

Empire in their hands. These leaders were omnivorous readers of Blue Books, company prospectuses, and theoretical works on Economics. Marxist devotees of the Central Labour College in London and its classes throughout the valleys, they had nevertheless a special South Wales cult of their own, and some of them even talked of "marching on London," to take it for the proletariat when the hour of social revolution struck.

Nothing had been conceded to them save by the strike. By its stern means they had forced their way up from the lowest depths of exploitation. To-day the earnings of a hewer on piece rates in the favourable working place might be £2 10s. to £3 a week. If there were wage-earning sons to add to their father's takings, one found an abundance of well-cooked food on their table, a bright homely kitchen, with devotedly polished brass about the hearth and chimney; perhaps also a sitting-room; and sometimes a bath with hot and cold water attached had been fitted at the family's own expense. A son or daughter might be at college, at Cardiff or in England; but this was only done by the willing co-operation of their brothers, at the cost of many a minor or major sacrifice.

Ninety per cent. of the South Wales miners were in the Miners' Federation; the remainder were mainly rolling stones, moving from district to district. The Federation exercised a rigid discipline, by the will of its active members, who exulted in its power. As wages were drawn each week, the Federation dues were handed to its officials, stationed at the pit-head. Every two months, the officials appeared at the pit for a show of members' cards. Any member in arrears with his contributions, was turned back, and ordered home for the day. Should he rebel against this punishment, all the other workers would refuse to descend, and work would be suspended for the day.

The Departmental Committee on Coal had reported in June that though the war expenses of owners and merchants entitled them to an increased profit of 3s. per ton, they had taken 9s. to 11s. per ton. The war bonus of the miners amounted to only 9d. per ton. The Government had sent commissions to America, Newfoundland and Canada, to secure inexpensive pit-props for the coal owners; and had even induced the French Government to withdraw soldiers from the Front, that they might go to Bordeaux to fell trees for the British mines. There were trees which might have been used in this country, Runciman told the House of Commons, but the cost of conveying them by British railways was higher than the mine owners were willing to pay. Whilst miners who struck work for a day had been sent to prison under the Defence of the Realm Act, their employers were charging prices which Runciman admitted to be "far in excess of what the expense justifies." He hoped soon to announce that the prices had come "a little nearer to what was expected of them," but in the meantime nothing was done.

Robert Smillie, the President of the Miners' Federation of Great Britain, was a big Scotsman, handsome and venerable, grown grey in

popular agitation, an early I.L.P.er and old friend of Keir Hardie. Many times he had been a Parliamentary candidate, many times defeated. He endeavoured to lead the miners in a lofty crusade to prevent the exploitation of the poor by high prices.

The five years' agreement, under which the South Wales miners were working, was due to expire in June 1915. Under the award of Lord St. Aldwyn, who acted as arbiter in 1910, the men would now be entitled to demand a wages advance in conformity with the increase in the selling price of coal. At the outbreak of war the miners' representatives gave notice that if the owners would not raise the price of coal any further, the men would forego the increase due to them. The owners merely offered a bonus of 10 per cent., if the miners would work under the old agreement till the close of the War, and continued raising the price of coal. The miners rejected this offer, and in March 1915 their representatives proposed negotiations for the new agreement. They suggested a wage which was less than the strict enforcement of the 1910 award would have given them. The owners were making an enhanced profit of 6s. 1d. per ton; the miners' representatives asked that they might share the profit to the extent of 4½d. per ton, a modest request indeed. The owners refused the advance and even to meet the miners' representatives to negotiate a new agreement. The miners announced that they would strike if the new agreement were not completed at the expiry of the old. The Government threatened punishment with a stern hand, should a strike take place. The miners laughed at the threat. Well knowing that their labour could not be substituted, they struck work as they had declared.

To placate public opinion, which already was irritated by revelations of profiteering, an Act was hurried through to limit the price of coal to 4s. a ton above the price charged in 1914 for coal of the same quality, sold under the same conditions at the same period of the year. This limitation was not to apply to coal for export or for use on ships, and its provisions were whittled away by other exceptions, the main sources of profit being allowed to escape its operations. Moreover, in all cases its provisions were practically illusory; for complaint against the coal owners who evaded the Act was left to the wholesale customer, who must appeal to the Board of Trade to take up his case. War conditions had produced so keen a competition to secure the output of the mines that merchants preferred to avoid litigation or offence, and to get what coal they could at any price, passing the enhanced cost to the consumer. Sir A. Markham, a coal owner, and Sir E. Cornwall, a coal merchant, strove in vain to induce the Government to take more genuine measures against profiteering. Every amendment they moved in the interests of the people was rejected. It was ever thus; the War enthusiasm of the great interests was perpetually stoked by war profits.

The miners being obdurate, Lloyd George, amid a chorus of Press eulogy, "settled" the coal strike. The men went back, but the trouble remained obstinately unsettled. With another flourish, Runciman re-settled it—all was peace, the newspapers averred. Then, as an item



## CHAPTER XXXI

## LLOYD GEORGE AT TRADE UNION CONGRESS—LORD DERBY'S VOLUNTEERS

THE great delusion which kept the belligerent nations at each other's throats was sweeping us onward towards Conscription. The National Register was barely taken when Lord Derby publicly declared<sup>1</sup> that it was "only a question of the date" on which the Government would introduce "the new system." Lord Northcliffe and his Press and the more extreme Conservative politicians and war enthusiasts persistently demanded it. The active rank and file of the organised Labour movement, the people who keep it going, day in day out, opposed Conscription to a man, and to a woman. Week-end by week-end I saw great crowds of excited people filling large halls and cinemas to listen to speeches denouncing compulsion both military and industrial; willing, with scarcely a dozen dissentients, to applaud appeals for peace.

The Trade Union Congress, held that year in Bristol, was moved by a different spirit. The war men controlled it still. For Ben Tillett, who was touring the country, making recruiting speeches at variety theatres, brandishing a German helmet, and who had lately returned from an officially conducted inspection of the Front, there was an expectant hush. He gave the delegates their fill of horrors, and told sensational stories about the shortage of munitions.

The majority of the Labour leaders were denouncing Conscription as a Northcliffe scheme, wholly unnecessary and harmful, perniciously urged upon an unwilling Government. The official resolution embodied this view, promising "hearty support" to the Government in securing the men "necessary to prosecute the War to a successful issue by voluntary means." Harry Dubery,<sup>2</sup> of the postal workers, spoke to an impatiently hostile audience when he pleaded that whilst secret diplomacy in the interests of rival alliances continued, Europe would never be safe from war; and if this country were determined to secure a victory of the knock-out blow it must commit itself to the provision of a huge army, which could only be raised by Conscription.

J. R. Clynes, representing a great union of ill-paid men and women, came fresh from the Government recruiting platforms, a thick-set,

<sup>1</sup> Manchester, August 21st.

<sup>2</sup> Dubery, who was for a time the London organiser of the I.L.P., was then an exceedingly active propagandist. A few years later he left the movement, disgruntled and disappointed, and became the zealous servant of an employers' federation.

pugnacious-looking little man, much changed from the pale, frail, studious-looking workman he appeared when first he entered Parliament. Full-throated cheers from a mass of the elder delegates spurred his attack on Dubery and all Pacifists. There was silence when he asked curtly what the Parliamentary Committee of the Trade Union Congress proposed to do if Conscription were introduced. It was evident that he would support Conscription or any other Government war measure. Will Thorne proposed that if the Government introduced any Conscription project a special conference should be called to find ways and means to oppose it. Shaw, the stout weavers' representative of Colne, protested that he would not oppose any recommendation of the Government.

That was the case of the Trade Union leaders. They opposed Conscription as the plan of "the coroneted creator of Carmelite House," in the words of Sedden, the President of the Congress; but if the Government wanted it they would swallow it—on terms. Havelock Wilson, then a hale-looking, ruddy fellow, not yet the cadaverous prophet of woe and notoriously open employers' man he afterwards became, was to-day a bellicose opponent of compulsion. He spoke of hanging the proprietors of certain newspapers to the nearest lamp-posts, and declared that if the Government should show any signs of introducing any sort of Conscription it would be necessary to let them know that "we do not mean to have it." Probably no one took Wilson very seriously. It was big, popular Bob Smillie, of the great Miners' Federation, who swept the Congress to its feet. He declared that if that day's decision were against Conscription, it would be "the duty of organised labour to prevent it." The hall was filled with cheers at that saying, an incitement to direct strike action if it had any meaning at all. In fact it was mere fireworks. Neither Smillie nor the Congress was prepared to do anything save talk to further its decision. Even Will Thorne's modest proposal to call a conference should the Government actually introduce a Conscription Bill was quietly withdrawn.

To display its power the Government had put a Press censorship over the Congress until the Conscription discussion was at an end. When it was clear there was to be no serious opposition, Lloyd George telegraphed an appeal for a greater output of munitions, falsely declaring that as the bulk of the munition factories were now controlled, the benefit of increased output would "ensue to the State, not to the employers. No profitmongering," he said, "is possible."

As had been prearranged, Sedden asked leave to invite Lloyd George to address the Congress, and leave being granted he appeared without delay. As ever alert and facile, he delivered a stinging attack on the workers in the factories; but succeeded in producing the impression that he cherished the friendliest feeling towards the Congress. The delegates, of whom the majority were Union officials, thus disarmed, no jarring note was heard, no awkward questions raised.

Next day, when the words of the Munitions Minister had been read in cold print, there was a general realisation by the delegates that they



silk skirts trailing and rustling: Arnold Lupton, emaciated, ascetic; Theodora Wilson Wilson, calmly ecstatic, mainly known for her children's tales from the Bible; A. J. Hobson, another spare intellectual; F. W. Pethick Lawrence, Margaret Bondfield, Catharine Marshall, old Lady Courtney of Penwith, and many more. I went with the rest through the familiar portals of St. Stephen's, expecting every policeman we encountered to turn me back; for still I was on the Speaker's black list for the stone I had hurled at the picture of Speaker Finch in the Suffragette days,<sup>1</sup> but I passed in with the throng unmolested.

We pleaded to no avail.

Robert Smillie was made president of the new Council against Conscription, F. W. Pethick Lawrence, hon. treasurer, Langdon Davies, whom I saw then for the first time, secretary. We met in a bare little office in Bride Lane. Catharine Marshall, as usual, had been to the House of Commons, and could report the rumours flying about the lobbies, and in particular the opinion of Sir John Simon, whose recent resignation from the Government had invested him with a romantic halo. Someone suggested Lobbying. "Oh, Lobbying at this stage would do harm!" Margaret Bondfield deprecated severely. "I thought Mr. Hobson," interposed Catharine Marshall, smiling. "Oh, that of course would be different; if Mr. Hobson would, that would be excellent," Margaret Bondfield rejoined. Impatience flamed within me. If only all Britain might have rushed to the Lobby! Our Federation members were there each day pleading with the Labour men to stand to their pledges. If only they might have been joined in their effort by all who cared!

The No Conscription Fellowship issued an appeal:

"Freedom of conscience must not be sacrificed to military necessity. . . . Men's deepest religious and moral convictions must not be swept aside.

We believe in human brotherhood. We will not kill. We will accept no military duties. While the soul of Britain lives, our witness cannot be in vain! . . ."

In vain! In vain! Events raced on. When the Council against Conscription met again, the Bill had been introduced. Pethick Lawrence resigned the treasureship; we could not prevent conscription and he had agreed to be treasurer of another society (the U.D.C.). The Council decided to meet at ten o'clock each morning for the melancholy edification of receiving a *réchauffé* of the news as the Bill went through. I resigned when I heard it. I felt myself in an atmosphere stifling to me. In the East End one could act and help.

The Opposition crumbled and fell away. The Parliamentary Committee, formed the previous October to oppose Conscription, with three Liberals, C. E. Hobhouse, Percy Alden, and J. Howard Whitehouse, as its officers, had decided—so Outhwaite later revealed—to offer "as little opposition as possible, because they were afraid of stimulating opposition to the coming law in the country"—to my way of thinking a strange

<sup>1</sup> See *The Suffragette Movement*, by E. Sylvia Pankhurst. (Longmans Green.) This picture has been removed from its old place.

manner of fulfilling their trust. The Irish withdrew their objection after the first reading of the Bill, having secured the exclusion of Ireland. "We must be careful that in Ireland we do not force the pace," the Chief Secretary warned. R. L. Outhwaite declared that the exclusion of Ireland conveyed a message to British workers: "Resist! Show that we shall have to send the military to your district; then you will be excluded!"

The Labour representatives now openly refused to leave their Government posts; they remained to support Conscription. They had obtained assurances that the Trade Union and Labour Party officials would obtain exemption from military service. Their work would be declared of national importance; their persons and the machinery of their movement would remain above the battle. They would face neither persecution nor the trenches. It was a wise precaution from their own standpoint. Henderson defended their refusal to obey the congress mandate, saying that Lord Kitchener had personally assured him that Conscription was essential to win the war: "I do not see how any man can set his opinion on a military question against the conclusion of Lord Kitchener and the General Staff."

About half the Labour Members voted for the Military Service Bill at every stage. Only 39 votes were recorded against its second reading; only 33 against its most cruel clause, to include young lads of eighteen years—mere children still. Asquith gave a definite pledge not to conscribe the widow's only son: "When there is a single unmarried son left behind it would of course be a monstrous thing if the State were to call for military service from a man in that position." He quoted the instruction of Shakespeare's Henry V to the then Lord Derby in the French wars:

"Go 'cruit me Cheshire and Lancashire  
And Derby hills that are so free.  
No married man or widow's son,  
No widow's curse shall go with me."

Asquith ignored the fact that the essence of the Shakespearean eulogy of martial chivalry and courage was free service:

"We few, we happy few . . .  
He which hath no stomach for this fight  
Let him depart; his passport shall be made  
And crowns for convoy put into his purse."

The married men were soon conscribed like the rest. The Military Service Tribunals gave no quarter to the widow's only son.<sup>1</sup> Amongst the earliest to be denied was a clerk, the only son of a mother in ill-health. He said it would kill her if he were taken. The chairman of the Tribunal replied: "We are at war and cannot take such cases into account." This

<sup>1</sup> W. C. Anderson, M.P., complained that at Bermondsey Tribunal the military representative opposed the exemption of a man who held three medical certificates of unfitness, who had four brothers in the Army, and was the support of his widowed mother and his wife and children. The Mayor had protested that the Tribunal was powerless and had better disband.



me; the audience shifted and fluctuated; the speakers had lost their grip.

The No Conscription Fellowship<sup>1</sup> had officially decided to organise no resistance, and to submit to the ordeal of the Tribunals, but many of its members were not of this mind. The Glasgow branch declared its refusal to appear before the Tribunals.

Whilst the Tribunals were still forming, the *Worker*, the newly-published organ of the Clyde Workers' Committee, was suppressed. Gallacher, Muir, and Bell were arrested under the D.O.R.A. and charged with attempting, through its pages, to cause mutiny and disaffection, and to impede the production of war material. The *Worker* had called for common action between munition workers and miners, to compel the withdrawal of Conscription, and had named Robert Smillie as the man who could secure unity in the effort. The Clyde workers were advised to "approach Robert Smillie, and offer him their assistance and co-operation in any measures he may take to make Conscription ineffective."

Robert Smillie did not respond to this appeal. His speeches, whether he meant them fully or not, were incitements to industrial action against the Government and its policies. They created a ferment in the minds of others; but he took no steps to implement them.

Now that Conscription was in force notices were sent by the military authorities to unmarried men, ordering them to present themselves for service, and threatening them with arrest as deserters should they fail. These notices made no mention that exemption could be obtained for any cause, or of the Tribunals to which appeal might be made. Even *The Times*, which had vehemently and persistently demanded the Act, complained that men previously rejected as medically unfit were receiving these notices, and that when they displayed exemption certificates these were often taken away and destroyed. An atmosphere of terror was created to prevent resistance. At Lancaster, on February 22nd, a poor mother was sent to prison for "harbouring" her son, who was found crouching between the rafters and the ceiling of their home.

A special Non-Combatant Corps was formed exclusively for Conscientious Objectors. Their duties would be to dig trenches, erect barbed-wire entanglements, assist the lines of communication, sweep up mines, and any other work of danger which might not compel them to take part in actual fighting. A military representative rightly observed that the members of this corps would not have a very happy time! Prominent Conscientious Objectors at once announced their determination not to undertake war work, of this or any other sort. The vast majority of the C.O.'s refused to take service in the Non-Combatant Corps.

The public were admitted to the Tribunals. I attended a sitting at Bethnal Green, as soon as the Tribunal there was formed. The appeals of four Conscientious Objectors were heard and wholly rejected, though all

<sup>1</sup> It had counselled signing the National Register, adding a refusal to undertake military service or munition work.

could prove they had long held anti-militarist views, and one was a widow's only son. A fifth C.O. was a local propagandist of some prominence, well known to the members of the Tribunal. They cleared the court to hear his case, and awarded him service in the Non-Combatant Corps, which he promptly rejected.

Amongst the other appellants was a small greengrocer and furniture remover, who pleaded for total exemption to carry on his business, as the sole support of his aged father, and of his two widowed sisters and their children. He was brusquely allowed a month's exemption to wind up his affairs before joining his regiment. Jews were treated even more relentlessly than other applicants; the destruction of their small businesses seemed to give real satisfaction to the Tribunal.

A large proportion of the cases rejected by the Local Tribunals passed on to the Appeal Tribunals, but usually received from them no kindlier treatment.

Numbers of physically defective men were passed into the Army, despite their appeals. When they broke down, pension was refused on the ground that their disabilities did not originate through service.

Philip Snowden<sup>1</sup> cited the case of a Conscript whose eyesight was so defective that when he laid his spectacles on the table he could only find them by groping. The Under-Secretary for War had written to say that if the poor fellow had *three pairs of spectacles*, to change as the lenses became dimmed in battle, he would be fit for active service. Another Conscript was so far advanced in consumption that he died three weeks after enlistment, another was a physical wreck with a crippled hand, whilst one was vomiting blood and when taken for service, could only digest Benger's Food.

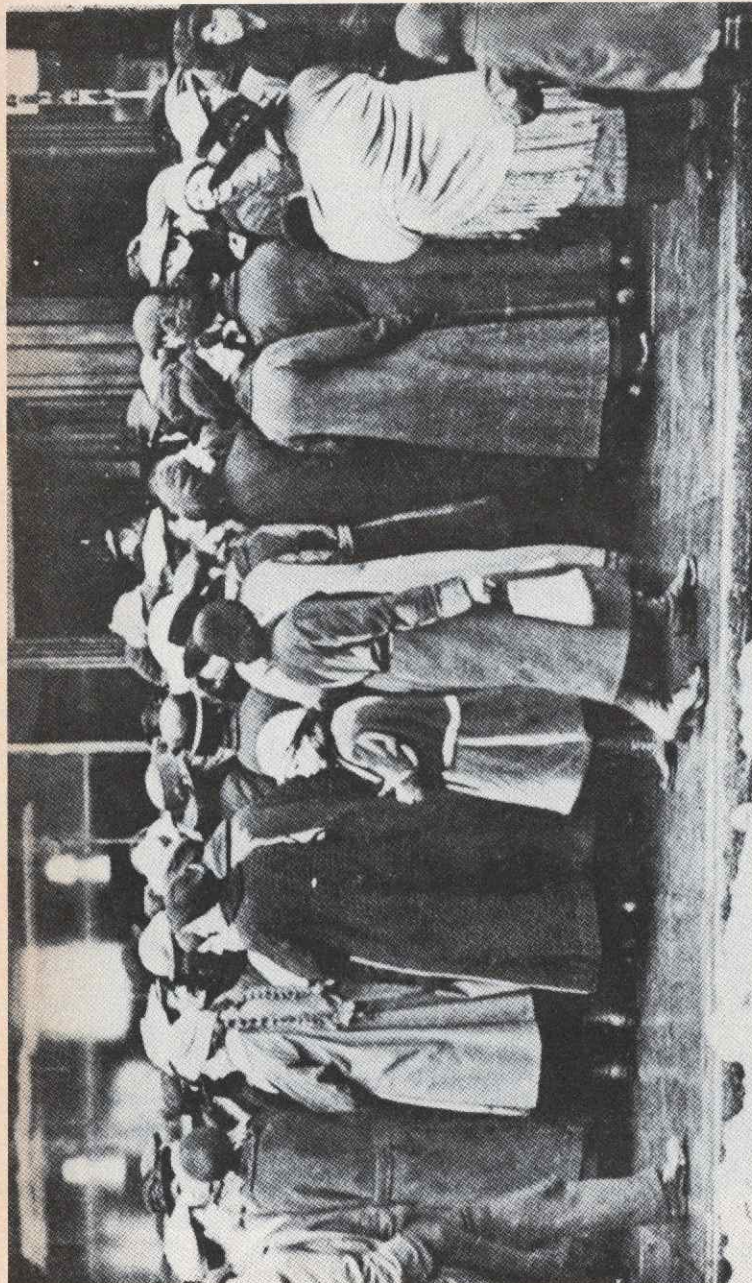
Asquith had said that agitation for the repeal of the Military Service Act was legal, and would not be prosecuted; yet the police were confiscating anti-Conscription literature, and police and military were breaking up meetings against the Act. When Members of Parliament complained that soldiers broke up meetings Tennant replied: "I must defend my military." When it was shown that Tribunals denied to Conscientious Objectors the protection accorded to them by the law, Walter Long protested he must "defend and maintain" the Tribunals. The Home Secretary admitted that the Press Bureau had prohibited the printing of a record of the decisions of Military Service Tribunals for the information of Members of Parliament.<sup>2</sup>

Nellie Best, a frail white-faced woman I had never seen before, was tried under the D.O.R.A. and imprisoned for six months. She had republished as a leaflet an appeal on behalf of starving and broken men discharged from the War, which had appeared in *Ainslee's Advertiser* in America, over the signatures of some of the richest and most prominent leaders of United States Society. She headed the leaflet: "*A Warning to those*

<sup>1</sup> House of Commons Official Report, August 23rd, 1916.

<sup>2</sup> Official Parliamentary Report. May 18th, 1916.





Daily Mirror

AN EAST END FOOD QUEUE

which protested against the Lloyd George Orders; but the protest was vitiated by the failure to state what wage the conference desired. The leaders could not bring themselves to demand equal pay for men and women.

Disgusted by the failure on the part of those whose province it was to speak for the organised women workers, I circulated a memorial demanding for women munitioners not less than 30s. a week, or whatever may be the current day rates of the industry for men, as well as the same piece rates as those paid to men. The names of those who signed it might well be written in letters of gold; for it was difficult then to bring people in positions of influence to that point. They included amongst Trade Unionists Robert Smillie, George Dallas, of the Workers' Union, and W. A. Appleton, the reactionary secretary of the General Federation of Trade Unions, who was influenced thereto by Margaret Macmillan. Olive Schreiner, of course, was with us; that old warrior in women's interests, Clementina Black; many prominent Suffragists, Emmeline Pethick Lawrence, Margaret Ashton of Manchester, Lillah McCarthy, Arnold Bennett, Laurence Housman, Emily Hobhouse, Isabella Ford, Mrs. Despard, Hertha Ayrton the scientist, Eleanor Barton of the Women's Co-operative Guild, Barbara Drake of the Fabian Society, Lansbury, Nevinson, Lewis Donaldson of Leicester, not yet made Canon, E. C. Fairchild, and A. A. Watts of the British Socialist Party, Katharine Bruce Glasier, and many others.

It must be emphasised that though we were thus protesting against the scales of wages fixed by the Lloyd George Orders as altogether too low, even these low scales were not enforced.

Legal provisions were now slipped through Parliament, in a composite measure, the "Police, etc. (Miscellaneous Provisions) Act," whereby deductions could be made from the women's small wages in the shape of weekly levies to pay for such matters as canteens, the supply of drinking water, lavatory accommodation, seats for the workrooms, ambulance, and first-aid requisites. The Factory Acts had long before provided powers to compel the employer to provide such necessities, and the Truck Act had protected the workers against deductions from their wages on such account. This new legislation invited the employers to compel their workers to pay for the hygienic equipment of the factories. More extraordinary still, this Act of composite provisions gave power to levy the workers in respect of "arrangements for the supervision of the workers." The sweated women were thus made to provide the salaries of supervisors paid at much higher rates than they could hope to earn. All this was an amazing evidence of reaction.

Should war remain continuous the workers would be reduced to a condition of serfdom from which only the trump of revolution could raise them.

Time soon revealed that there was to be no attempt by the Ministry of Munitions to enforce the Lloyd George Orders against employers who were paying women munitioners less than the low rates the Orders directed. In October 1916 three women were tried for bad time-keeping before the



Bertrand Russell, the distinguished mathematician and philosopher, was the most notable protagonist of the Conscientious Objectors, and a regular contributor to their weekly organ, *The Tribunal*. In June 1916 he was fined £100 and costs, with the alternative of sixty-one days' imprisonment, for a leaflet on the case of Ernest Everett, a Conscientious Objector whom the military service tribunal had sentenced to two years' hard labour. Six men had been prosecuted for distributing the leaflet, and Russell had written to the *Times*, declaring himself its author.<sup>1</sup>

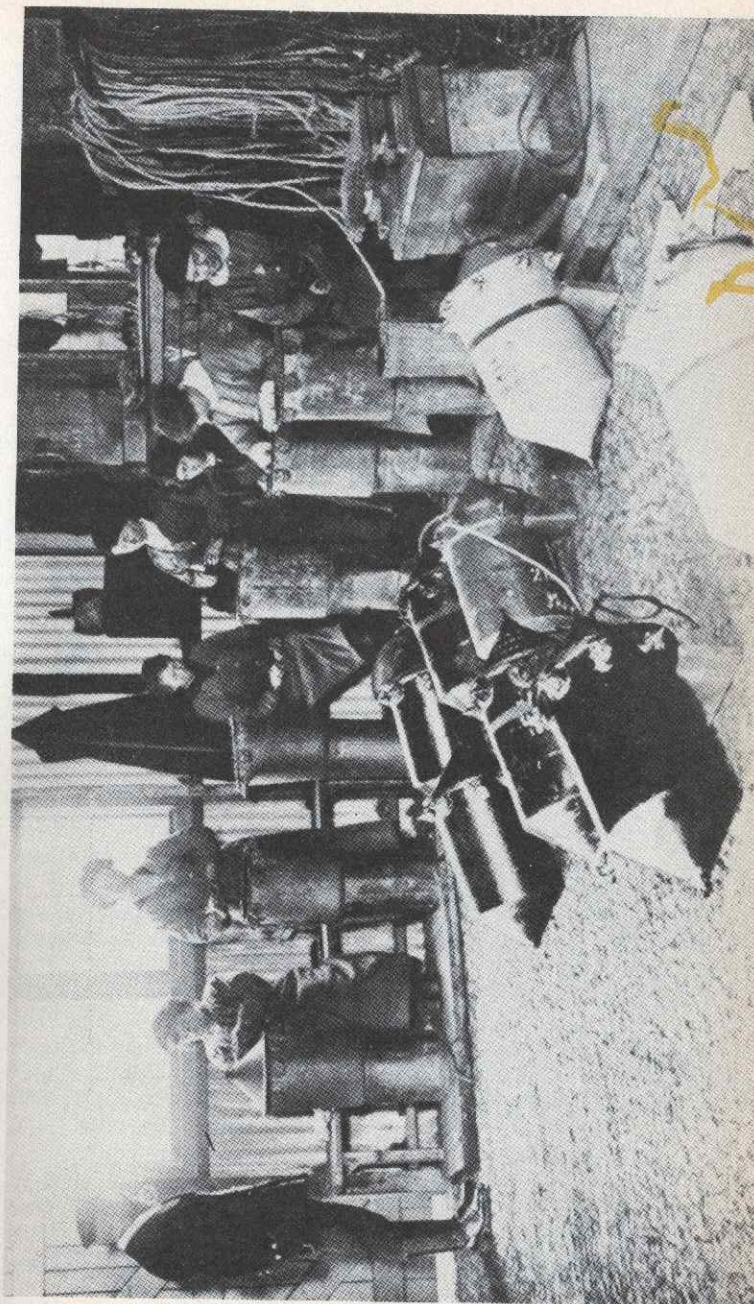
The neutral world was astonished to learn that Trinity College, Cambridge, had in consequence deprived him of his lectureship there, which to scholars and thinkers all the world over had appeared the glory of the Cambridge of that day. It was recalled, of course, that Edward Carpenter had also been dismissed by Trinity for his lack of orthodoxy, and had been glad to escape to a freer atmosphere. It was remembered that Shelley and Hogge had been expelled from Oxford. In short, the reflection was made that the old British Universities had long been obsequious in their respect for vested interests and constituted authority, and had too often persecuted the spirit of independent enquiry.

The American University of Harvard immediately invited Russell to become a lecturer there; but on his acceptance, the British Government refused to permit him to leave the country to take up his duties at the University. When Arthur Ponsonby protested in the Commons, Robert Cecil replied that it would not be "in the public interest" to issue a passport to Bertrand Russell. Russell's income was substantially reduced by the loss of his lectureship; but his announcement that he would now lecture up and down the country to earn a living was doubtless inspired rather by propaganda motives than by financial stress. The Government retorted by serving on him a notice forbidding him to enter any prohibited area, "now or hereafter," except with its written permission. The War Office presently objected to his proposed lecture subjects: "The Sphere of Compulsion in Good Government" and "The Limits of Allegiance to the State." He was refused permission to enter Glasgow to deliver a course of lectures there, on the ground that his propaganda would be prejudicial to the manning of the Army. The Lord Provost of Glasgow presided at a meeting of protest whereat Robert Smillie read the lecture Bertrand Russell had intended to deliver. Later in the War<sup>2</sup> Russell served six months' imprisonment for an article in the *Tribunal*. He gained a meed of adoration from devotees of Science, who saw in him the one Englishman of great academic eminence who had maintained an open stand against the War.

Romain Rolland, the notable French writer and Professor of the History of Art at the Sorbonne, another lonely beacon amongst the eminent men of Europe, was admired by the growing band of pacifists for his war-time articles in the Swiss *Journal de Genève*, his essays "Au dessus de la Mêlée" and his pre-war novel "Jean-Christophe," to the international spirit of which he had remained true.

<sup>1</sup> His goods were distrained to pay the fine.

<sup>2</sup> January 3rd, 1918.



FOR THE NAVY



On October 26th, 1916, she was removed from Aylesbury to Holloway Prison, where she was placed in the remand hospital. Her husband was informed that she would only be entitled to a visit once in three months, on condition of good behaviour; but the visit could not be from him. Though the authorities gave no reason for her removal to Holloway Prison, and though he could not learn that she had been tried for any offence, he thought she was under punishment. He wrote to the Home Office begging to know whether this were the case, promising to ask her not to do anything insubordinate. As before there was no reply. The husband and wife were now interned within twenty minutes' walk of each other; for months they begged in vain to be allowed to meet. The woman was ceaseless in her appeals. She addressed many petitions to the Home Office, and in her letters to husband and children emphasised her yearning to see him.

After nearly five months, on Thursday, March 15th, 1917, Ahlers was notified that his wife was dangerously ill. On two consecutive days he was taken to her cell and found her unconscious. On the morning of the third day he was told that she was dead. The long-desired visit had come too late. On Tuesday an inquest was held in the prison, whereat it was declared that Mrs. Ahlers had died of veronal poisoning. A letter had been found under her pillow, telling her husband that she could endure her life no longer, begging him to forgive her, and saying she knew her daughter would keep the home going for her father and brothers. Poor girl, she and the younger boy, a child of fourteen, were alone together.

The girl believed, and she had said it at the inquest, that if only her mother might sometimes have seen her father, this tragic thing would not have happened. Her soldier brother said the same, protesting that his father was naturalised, and he and his brother and sister were British subjects born in England. He had chanced to get leave that week, and though the regimental authorities had recalled him when they heard of the inquest, he had disregarded their order, and remained to attend it nevertheless.

Dr. Forward, the prison medical officer and deputy-governor, a quiet pale man (I knew him well), had stated in evidence that he had found Mrs. Ahlers unconscious, and as she complained of pains in the head, he thought she might be suffering from a cerebral tumour or epilepsy. Not for some hours did he take a stomach washing and send it to the Home Office analyst, who discovered traces of veronal. The usual methods for combating the drug were not taken until valuable time had been lost. The question of how Mrs. Ahlers obtained the drug was never cleared up. There was no evidence from Aylesbury. Her daughter was passionate to know more; what had happened to her poor mother inside those prisons? I was stricken by the futile cruelty of it all.

## CHAPTER LI

## VOTES FOR WOMEN

THE cry of "Votes for the fighting men!" was a better stick with which to beat the Government, than talk of remote lands, unknown to the multitude, and the squabbles of war strategists. It was now the slogan of Northcliffe, Carson, and a crowd of Tory extremists, and of Labour jingoes like Will Thorne, who cried: "One gun one vote!" coupled with a clamour for the disfranchisement of Conscientious Objectors, which was eventually obtained. Already in the spring of 1916 *The Times* had been threatening the Government with "strong and natural hostility," unless a special soldiers' and sailors' franchise were introduced. The first Act, to extend the time of the Parliament of which Conscription had been the price, was nearing the end of its term. Unless it were extended, the Parliament must expire in September. The residential changes brought about by enlistment, and the movement of workers to munition areas, would produce wholesale disfranchisement, if the election were to be taken on the old register, and the old qualifications. Adult suffrage, with continuous registration, was the only practical solution. Before Conscription became law, I had seen Lord Northcliffe. I had sought him, because I knew his power, much as I disliked it. I had urged on him that the tremendous cataclysm of the War, and the huge sacrifices it was forcing on the people, should sweep away the old cheeseparing ideas of the franchise, and extend complete adult suffrage to men and women alike. He declared himself impressed by my argument, and with the air of a super-premier promised to take the matter into consideration.

As already explained, our Federation had been demanding a vote for every woman over 21 since before the War. In December, 1915, I put before the women's suffrage societies the plea I had made to Northcliffe. I got our Federation to call an informal conference in the little room behind Miss Thring's suffrage shop in the Adelphi. With the exception of the W.S.P.U. and Mrs. Fawcett's N.U.W.S.S., most of the societies sent delegates. They all, without exception, gave assent. A management committee was appointed, with myself as hon. secretary, to convene a larger conference. I was greatly rejoiced by this cordial acceptance of the wider demand; but, alas, when the delegates reported the proposal to their executives, the old guard took alarm. The conference which met in the Essex Hall was a stormy one. It was well attended, all the societies were present; but almost all were bitterly hostile to our project, and not one was prepared, yet, to go all the way with us, in demanding either a vote for every woman over 21, or adult suffrage for all men and women.