

## CHAPTER XVIII

### PATRIOTISM IN HIGH PLACES

IN mid-March Sybil Smith arranged a drawing-room meeting on behalf of our toy factory, at the Waldorf Astors' big house at Maidenhead. To conclude the arrangement I had to interview Mrs. Astor, as she was then, in their London house. I saw her very formally for a few moments, in a great dark room, where she looked like a bit of Dresden china with her flaxen hair and pink and white skin.

Sybil Smith and I went down to Maidenhead together. Mrs. Astor met our train, and we were packed into a big motor car with other guests, including two smartly tailored young men in civilian dress. Our hostess discoursed volubly on the "slackers," who refused their share of war service; duty to one's country was obviously a favourite theme with her. She had been reading a wonderful book, which had informed her that to indulge in luxury was to increase "the poor man's burden." "I am going to be austere!" she shouted, eyeing us all with a glance of challenge. "I am not going to increase the poor man's burden!"

She told us merrily she expected a considerable audience at our meeting, adding, with an abundance of American slang, which rendered some of her observations incomprehensible to me, that invitations had been extended to many persons of the neighbourhood, who had long been angling for a chance to visit her.

Mounting an incline, the motor overtook a young horseman. To my astonishment Mrs. Astor thrust her elegant head out of the window, and sang out in strident tones:

"Charlie McCartney, the pride of the nuts!" Her voice rose to a fierce shriek: "Why aren't you in khaki?"

Then she reseated herself with a triumphant smile which claimed our admiration; and fired off some caustic epithets anent that young neighbour of hers, whom she desired might be driven to enlist. Her own husband, a major then, was by no means at the Front; but habited in perfect khaki was keeping up appearances and setting a proper example to others.

The car was now taking us up the drive to the Astor mansion, where the servants assisted us to alight. As soon as we crossed the threshold of the great entrance hall where a roaring fire welcomed us, our hostess was hurried away in a stir of talk. A tragic telegram had arrived in her absence. The news flew around. An officer had been killed at the Front. One of Mrs. Astor's beautiful sisters had lost her friend. She

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was heartbroken. Ah! Ah! sighs and regrets. All the guests learnt. All the guests sympathised. How sad! How sad, indeed!

Mrs. Astor could not attend our little function; she was beside her bereaved sister. Regrettable, truly; yet, save for the cause, I should have been glad of her absence. Already I began to feel a fish out of water in her environment and wished myself a thousand miles away from her hospitality. Yet one's crest was subdued; one's heart tamed by that sorrow, that stricken love, now striving with the agony of its loss. Ah Life! Ah Time! We are all as one, at heart!

This was the levelling influence of war time. Keir Hardie told me that when he saw a man whom he regarded as "one of the worst Members of Parliament" bowed by the news that his only son had been killed at the Front, he wanted to fling his arms about his neck.

Sadly we set out our toys in the ornate drawing-room. Whilst we yet laboured with the ill depression of the blow, a motley of well-dressed women swept in on us. I spoke to them quietly of the hard, grey life in the East End; of the women and girls making toys in our little factory; drudges, errand girls, charwomen learning to paint, the sausage-filler turned designer. I strove to reveal to them within our poor ones the eternal psyche, striving for release from its dull prison. I was well received; many people enjoy having their hearts touched—then pass to the next sensation, quite unchanged. The collection taken, the crowd swarmed to a buffet laden with glittering delicacies, consuming, or discarding with a nibble, over the teacups, heedless of that austerity our hostess preached.

Now to our rooms to dress; great chilly spaces, but each with its own bathroom and fine marble bath. Poor Sybil had talked so devotedly to the visitors that she had had no tea. She peeped into my room. "I am so cold and I wanted a cup of tea. I wish I had brought Mrs. Bowdson with me. She would have fetched me one from the kitchen!"

Of the feminine portion of the house-party I was first to appear, and sat aloof, fingering magazines on a divan. The men in their starched fronts gathered around the fire. Balfour,<sup>1</sup> in the centre of the throng, with his back to the blaze, talked with his flippant, senile elegance: "All Governments lie, you know, but *this* Government!" "Ha-ha!" an admiring chorus hung on his words.

At last came the ladies, amongst them Mrs. Astor and her sisters, all with their delicate, flaxen fairness, in black silk gowns with delightful white ruffles. The more intimate guests tendered condolences, the less intimate wore an air of solicitous sympathy.

At the dinner, noisy with talk and sumptuous with abundant meats, I heard the voice of my hostess above the clatter, declaring her intended austerity. I sat beside my host who told me importantly that he had received two remarkable letters from my sister Christabel—one of them he had sent to the War Office, the other to the Minister of Blockade.

<sup>1</sup> A. J., afterwards Lord Balfour.



I saw Frank Smith later in the dark little office in Cliffords Inn and put to him a question, restless in my mind :

"He wrote to me that he had not 'mind control.' What did he mean?"

"He had delusions."

"What sort of delusions?"

"With Lloyd George riding in a motor car," Frank Smith answered, with a gesture of misery.

A meeting to honour Keir Hardie was held in the Memorial Hall. I remember the hoarse, deep roar of applause which greeted J. R. MacDonald when he rose. Men sprang to their feet and cheered him, and cheered again because he was the target on whom the attack of the conscriptionists and the jingoes mainly centred. He spoke tenderly of Keir Hardie, as did all that night. The spirit loomed over us of our leader and friend, who had loved humanity as others love their immediate families, and, feeling more deeply than the many can, had been stricken unto death by the Great War, in which he had neither kith nor kin of his blood, but the shattered brotherhood of the world whereon his hopes were set.

Among the leaders of the Socialist International none had foreseen so urgently and painfully as he, the approaching menace of the World War; none more clearly conceived its prevention by a general refusal of the workers in all countries to assist in the conflict.

The proposal for the international general strike of the workers against war had been pioneered in the international Socialist congresses by the Dutchman, Domela Nieuwenhuis, since 1891 and by Hervé, the French "anti-patriot," as he called himself. Bebel, the German Socialist leader, and the majority of his party had opposed it as "impossible and beyond discussion." Hervé's propaganda had found large support in the French Socialist Party. Jaurès, its leader, at the Stuttgart International Socialist Congress had given his assent to a resolution of the French party in which the general strike and insurrection was mentioned as one of the means by which the workers might oppose war. That this assent, though sincere, was mainly academic later events were to indicate. The Stuttgart Conference eventually adopted a formula in which direct endorsement of the general strike against war was avoided and the differences in the opposing policies glossed over. At the Copenhagen Conference in 1910 Keir Hardie and Edouard Vaillant of France moved an amendment, drafted by Hardie himself, declaring for the general strike against war, "especially in the industries which supply war with its implements (arms and ammunition, transport, etc.)." Vandervelde of Belgium, the skilful diplomatist, who was to find a seat in the Belgian Coalition War Cabinet, persuaded Hardie and Vaillant to accept the reference of their proposal to the International Socialist Bureau, for study and report to the next conference. The report should have been presented at the Conference which never was held, for the World War had come and found the Socialists unprepared. Like Hervé, the "anti-patriot," who at the first trump of war had become patriot of the patriots, jingo of the jingoes, the battalions of the International had turned to rend each other.

To Keir Hardie the International general strike against war was an article of profound faith. Once he had accepted it, in his clear-minded definite way, it became one of the great objects of his life to work for it steadily, persistently. Advocating it and defending it through Press and platform in this country, again and again he tore himself from the pressure of home politics, to pioneer for it abroad—in France, Belgium,



Hungary, Scandinavia, above all in Germany. He wrote to me from Copenhagen during the Socialist International Congress of 1910:

"We have been having the usual trouble with the S.D.F.,<sup>1</sup> but have now got them finally in hand and have turned Hyndman off the Bureau.<sup>2</sup> I have accepted invitations to speak at two meetings in Sweden next week, and from there I go on to Frankfort-on-Main for a demonstration. . . ."

H. M. Hyndman, as is well known, had long predicted war with Germany, demanding Conscription, to raise what he termed "a citizen army," and advocating naval and military preparedness for the approaching war. He had bitterly attacked Keir Hardie's propaganda of international working class solidarity.

In August 1912 Keir Hardie and Arthur Henderson, on behalf of the British Section of the International Socialist Bureau, had addressed a letter to the Trade Unions of this country, urging an "anti-war strike," as "supplementary" to political action, and to be used "where political action is not yet sufficiently developed to prevent" war.

In the Morocco crisis of 1911 Keir Hardie had called on British workers to hold themselves prepared, so that in the event of war, not a soldier or a cannon should be transported by ship or train.<sup>3</sup> Ten months before the World War he was at the German Socialist Congress in Jena, pleading for the establishment of the United States of Europe. Eight months before the War he was speaking for peace with Jaurès, Adler and Vandervelde in London. On the very eve of the conflict he was with the International Socialist Bureau in Brussels, striving to avert the War.

<sup>1</sup> The party of H. M. Hyndman. Hardie here used the old initials of this organisation, the "Social Democratic Federation," though it had become the British Socialist Party.

<sup>2</sup> The International Socialist Bureau, of which Hyndman had been an original member.

<sup>3</sup> Speech at International Peace Demonstration, London, August 17th, 1911.

May O'Callaghan, my sub-editor, who prided herself upon her compatriotism with Bernard Shaw, regarding him in some subtle fashion as a piece of her own property, urged that she should write him asking for an article on Keir Hardie for the *Dreadnought* of the following week. Having kissed the blarney-stone, like all the Irish, and sharing their gift of humour, she was much more likely than I to succeed immediately in such a task. She obtained at once the promise of a Shaw article which was to appear simultaneously in the *Merthyr Pioneer*. She received also one of Shaw's characteristic letters wherein, most unexpectedly, he observed that his article was "not nearly so good as Sylvia's." He added graciously: "Will you undertake to send me the *Dreadnought* every week during my life (I am now in my 59th year) if I pay you a ten years' subscription? Anticipating a favourable reply, I enclose a cheque for £2 3s. 4d."

It was a thrifty bargain, for though the *Dreadnought* lasted only nine years more, its price rose perforce, with the rising cost of paper and printing, and from a halfpenny became twopence before the War ended.

Shaw's article proved typically Shavian, with a bitterness, to me, almost too acid:

"There is, I feel sure, a very general feeling of relief in the House of Commons and the Labour Party that Keir Hardie's body lies mouldering in the grave. . . . I really do not see what Hardie could do but die. Could we expect him to hang on and sit there among the poor slaves who imagined themselves Socialists until the touchstone of war found them out and exposed them for what they are? . . . That the workers themselves—the Labour Party he had so painfully dragged into existence—should snatch still more eagerly at the War to surrender those liberties and escape back into servility, crying: 'You may trust your masters: they will treat you well.' . . . This was what broke the will to live in Keir Hardie."