Hall, and to the obstinate little Mayor, who considered it synonymous with patriotism to disburse as little as possible in relief.

When the Councillors had settled their differences as to their representation on the General Purposes Committee they were all anxious to get away. I raised an urgent, but, alas, isolated appeal on behalf of the starving people, and read from a painful list of typical cases of destitution,

<sup>1</sup> Wife of John Scurr, afterwards Labour M.P. for Mile End, E. She died insane.



When the Mayor's Committee met again, all party acerbities had vanished; it was a body of mutual agreement that the present distress was of no importance at all; the real hardships of war were to come. It was a feature of war time that the popular mind assumed a craving for the fabulous and immense, refusing to concern itself with the common, everyday sorrows and needs.

No minutes were read, a genial familiarity pervaded the scene. A representative of the Board of Trade attended to inform the Committee on the state of unemployment amongst men. I asked him for information respecting women, but he admitted that he had none to offer. Women were always an afterthought, if they were thought of at all in those days!

The Committee now applied itself to the construction of its own machinery. A report from the General Purposes Committee was accepted, wherein it was laid down that four registration offices should be opened in the borough to receive applications for relief, and that after registration the applications should be transferred to fourteen ward committees, in order that the bona fides of applicants might be investigated, both by visiting them at home and by calling them up for examination by the ward committees. Applications would only be registered from those who before appealing to the Mayor's Committee had already registered both with the Distress Committees set up under the Unemployed Workman Act of 1905, and at the Labour Exchange. This entailed queueing up at three different offices. For poor women the War was indeed a very nightmare of queueing and registration! There was no Labour Exchange for women in the borough of Poplar. Penniless and hungry as many of them were, they must tramp into a neighbouring district, carrying, in many cases, a baby in arms with a toddler or two clinging to their skirts.

The Committee entered upon a long discussion as to whether applications for relief should be registered in duplicate or in triplicate, and, this decided, it was in haste to disband. Again I pleaded alone, and in vain, for relief for the starving people, reading out particulars of distressed cases, till I was stopped by the Mayor, who petulantly refused my request to name a date for the next meeting, declaring that nothing could be done until the Cabinet had issued its promised scheme for the distribution of relief.

Consumed by unhappiness at this further delay, I wrote to the Cabinet Committee and to the Local Government Board, asking whether it was contemplated by those responsible for convening the Local Representation Committees for the relief of distress that these Committees should remain inactive. The Cabinet Committee replied:

"... they contemplate that the Local Committees will survey the position and make suggestions to the Local Authorities to undertake or expedite schemes of work which would provide employment for men or women who have been displaced owing to the outbreak of hostilities."

Apparently the Fund was to remain in store whilst the committees appointed to administer it acted merely as powerless and irresponsible advisers to the Local Authorities. Pressed in Parliament for a statement as to when the promised White Paper giving instructions to the Local Committees would appear, McKenna, on September 14th, answered evasively:

"I do not think it advisable to lay down at this stage a set of regulations or conditions for the Local Committees."

A circular of the Local Government Board issued to Local Representative Committees a month previously provided the clue to these prevarications.

"Single men, who are physically fit and within the prescribed ages for enlistment in the Army, Navy, or Territorial forces, should not ordinarily receive assistance from the local committees until other applicants have been provided for."

The Government was leaving unemployment and hardship to do the work of raising a "volunteer" army. There was no relief yet even for women. Appeals were being made through the Press to individuals and philanthropic organisations, not to deal with distress on their own account, but to link up with the National Relief Fund—which was disbursing nothing! The few voluntary organisations which started workrooms for unemployed women applied in vain for grants from the Fund.

A. J. Balfour, in the general share-out of complimentary office amongst the political leaders of all parties, had been made chairman of the National Relief Fund Executive. In reply to Parliamentary criticism he protested that there had been no "bottling up" of the Fund, and repudiated the suggestion that it was only to be used for the dependants of soldiers and sailors:

"It is the women thrown out of employment who seem to me to have the strongest claim on our sympathy, and so, I believe, think my colleagues on the Executive Committee."

Yet actually the Fund was mainly being used to make good the deficiency in Army and Navy allowances. Whilst the White Paper giving the Cabinet scheme for relief still failed to appear, the majority of the Mayors' Committees were marking time. In London no grants had been made to the Local Representative Committees for the relief of civilian distress. In Manchester food tickets, varying from 1s. to 6s. a week in value, were given out to distressed persons. The situation in Hackney was more typical; on August 21st, at a meeting of the Local Representative Committee there, its chairman was asked whether a grant had been applied for from the National Fund. He replied that as a committee they had as yet no evidence of distress. He did not doubt its existence, but they had not yet set in motion the machinery to discover it.



most cordial sympathy with our view ; and declared his eagerness to take the chair in a discussion between ourselves and Mary Macarthur.

We demanded that registration of distressed persons at one office should be sufficient for all purposes, and that the officials should send the particulars through to the body appropriate to the case. To stop unemployment we demanded the opening of factories for the work now at a standstill. The fruit crop had been lost ; the Government might have saved it. We reminded him of the Maternity and Infant Welfare circular his Department had issued before he left office. Was that to remain a dead letter, or would the Government take steps to implement it ? To do so without ensuring food for pregnant and nursing mothers would prove futile. A poor woman had come to me crying, because, for lack of pence, she had missed taking her wasting infant to the hospital, where they were giving it Scott's Emulsion. Ill and starving, she was trying to feed the child at her shrunken breasts, whilst it cried all day, unsatisfied. " It is *you* we must nourish first ! " I told her, shocked by the cruel folly of this paradox. She went on to our list for free milk, barley water and dinners at the restaurant. At the end of a week we sent her to the hospital with the fourpenny fee, requesting that it be remitted in future. We received a reply thanking us for the wonderful improvement in the baby.

When we had done, Burns assured us that all we had said would be considered and dealt with. He added, with a paternal smile at me : " Miss Sylvia, I have been impressed, and I have been pleased."

His tone was sincere and generous. I respected him for his resignation from the Government on the War issue ; yet I considered his imperative duty was to disclose to the people at large his reasons for his refusal to share responsibility for the War. I had long been prejudiced against him for his ill relations with Keir Hardie and with the Labour Party. Above all I condemned him that he was on the Cabinet Committee to relieve distress, and that the hungry people were unrelieved.

Much later in the War he proved my most unexpected protector in Parliament Square. A little band of us were parading there with peace posters. A man assailed me with a wordy torrent of threats. Burns, who had come up behind me, suddenly sprang forward, with fists up ready for a fight, and ordered the abusive one to depart. Though I recognised his kindness, I was a trifle embarrassed by this championship by one who despite his resignation I still was inclined to regard as on the other side. It disconcerted me more than the assailant had done. I gave the word to my companions that we should roll up our posters, and go inside to interview Members. As we waited in the entrance hall for them to come to us, I unfurled my poster and spread it across my knees. A policeman warned me that it must not be displayed there. Again Burns was at my elbow. I heard him say to one of our women : " Persuade her to put it away. We don't want her thrown outside for that. We love her too well to let her do it." Again his

solicitude worried me. I was prepared to face opposition and violence ; sympathy from within the citadel could only be distressing. Already some of our women were taking their cue from him and beginning to plead with me. Such action would be ridiculous with one's own friends trying to stifle it. I folded up the poster, oppressed by the thought that our protests, which in other times might have reverberated through the country, could count no more to-day than the wings of a moth beating against a fortress outside in the darkness of the tempest.

Later still, when the War was wearing to its end, I met Burns in the cloisters of Westminster Abbey. He hailed me with friendly mien and we walked together among those ancient walls. He ruminated sadly on the dragging on of the War and its wrecking of many hopes. I told him that I was attending the Inter-Allied Labour and Socialist Congress, and expressed my sorrow at its dearth of international Socialism. " Yes," he assented, " they have forgotten all that."

" Why do you not speak ? Why do you not expose the truth ? " I urged him.

" My silence speaks louder than any words ! " he answered ; then added that after the War he would come out and astonish everyone. He would be " more revolutionary than anyone." I mentioned the word Russia—the revolution there was already in its spate. At once a wave of reserve and impatience seemed to pass over him. He indicated the door from those tranquil sun-kissed cloisters into the thronged passages of the dark and never restful church, telling me that my way lay in that direction ; dismissing me with imperious, though not unfriendly haste.

In Poplar the Mayor's Committee still failed to meet. The people had registered and were registering their distress. The members of the ward committees had canvassed them separately and together, had laboriously discussed the canvass. Many poor applicants had been rejected for many reasons : that there was not sufficient proof that they were unemployed through the War, that their unemployment was chronic, that they were wives who should not require to be wage earners, and whose husbands were the persons who ought to register ; that they were, or ought to be, recipients of Poor Law relief ; that their income was a little too large for them to be classed as requiring aid.

For those who passed the ordeal still no relief appeared. The National Relief Fund had sent no grant to Poplar. The Fund had now reached £3,000,000, one-sixth of it advanced to soldiers' and sailors' families ; to civilian distress still closed. Some Local Authorities, notably West Ham, had undertaken local improvements, the loans for this purpose were double those of the previous year. The Government had sanctioned small disbursements from the Housing grant, and the Road Fund.



boast of: meat pies one day, boiled rice and bread another. "They ask for more bread when they get home," a mother told me sadly. "Can you have a second helping?" I asked her little ones. "They'll give you more if they have any left, but generally they haven't," they answered wistfully.

It was a shock to learn that the children of British wives of Germans whose husbands were interned were refused school meals because of their fathers' nationality, though themselves legally British subjects, compelled to attend school, and liable to conscription when old enough.

At last the Cabinet Committee and the Central Committee for the National Relief Fund published a model scale of doles for civilian distress: 10s. a week for one adult, 4s. 6d. for each additional adult, 1s. 6d. a week for each child, up to a maximum of £1 a week for a family. The scale was hotly denounced in Labour circles as grossly inadequate. Lansbury fulminated against it in his *Herald*, but in Poplar, where he had been popularly elected to protect popular interests, the Mayor's much lower scale still prevailed—and only our Federation would protest. That is politics. With sorrow and bitterness I learnt it, and a disillusionment which often meant for me a lonely aloofness from all save the little band who struggled with me and the great mass of the poor. To them my heart clove; I was theirs, theirs with all my strength.

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The Poplar Local Representative Committee had not met for a month. Its adoption of the Fulham scale was a dead letter. The Ward committees had not been notified of it; the Mayor had ignored it. The food tickets he had doled out in person were now distributed by Borough officials according to his instructions, on a maximum scale of 4s. a week per adult and 1s. a week per child to the entirely destitute. At least a fortnight after registration must elapse before even these paltry doles could be received.<sup>1</sup> Meanwhile the applicant must pass the scrutiny of the registration clerks, the ward committees, the Borough treasurer, and finally the almoner appointed by the Mayor. To earn 2s. or to receive it from a wage-earning child, a lodger, or anywhere, was to reduce relief by 2s. To receive relief from the Poor Law meant complete disqualification. One poor fellow had almost passed the inquisition successfully, but spurred by hunger, he appealed to the Poor Law relieving officer for a loaf of bread. When the almoner enquired: "Have you had any Parish relief?" he answered truthfully, and was struck off the list. The Relieving Officer refused to assist him a second time, declaring his a case for the National Relief Fund. Men do not die of such iniquities—only lose health.

So cursory was the treatment of distressed people that no appointments were made for the disbursement of relief, and whoever chanced to be away from home when the distributor called was left without for that week.

When all the evidence of this procedure<sup>2</sup> was in my hands, I exposed the facts in the *Dreadnought*, demanded a meeting of the Local Representative Committee, and placarded the borough with the caption:

"THE MAYOR'S MEAN SCALE OF RELIEF."

I concluded my *Dreadnought* indictment with these words:

"When the Mayor's Local Representative Committee was called together, much time was spent in discussing the representation of the various interests in the Borough, and each and all were clamorous for their full share. I have been astonished to discover how unprotestingly these lately clamorous interests have allowed the functions and activities of the main committee to disappear. Unceasing was their vigilance when the measure of representation for their parties was in question, but they are slumbrous in matters which concern the measure of sustenance to be apportioned to the distressed."

The shot went home. The *Dreadnought* appeared on Friday and the Mayor and every member of the Local Representative Committee received a copy. By the last post on Saturday the Mayor summoned the Committee to meet on Wednesday, November 4th.

He faced us then, a poor feeble old man, protesting that he had had to plead "like a cripple at the gate" for the £374 which was all that

<sup>1</sup> In Camberwell applicants were relieved within three days.

<sup>2</sup> Emily Dyce-Sharp, my sub-editor, as Hon. Secretary of the Bow West Ward Committee assisted me materially in collecting the facts.



The Government instituted an insurance against the air raids, but obviously poor people, struggling for the bare necessities of existence, did not insure. At the last meeting of the Poplar Mayor's Committee I appealed in vain for relief for the poorest sufferers in our own district. One of them, a widow with three children, her weekly income only 7s., had her bed, her clock and other essentials destroyed.

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One October morning a group of unhappy women came to me. They were workers at a food-preserving company in Limehouse. They complained that their wages were only 10s. with 2d. per hour overtime; that the basement where they worked was wet and steaming, and the food with which they had to deal, often vile-smelling and decomposing. That very morning twenty-four women had had to pluck five hundred fowls, some of them alive with maggots. It was said in the factory that these fowls were destined for the troops at the Front.

The *Dreadnought* was going to press. I wrote out their story in a brief paragraph, intending to take up the case with the Government Departments concerned as soon as the paper was off my hands. I was called out on the morning after publication, and returned to find Smyth in a state of excitement. Two women factory inspectors had called, much perturbed, as the firm were purveyors of turtle soup "to the Royal Household!" It would certainly never do to have scandals about the firm! The factory inspectors had urged that instead of publishing such cases, I should always notify the Home Office. I knew the value of publicity too well to agree to that; but thereafter I had the paper sent regularly to the factory inspectors' department. The workers of this firm presently received an increase of 1s. a week. I commented: "A paltry increase; we look for more!"

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