

## 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 "heartly 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.

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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