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SIDNEY AND BEATRICE WEBB

AUTHOR OF
J. RAMSAY MACDONALD

SIDNEY AND
BEATRICE WEBB

A STUDY IN CONTEMPORARY BIOGRAPHY

BY
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PREFACE

OF the difficulties that surround any attempt to write the biography of the living, the writer is acutely aware. The justification of such an effort in the present case is a sense that the long work of Mr. and Mrs. Webb is, in some senses, insufficiently realised by those who have entered into its inheritance: that it is eminently worth knowing: and that, reviewed as a whole, it casts light both on a world we have wellnigh forgotten—that of the last twenty years of the nineteenth century—and on one we hardly yet understand—the stormy progression from the pre-war to the post-war period.

For the narrative that follows, the writer is solely responsible. Mistakes no doubt there are; if so, the book we all eagerly await, in which Mrs. Webb carries on the enterprise so brilliantly begun in *My Apprenticeship*, through the even more interesting years of *Our Partnership*, will set them right. The subjects bear no kind of responsibility for these pages. They have not read them, nor been consulted about them. On undertaking the work, an enquiry was addressed to them as to whether they could bear the idea, the reply to which was that “they would rather not have a book written about them, but, if it had to be done, they did not mind.” Since then, they have at least been spared any cognisance of the effort to make them out. Various of their friends have been good enough to talk with the author about them, especially as regards their earlier years: for such great kindness, gratitude goes to Mr. Bernard Shaw, to the late Professor Graham

Wallas, to Mr. F. W. Galton, to Mr. W. Stephen Sanders, to Mr. and Mrs. C. M. Lloyd, to Mr. E. R. Pease, to Miss Susan Lawrence, to the Rt. Hon. A. V. Alexander, to Mr. James Middleton and to Dr. Drummond Shiels. None of them, however, must be held responsible for anything but their quoted words. Interpretation and judgment, like errors in either, or confusions as to fact, go to the account of the author only.

Chelsea,

Nov., 1932.

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SIDNEY AND BEATRICE WEBB

SIDNEY AND BEATRICE WEBB

CHAPTER I

BACKGROUND FOR A DOUBLE STAR

ALMOST impossible, nowadays, to think of Sidney and Beatrice Webb except as a couple. It is not only that they have written, together, books in which no one can detach what belongs to one from what belongs to the other. They talk, if you meet them, in the dual, almost always. "We think," one will say. "Our idea is . . ." the other will go on. Sometimes, one of them gives a lecture, the other answers questions on it; on the next occasion, the parts will be reversed; but the substance of the lecture, and of the answers, will be just the same. When they say "we," the listener knows, no matter who uses it, that the number is right; the thinking is, somehow,—he does not know quite how—a joint process. Who can bring to mind any issue, large or small, on which they disagree? They do not look alike; yet one has heard that they can interchange shoes, hats and gloves; even that, at the period, now remote, when bicycling was the rage, Mrs. Webb had a complete outfit available for shocking the shockable in her husband's wardrobe.

Everyone talks, invariably, of "the Webbs"; and finds it hard to believe that this entity ever existed in separate parts. They are in fact, and have been, for forty years, the brightest example of what she has called a "double-star personality, the light of one being indistinguishable from that of the other." The effective fusion of two shining

minds has, indeed, worked, as he suggested to her in the days before it took place, not as a mere sum in addition. "One and one make two" she declared. "No, your arithmetic is at fault" he retorted. "One and one, side by side, in a proper integrated relationship, make not two but eleven." So, in truth, it has proved, although to attempt to express the result in any mathematical formula is futile, since it is eminently a human result. The very completeness of the accomplishment makes it difficult now to see the component elements in separation.

Yet both Sidney and Beatrice had actually been alive, and very much alive, for more than thirty years before either was aware of the existence of the other. They grew up in England, in her case largely, in his wholly, in London, but in worlds that knew not how the other lived; worlds between which, at that date, yawned a social gulf that, despite philanthropies and social reform movements and conscientious stirrings in many minds, was practically impassable. He was a product of London's mean streets; she of England's country houses. What made it worse was that he seriously professed opinions which, in the early 'nineties, were not respectable. Socialism, in the mouth of a young lady of assured position and social charm, was not taken seriously. When, as with Mr. Webb, it must be taken seriously, it was dangerous. Beatrice Potter dared not tell her dying father that she was engaged to a Socialist; it would have poisoned his last hours. Herbert Spencer, her oldest friend, revised his intention of making her his literary executor when he found that she intended to do so awful a thing. Many of her friends simply thought she must be mad. For them, the social gulf made the thing impossible. The more impossible that she was not only "one of us": she was a predestined leader. Belonging, as she did, by birth, by wealth, by upbringing and connexion, to the governing class into which her eight sisters

had duly married, she had, in addition, personal attributes—good looks, brains (possibly rather too obvious) and social talents—marking her out as a hostess and *grande dame*, which made her action really treachery.

So some thought. There were however, others. Socialism was not respectable. That was, for some, its one title to respect. They did not know much about it: but, if it was not respectable it was so far, good. The 'nineties had their iconoclasts. If they were few, they were shrill. Isms of all sorts flourished, fostered and tended by eager sects. There were coteries—earnest, humanitarian, artistic,—with which it was an article of faith that any day might witness a general smashing of conventions and accepted ideas. While the aesthetic movement was leading some to feed on lilies and clothe themselves in odd garments, dyed and made by hand, others were flocking east to Toynbee Hall, which the Barnetts had founded in 1885 as a challenge to the Charity Organisation Society and all its ways and works. There, grave young men were saving their souls by debating at night with Marxian tailors, lest they should lose them in the Civil Service during the day. For them, Miss Potter seemed to be waving a grand banner of defiance.

In any event, the marriage was a nine days' conversational theme. Its real interest, as is the case with any marriage, depended on an acquaintance with the characters and histories of the principals, such as few of those who chatted about it possessed. A certain number of persons thought that they knew all about Beatrice: few and far between were those who claimed any such knowledge of Sidney. Children of their age of course they both were: indeed, in eminent degree typical of it. If it had treated them very differently up to the time of their meeting, they did yet share a common mental climate. That was important, since, unlike as they were in background and in upbringing, in the place from which they had come

and the route along which they had travelled, they were and are alike in one respect. Not only had they reached the same intellectual resting-place; to do so was of vital significance, in either case. To both of them Descartes's superb assertion fully applies. *Cogito ergo sum*: I think, therefore I am: it is not a phrase descriptive of the majority of humans. It is, it was, descriptive of Sidney Webb and of Beatrice Potter. If it accounts for their difficulty in understanding other people it also is the secret of their instant recognition when they met, and of the "integrated relationship" they were able to build on that recognition.

Of course, in the 'nineties—in that respect very unlike the nineteen-thirties,—people, whether or no they did think, believed sincerely that they ought to do so, that they could, and that great results would come of the process. There was an immense amount of cogitation going on. This belief that thinking could find a way, coupled with a general, confident optimism about the result, make the characteristic colour of the mental climate of the 'eighties and 'nineties. It was the climate in which both Sidney and Beatrice grew up, and is in degree the climate they have, thanks to their association, maintained round themselves ever since.

We are apt, nowadays, to talk of mid-Victorian complacency. Complacency is not however really the right word, so far as the last two decades of the nineteenth century are concerned. Smugness did persist, but it was being assailed from every side. Then everybody, it is true, believed, formally at any rate, in Democracy: but there was no other social or economic arrangement, and few moral or intellectual prescriptions, not being challenged. But while some challenged, everybody hoped, and most people believed in something or other. The mood of the challengers was one of confidence. There was a robust moral infusion in the most devastating criticism being offered of any specific institution or belief. In the social

field, the seed sown by Carlyle and Ruskin, Dickens and Darwin, was sprouting vigorously in lively looking seeds. If many were troubled about their souls, and more about the souls of their fellows, the outlook was fundamentally cheerful. Evils there were, but they could be remedied: above all, by the resolute use of intelligence, science and good will. Man might be the creature of his environment, but he had power to change it: wider knowledge, more science, would surely see him growing in stature and in scope. So, the general effect of scientific discovery, the emergence of a scientific attitude, and the whole body of new views as to the nature of the universe identified with the names of Darwin, Tyndall, Huxley and the rest, was to make men feel that while an immense number of things needed doing, they could be done.

Everything mattered. Everyone had a great but also a joyous responsibility. The new world opening out was far richer, so it seemed, as well as far more various and interesting than the old. With the swift development of means of international communication of every kind, it was beginning to be the integrated modern world, without yet having become either so large or so dense and tight as to blast the imagination. It was a world in which everything was open to question and nothing taken for granted, although the questioners could still hug the joy of feeling themselves to be in a minority—bold bands of revolutionaries in an environment on which they could look down. Whether Wagner, who died in 1883, was a mere wilful cacophonist or a bold widener of the boundaries of music: whether Whistler was enriching or merely insulting the public taste: these were matters of exhilarating controversy. There were fierce discussions, of impassioned gravity, on the relations between art and morality, such as are inconceivable to-day, when everyone feels he is an artist, if only in "life," and there is no morality. The

new waves beating on the old shores still reached Britain with a considerable time-lag: here, in 1888, *Robert Elsmere* was discussed by eminent persons as a bold and troubling problem novel, while Ibsen's *Ghosts*, which fluttered the intellectual doves of Europe in 1881, had to wait ten years before it was given a single performance in London, and that in defiance of the Censor. But that only added to the fun.

The combined assault of the new science and the new art led to a vast stirring of consciences, for conscience was still taken for granted, as a normal constituent of human anatomy. Out of this stirring, in the main, arose what was known as the "Social Reform" movement. Political democracy was an accepted fact. True, the centre of power had not really shifted; control and direction were in the hands of landowning captains of industry, like Richard Potter: Prime Ministers still came, inevitably, from the great public schools: Trade Union was a word of fear: workmen were only timidly, in ones and twos, penetrating into Parliament, as Liberals. Formal democracy however was completed, so far as the males in the nation were concerned. Town artisans like Sidney Webb's father were enfranchised in 1867, after smashing the railings of Hyde Park: their brethren in the countryside followed in 1885. Women, of course, had to wait for recognition as citizens for another quarter of a century and a world-shattering war. Yet there was a formidable agitation going on for their inclusion, and, the door of higher education having been successfully forced, rational minds, like those of Richard Potter, saw small sense in a franchise which excluded highly intelligent women like his daughters. True, his argument was that they would vote Tory, like himself, and so help to stem the tide of illiterate workmen; true, too, the ablest of those same daughters publicly disagreed with him. When it could be said that women did not want the vote, it was not surprising that the general

sense of the 'nineties blandly saw democracy as a democracy of men. As such, however, great things were expected of it.

With the new faith in progress went a new faith in government. Although it still dominated the minds of the official governing class, by the 'eighties and 'nineties, the Benthamite-Mill dispensation was wearing itself out. Herbert Spencer threw up a last rampart of Individualism, the more imposing at the time because it was so soon to be washed away. The scientific theory of environment co-operated with the humanitarian drift of feeling and the confident belief in knowledge as the instrument of progress to create an outlook among the younger generation to which Spencer's *The Man versus the State* was repulsive, if not absurd. Individualism, fatalist and essentially pessimist was beginning to be an uncomfortable strait-jacket for the new, scientific optimism. That optimism in its turn found its natural expression in various forms of collective action. So, it is to the new faith in ordered progress that one must refer both the steady march of social reform legislation of various kinds, the growth of voluntary associations, like Trade Unions and Co-operative Societies, the steady extension of public provision by the provincial municipalities, and the rise of new political movements. The 1870 Education Act had made primary schooling compulsory, that of ten years later made it free, although it remained unorganised on any national plan. Factory and Public Health legislation made great inroads on the presumed right of the individual to "do as he likes with his own"; the notion of a minimum social code began to dawn on many minds. In the field of local government, in cities like Birmingham, Bradford and Glasgow, to name only these, collective provision to meet citizen needs was going ahead fast, if not as yet in London. Radicalism, in Birmingham, threw up a veritable hero in Joseph Chamberlain: and Chamberlain, with his "home town" achievements

in Collectivism behind him, at one time toyed with a national programme which, in its emphasis on the public ownership of the land, showed plainly the influence of Henry George.

Henry George influenced the mind of the workman, very deeply: it was a sure instinct that took John Ruskin to meet him, when he landed in England in 1882. George affected that mind far more deeply than did Marx, who, like Lenin after him, worked, unknown, in London, and died there, unknown, in 1883. But a more powerful influence than that of any revolutionary was arising out of the realisation of how the vast majority of the citizens of the richest city and country in the then world were actually living. Pictures like that in *Darkest England* or *The Bitter Cry of Outcast London* might be dismissed as sentimental and exaggerated, but the results of the great and thoroughly scientific enquiry into the Metropolis undertaken by Charles Booth in 1886 could not be so dismissed. His demonstration, by statistical measurements based on a most thorough scrutiny, that in London no less than thirty per cent of the population were living below the poverty line, administered a most painful shock to optimists and pessimists alike. Poverty, degraded and degrading, and poverty in "widest commonalty spread" was suddenly realised, as an appalling fact. Hard upon this followed the great London Dock Strike of 1889. Revolt had stirred, first, among some of the weakest, worst-paid, and least organised workers. The fiery eloquence of Mrs. Besant put heart into the match-girls: their heroic example, and its amazing success, fired the dockers. The 1889 strike is a turning-point, not only in the history of Trade Unionism, whose centre of gravity it shifted from the skilled craftsman to what the Americans call "common labour"; it is a turning-point in social and economic history. Public opinion, almost for the first time, was definitely and declaredly with the strikers, and

that public opinion won the strike. Cardinal Manning intervened on their side; two highly distinguished civil servants—Vaughan Nash and Hubert Llewelyn Smith—wrote the history of the affair: the thing had all the movement of an exciting drama. But there was more in it than that. Suddenly, people not previously interested in politics, became aware of what Carlyle had called, in a phrase to be revived in the opening years of the new century, “the condition of England question”. Even in drawing-rooms, the word Socialism began to be muttered, although few as yet were prepared to say at all clearly what it meant.

Very slowly did any of these influences percolate through to the world of professional politicians. The Gladstonian Government that fell in 1886 was largely absorbed in non-domestic issues, like Egypt, South Africa, and, above all, Home Rule for Ireland. It was further, from first to last, distracted by the bitter controversy arising out of the refusal of that stormy petrel, Charles Bradlaugh, to take the Oath. Secularism, Birth Control, Socialism—Bradlaugh, with the able assistance of Annie Besant, powerfully confused the issues, and raised a prodigious dust of prejudice and passion. Ireland, again, dominated the parliamentary scene throughout the life of the Conservative Government between 1886 and 1892. Those who were deeply stirred about social facts and economic issues became more and more exasperated, fell more and more into revolt, inclined more and more to cry “A plague o’ both your houses!”. Something was wrong, and it was more deep seated than the orthodox politician was willing to see; but, given sight and will, it could be righted.

In their different ways, this was the feeling that was burning in the mind of two remarkable young people—Sidney Webb, then a clerk in the Colonial Office; and Beatrice Potter, a young lady, nominally of leisure, in a mansion in Monmouthshire.

CHAPTER II

SIDNEY

IF questioning and argumentation about it and about were vital constituents in the mental life of the 'eighties, nowhere were they so active and constant as in the Metropolis. London, at that time, was still, so far as its working population went, a Radical focus. The influence of Francis Place and John Stuart Mill lived on, in countless Radical clubs. It was in London that Charles Booth was carrying out his enquiry: in London that John Burns and Tom Mann were preaching the New Unionism and assailing the old Unions as mere "middle-class rate-reducing institutions"; there that H. M. Hyndman, in his frock-coat and immaculate tall hat, was thundering at the Proletariat that they had nothing to lose but their chains. Hyndman, of course, spoke as the high priest of the Social Democratic Federation. The S.D.F. enjoys two distinctions. It was the earliest definitely Socialist Society to be founded in England, since it was born in 1881. To work for and through it, William Morris devoted some of the best years of his life. He did so because the very intensity of his concern for aesthetic values made him feel that society must be so re-organised as to make them accessible to all men, or else it and they must perish together. Convinced that only Socialism could give the world the art that is the expression of man's joy in labour, he loyally took his part in the donkey work of the only body then working for it. He was compelled, later, to quarrel with the S.D.F. partly because they stood for a dogmatic

Marxism in which he, in that a typical Briton, could not believe: partly because quarrelling among leaders has been almost a law of life with the S.D.F. Anyhow, the revolutionary claims of the Federation looked more than a little dubious to the workman elector when, at the time of the 1886 General Election, the Social Democratic Federation ran two candidates, and made no secret of the fact that the expenses of these contests had, in either case, been paid by one of the old political parties for the purpose of upsetting the other. Irrationally, perhaps, Tory gold stank even more disagreeably than Liberal, in London nostrils: it stank the more that it was wasted, the two purchased candidates polling but 57 votes between them. Difficult to believe in the Red Menace after that.

This incident, moreover, occurred just at the wrong time. The two following years were years of slump and acute distress. For the first time, a really serious menace, that of Unemployment, appeared not in the Metropolis only but all over the country; indeed, all over the world. Bomb throwing in Chicago coincided with demonstrations in London and other cities. On "Bloody Sunday," the demonstrators came into collision with the police: John Burns, Cunninghame-Graham and H. H. Champion were arrested and sent to prison—a fact that was to make Burns a genuine hero with the working class for many years to come. The trouble looked grave at the time, and although it subsided with the revival of trade, the ferment and unrest went on. Every reader of the newspapers became familiar with the names of great outdoor orators like Hyndman, Champion, Cunninghame-Graham, John Burns, Tom Mann, and Ben Tillett. Many knew by sight the long-bearded, black-coated apostle of Revolutionary Marxism, with his impressive white cuffs: some, the handsome and aristocratic figure of the lineal descendant

of Scottish kings; while far more had seen the flashing dark eyes, and thrilled to the magnetic eloquence of John Burns in Hyde Park or on Tower Hill. Indeed, John Burns, in his twenties and early thirties—he was born in 1859—was, with A. J. Balfour, the Tiger Lily of “resolute Government” in Ireland, Jo Chamberlain, the arch-priest of Birmingham Radicalism and Collective efficiency, and Charles Stewart Parnell, then moving swiftly towards his tragic end, among the most picturesque and challenging figures of the day. It was of them people talked, as the men of the future. There were, of course, those who pinned hopes, of a more sober kind, on the bright young lawyers beginning to be heard at Westminster, H. H. Asquith and R. B. Haldane; others, again, who believed that Mill’s mantle had descended upon the somewhat sloping shoulders of John Morley.

Few and far between were those who guessed that the most potent ferment for the future was actually being brewed, not by any of these, but by a small band of young men who, seeking no publicity and very largely concerned still with their own education, were assiduously creating, fostering and feeding nascent Socialism in London. As one of them was to say, many years later,

“We were young in those days . . . and I suppose as eagerly presumptuous as young people ought to be. We spent what free time we had, after earning our daily bread, in reading and talking—in studying everything from blue-books to art, from history and politics to novels and poetry; and perpetually discussing and lecturing, among ourselves, and before anybody who would listen to us.”¹

They not only talked restlessly: they read, they studied, they observed, they ground their minds against hard facts, they amassed facts, they revelled in them; and thus

¹ Preface to 1920 Edition, *Fabian Essays*, by Sidney Webb.

trained themselves into a formidable efficiency. Contact with one another preserved and strengthened, in all of them, a saving sense of humour. They were not out to frighten, but to convert; they presented their novel notion in a form the more insinuating that it was not, and was not meant to be, alarming. They were not dreary. Propaganda they found and made tremendous fun. Outstanding among them was a quartette—George Bernard Shaw, Sidney Webb, Sydney Olivier and Graham Wallas. Shaw was first on the field. He had come from Ireland to London in the late 'seventies, his professional occupation at the time being that of musical and dramatic critic, although his shabby portmanteau was bulging with MSS. plays and novels. He it is who has, also, written, in various forms, most of the history of these bright early days: and drawn the most vivid picture of the man whom he always regarded as the master-mind in the group, who was to be his closest friend and associate for the next half century—Sidney Webb. Sidney Webb he first saw in action, in 1879, when barely twenty.

Shaw joined, among other groups of the kind, a body which called itself by the resounding name of the Zetetical Society. This was a sort of junior offshoot of the then famous Hampstead Dialectical Society—a club for the discussion of political and social questions, and Shaw, at any rate, joined it for the purpose of learning to speak. There, a few weeks later, an individual took part in one of the debates who roused his keenest interest. Fortunately, he has described him:

“The speaker was a young man of about twenty-one, rather below middle height, with small pretty hands and feet, and a profile that suggested, on account of the nose and imperial, an improvement upon Napoleon the Third. He had a fine forehead, a long head, eyes that were built on top of two highly developed organs of speech (according to the phrenologists) and remark-

ably thick strong dark hair. He knew all about the subject of the debate; knew more than the lecturer; knew more than anybody present; had read everything that had ever been written on the subject; and remembered all the facts that bore upon it. He used notes, read them, ticked them off one by one and threw them away, and finished with a coolness and clearness that to me, in my then trembling state, seemed miraculous. This young man was the ablest man in England—Sidney Webb.”

Shaw, deeply impressed, was by no means disposed to leave the matter at that. On the contrary, by his own account, he proceeded “to force my friendship on Sidney Webb—the most successful thing I ever did.” Why was no far-seeing Max or Low alive at the time to draw pictures of these two, as in the years that followed, with the friendship established, they went about together, at work and at play? For there was plenty of play, as well as a great deal of hard work. They went on holidays—to Holland, where Shaw made Webb look at pictures: and to Oberammergau, where he refused to be taken for walks but sat in the hotel writing letters. They were a veritable Damon and Pythias for the next ten years. Though an intimate, it was not an exclusive friendship. Very soon they had drawn in two other young men, very different in background but full, like them, of ardent political and social passion, whom they caught as they came down from Oxford—Graham Wallas and Sydney Olivier: and the duo expanded to a quartette. An amazing quartette it was: with something of the carefree intensity of the immortal Musketeers, to whom it has oftener been likened. Not all the parts fit. If G. B. S. with his red head and Irish impudence, is an obvious D’Artagnan, and Sydney Olivier, tall, dark and gravely handsome, an inevitable Athos, there was not much but his height to make a Porthos of Graham Wallas, totally devoid of his prototype’s engaging vanity. On the other hand, if Sidney Webb, on no better showing than

the "pretty hands and feet" which Shaw 'spotted' and a stature diminutive by comparison with that of the other three, has to be Aramis, he had, even at this date, some of the statesmanlike qualities of the future Bishop of Vannes.

His 'origins' are much harder to trace than those of any of his friends; and, when traced, seem much less hopeful. He comes out of the stratum of purely English life which is most mysterious—the respectable, 'superior', lower middle class, which 'keeps itself to itself', appals while it baffles the foreigner, and exists in a manner which the home-grown intellectual finds terrifying to contemplate in its inartistic extension. These 'origins', he has never illuminated. Unlike his future partner, he has never written and is certain never to write, any kind of autobiography. True, to *The St. Martin's Review* in the winter of 1928, he contributed some pieces which, most misleadingly, he called 'Reminiscences', but about himself they record practically nothing. When he starts with a bare fact about himself—and that is rare—it is only to switch off, instantly, to some institution, or general observed train of facts and consequences, from which he never comes back. At any time, the pronoun "I" is the word in the language figuring least frequently either in his speaking or writing. About himself—that theme which nearly everyone finds so fluent—he is invincibly reticent. In these so-called 'Reminiscences' he starts off with a gem:

"Let me say at once that I have no intention of writing an autobiography. I am, I believe, 'not that sort.' Indeed, I have very little knowledge of what has happened to me internally. I am, I suppose, what is nowadays called an extrovert. Things impinge on me, and I re-act to the impact, occasionally, with ideas and suggestions that prove interesting."

"Occasionally," here, is manna for the thirsty biographer. But it is all he gets. So, the outline of the "impacts and re-actions" of the first twenty years of his life has to be

purely external, and bare to a degree. That, no doubt, is as he would wish.

He is, to begin with, purely English: as English as an Englishman can well be. Many people, both when he was young and throughout his career, have assumed that he is Jewish, on no better evidence than his appearance. True, that appearance—the thick nose and lips, abundant hair, small stature, and sensitive hands and feet, the eyes concealed by eye-glasses, far from straightly set on his nose, and attached to a cord, often knotted and broken, which, since he never removes them, serves no obvious useful purpose—does, at a first glance, give him the air not only of a Jew but a Jew of Continental origin. Abroad, he passes easily as either a German or a Frenchman: at an International Conference, his is certainly not one of the figures one would pick out as characteristically British Empire. But, apart from his industry, his amazing memory and equally amazing power of finding the right word and tracking every nuance of meaning through the appropriate shading of language to express it, he is markedly deficient in Jewish traits of mind or character. He is not artistic; he is indifferent to money; he much prefers the knowledge of facts to the possession of cash; unassuming, modest and disinterested, he is totally devoid of personal ‘push’.

The evidence of his ancestry, anyhow, disposes of the hypothesis. On both sides, the line of descent is purely English: Anglo-Saxon English. His forbears came from East Anglia, and from Kent. His grandfather on the paternal side was a Kentish inn-keeper; a cousin was a professional cricketer. His maternal grandfather was a small, very small, property owner in Suffolk.

From *Who's Who*, and from the Election documents in which candidates are compelled to set out those full “given” names which they may, or may not, use in daily life, it

appears that the child born in London on July 13th, 1859, was named Sidney James, and was the second in a family of three, coming between Charles and Ada. London is a large, generalised term; but little Sidney James was born "in the very middle of London, in one of its most densely populated areas": in fact, in Cranbourn Street, Leicester Square. There, his mother carried on, as she had done before her marriage, a hairdressing business. Left an orphan as a youngish woman, she refused to live idly and uncomfortably with relations; instead, she removed herself from East Anglia, and, borrowing enough money for the purpose from a brother-in-law, set up shop in London. Evidently a woman of efficiency, she made a success of her enterprise, in a modest way: the shop was a briskly going concern by the time that she met and married Mr. Webb, in 1854. He belonged to an entirely different type. A man of ardent intellectual interests, he was a great reader and a keen Radical. John Stuart Mill was his hero, as later his younger son's; he was one of Mill's staunch supporters at the time of the famous Westminster election, when, on being asked by a hostile questioner at a meeting whether "It was true that he had said all working men were liars," Mill courageously replied "Yes." An accountant by profession, Mr. Webb senior, in spite of none too robust health, spent much of his time and energy on unpaid public work. He was both a Vestryman and a member of the local Board of Guardians: one of those selfless persons, without personal ambition or 'drive', on whom hard and thankless jobs tend to be put. He did them well: he had all kinds of efficiencies. For instance, he was rather surprisingly a crack shot; and Sidney, out of piety was, at one stage, a volunteer—though not a crack shot.

In the Cranbourn Street household, the little, rose-cheeked mother was, evidently, the active partner; but

there are no indications, despite her domestic and professional efficiency, that she was one whit more worldly-minded than her husband. In some respects, certainly, she was well ahead of her times and her circumstances. Not only did she give the children plain, good food: she insisted on cold baths and open windows, at a time when such things were commonly thought to be dangerous. Moreover, the boys—it was too early to expect equal treatment for a girl—were sent abroad, to learn languages. Both Charles and Sidney were thus despatched to Switzerland, to acquire French: and, later, to the house of a pastor at Wisnar, in Mecklenburg-Schwerin, for German. On the way to Germany, Sidney, as a boy, was wrecked in the Baltic. Charles, on the strength of his languages, became a foreign correspondence clerk in a big London house; Sidney was to use the instrument for other purposes.

London, inevitably, coloured and largely constituted the boy's education.

“After a few lessons at my mother's knee, which I do not remember, I had taught myself to read at an early age, very largely from the books and notices displayed in the shop windows, a source of endless interest. It used to take me a full hour to get the whole length of Fleet Street, so absorbing were the pages of the periodicals there exposed to view. I found more instruction in the reputedly arid pages of Kelly's London Directory, then already a ponderous tome, than in any other single volume to which my childhood had access. It was from the steps of St. Martin's Church that, as a very little boy, I saw my first Lord Mayor's Show. I remember my mother telling me on that occasion—and it seems to have sunk in—that if I was a good boy, I might myself one day be Lord Mayor! In short, I grew up a patriotic Londoner, very early declaring that no place on earth (I knew nothing about any other place) would content me for habitation, other than the very middle of London that I knew.”¹

It was through his observant eyes, and through books, that most of his education came to him. With his hands,

¹ *Reminiscences* by S. and B. Webb. *St. Martin's Review*, December, 1928.

he never possessed any skill, never did he achieve enough even to drive in a nail with accuracy or assurance, or to mend a bicycle puncture. His schooling pursued the normal course, and included Sunday school. There, as in the ordinary school, he won rows of prizes; many years later, his secretary, rather to his surprise, found that he had, for these volumes—*Christy's Old Organ* and the like—a queer tenderness. The books at 41, Grosvenor Road were having their annual dusting; when the bottom shelves were emptied, and their contents exposed, various such works were disclosed. "Get rid of them," said Mrs. Webb, with ruthless common-sense. Sidney demurred. "I don't think we will," he murmured; and in the end, retrieved them all, and stowed them—perhaps for greater safety—behind other volumes.

School days at the City of London school came, all too early, to an end. Classes at the Birkbeck Institute had to be broken by a change for the worse in the family circumstances; at sixteen, it was necessary for Sidney to become a wage-earner. Assisted by his knowledge of French and German, he got a post as a clerk in the City office of a Colonial broker. There, however, he did not stay for long. Assiduously, he went on with his studies. His gift for rapid reading and secure assimilation and memorisation of whatever he read that interested him—and nearly everything did—stood him in good stead. He attended London University evening classes, after working hours were over; and, in 1878, sat for the Open Competitive Examination for the Civil Service. As a result, he won a place in the War Office, as what was then known as a Second Division clerk. His examination efficiency was formidable. Not only did he invariably come out at the top: he literally 'mopped up' exhibitions, scholarships and prizes. A year later, he again sat for examination, and was again successful, being transferred

a stage higher in the official hierarchy, to a post in the office of Surveyor of Taxes. In this capacity, he 'assessed' Robert Browning, who protested, successfully: proving that his earnings from poetry did not bring him within the income-tax paying category. It was at this stage in his career that G. B. S. heard him, at the Zetetical Society, and found him already possessed both of a mine of exact knowledge and of an unrivalled capacity for setting it forth in words of precision. In the following year, he again essayed the Open Competition, this time under the Playfair Scheme for promotion from grade to grade. As a result, another barrier was down; he passed up into the First Division, the present Administrative grade,—passed so high that he could have entered the Foreign Office. In the Colonial Office,—which he actually chose, on advice—he had among his colleagues Sydney Olivier, who had entered the service by the normal route, from the University. There he worked, for the next ten years, until he left the Civil Service, to take up public work on a larger, freer stage.

About the course of his own mental development, in these formative years, he has made no revelations to the world, beyond a generous acknowledgment of his debt to John Stuart Mill. About himself, in any connexion, he has, at any time, talked less than any other public man of equal or approaching eminence. The indications of his written work, as of his speech, whether public or private, go to suggest that he would prefer to remain always anonymous. At any and every stage in his career, he is to be found, again and again, writing papers and doing heavy work for which he neither gets nor desires to get, the credit. Nothing, in this, either of timidity or shyness. No one could be less timid, and he is far too unselfconscious to be shy. Indeed, this alliance, in his make-up, of powerful and comprehensive mental ability with genuine disin-

terestedness, an ingrained and transparently native modesty and a complete indifference to his own personal position in the world, presents a phenomenon so unusual that he has, constantly, been accused of being Machiavellian. For this there is no better evidence than the fact that he has an authentic preference for getting things done to being seen as doing them. He really is the "unassuming expert": the man who desires both to know, and to serve, for its own sake. One can see both this strong sense of duty—remarkable in that it included public as well as private duty—and this real indifference to the world's ratings or its rewards, as part of his inheritance from both father and mother, lifted, in his case, to a higher potency by mental endowments rarely found in combination with just that type of moral metal. He has a passion for knowledge, but also a passion for service. He does not want to keep what he knows to himself: he wants to communicate it. To that end, he not only studied intensively, history, economics and law—taking, as it were in his stride, an LL.B. degree at London University some time in the mid-'eighties;—he also taught himself to expound what he knew by giving unpaid lectures at the London Workingmen's College. Nevertheless, there was the danger that, left to himself, he might have remained the expert. But he was not to be left to himself. That he was not to be so left was made certain by his rare faculty for corporate effectiveness; a faculty which is not, of course, purely mental. He was eminently "good to work with" and people are not good to work with unless they possess certain humane attributes. Among these a sense of humour ranks high, and he has plenty of humour, of his own special brand. Add to that a real power of enjoyment, a zest in the exercise of faculty, an immense gift for finding interest everywhere, boredom almost nowhere, a temper not easily exasperated, and a disposition to

find the world a good, or at worst, a supremely interesting place.

Bernard Shaw tells two stories of Sidney Webb as a young man, which are highly illuminating. When he was a Colonial Office clerk, he and Shaw were on holiday in France. To the post office Webb, talking French admirably and looking quite like a French bourgeois, conveyed a vast parcel of official papers. These, he insisted, could go through the post for a halfpenny. The clerk protested. He insisted. If the code were consulted, it would be found that para. X on p. X vol. X, entitled him to despatch official papers at this rate. The clerk, impressed, wavered: consulted his superior. That functionary brought down the volume cited—and, of course, Webb was right. After that, as Shaw says, he could have posted all his laundry home for a halfpenny.

The other story is even more interesting. Again the two were abroad together; this time in Haarlem, in a tram. Into this tram, a young man consigned to prison, was brought by his guard. He was not handcuffed but to his wrists a long chain was fastened. Plainly he was wretched, selfconscious, ashamed, an outcast. The tram stopped near the prison: he was led out by his guard, between the long lines of other passengers, looking about him miserably. Suddenly, his head lifted, his expression cleared, something almost like a smile played over his lips. He had recovered his self-respect. How had this happened? The explanation was simple. Earlier in the day Shaw and Webb had, as travellers will, purchased a large piece of marzipan. They had eaten enough: perhaps even a trifle too much. Yet a large lump remained, bulging in Sidney's pocket. As the young prisoner was led past him, he had stuffed the sweet into his hand.

This warm humanity rather than his superb efficiency, bound Shaw, Olivier and Wallas to him, and made

their association closer than a mere working partnership: they were a band of brothers. The others, fully recognising his gifts, were by no means disposed to allow them to bloom unseen. The Fabian Society provided just the right garden.

In the earliest discussion which led to the foundation of this famous body, none of the quartette participated. Nor had they any part in the division that took place inside the earliest group, between those primarily concerned with individual moral perfectibility, who went off into the Fellowship of the New Life, and those primarily interested in the reconstruction of society on new social principles, who remained to constitute the Fabian Society. Social organisation, rather than the "highest moral possibilities," would certainly have been the banner under which Sidney Webb would, instinctively, have ranged himself, although banners were never in his line, and the approach developed by the Fabians suited him, indeed was largely made by him, in its rejection of anything of the sort.

The earliest debates of the society, says Mr. E. R. Pease, their historian, were "in the main on things abstract or Utopian." But in March 1885 Sidney Webb resolutely brought them down to earth in a paper which he read, called *The Way Out*. Two months later, about a year therefore, after G. B. S., he was elected a member; within a year he was, like Shaw, on the Executive, where he has remained ever since. Sydney Olivier joined almost at the same time as he did; Graham Wallas a little later. Among other outstanding Fabians of these early, highly argumentative days, were Hubert Bland, William Clarke, Harold Cox, and Annie Besant. The total membership in the mid-'eighties was only forty.

Of the outlook and habit of mind of the Fabian at this epoch, Shaw has drawn a vivid picture.

“In 1885 our differences were latent or instinctive: and we denounced the Capitalists as thieves . . . and, among ourselves, talked revolution, anarchism, labour notes versus pass-books, and all the rest of it, on the tacit assumption that the object of our campaign, with its watch-words, ‘EDUCATE, AGITATE, ORGANISE,’ was to bring about a tremendous smash-up of existing society, to be succeeded by complete Socialism. And this meant that we had no true practical understanding either of existing society or of Socialism. Without being quite definitely aware of this, we yet felt it to a certain extent all along; for it was at this period that we contracted the invaluable habit of freely laughing at ourselves which has always distinguished us, and which has saved us from becoming hampered by the gushing enthusiasts who mistake their own emotions for public movements. From the first, such people fled after one glance at us, declaring that we were not serious. Our preference for practical suggestions and criticisms, and our impatience of all general expressions of sympathy with working-class aspirations, not to mention our way of chaffing our opponents in preference to denouncing them as enemies of the human race, repelled from us some warm-hearted and eloquent Socialists, to whom it seemed callous and cynical to be even commonly self-possessed in the presence of the sufferings upon which Socialists make war. But there was far too much equality and personal intimacy among the Fabians to allow of any member presuming to get up and preach at the rest in the fashion which the working classes still tolerate submissively from their leaders. We knew that a certain sort of oratory was useful for ‘stoking up’ public meetings; but we needed no stoking up, and when any orator tried the process on us, soon made him understand that he was wasting his time and ours. I, for one, should be very sorry to lower the intellectual standard of the Fabian by making the atmosphere of its public discussions the least bit more congenial to stale declamation than it is at present. If our debates are to be kept wholesome, they cannot be too irreverent or too critical. And the irreverence, which has become traditional with us, comes down from those early days when we often talked such nonsense that we could not help laughing at ourselves.”¹

Inside the Fabian Society—whose papers were, at one stage, kept in a drawer in the Colonial Office—real hard

¹ *The Fabian Society: Its Early History*. Tract No. 41, by Bernard Shaw.

debating and close discussion went on. The famous Four did not only meet and argue there, however; they were incessantly sharpening their notably quick wits against one another, spending week-ends and evenings together, reading and arguing. In addition to this, they “plodded away,” to quote Shaw again, “at footling little meetings and dull discussions, doggedly placing these before all private engagements, however tempting.” No meeting was too small, or too large, for them: they were for ever busy, injecting Socialism. They talked in club-rooms and drawing-rooms, before Trade Union and Co-operative branches and workingmen’s associations of all kinds: they also organised meetings of their own. As many as seven hundred lectures were delivered by members in a single year; and the lion’s share of this work fell to the Quartette. Some of them, although not Sidney, talked out of doors as well as indoors: but, in the main they left the street corner to the S.D.F., and selected atmospheres permitting close argument and the following up of points, above all in question and answer. The work was hard.

“A man’s Socialistic acquisitiveness must be keen enough to make him actually prefer spending two or three nights a week in speaking and debating, or in picking up social information even in the most dingy and scrappy way, to going to the theatre or dancing or drinking, or even sweethearting, if he is to become a really competent propagandist.”¹

It was hard, but they did “actually prefer” it. What sweetened the toil, and made the whole thing immense fun, was the keenness of mutual life and the eager comradeship that went with it.

They talked; they also wrote,—and wrote assiduously. Part of the machinery of education, both of themselves

¹ G. B. S. *ibid.*

and of others, was the issue of a stream of pamphlets. Characteristically they called them Tracts. If anyone liked to laugh, they had got in first with the joke. Among these early Tracts—of which the majority came, anonymously, from the tireless pen of Sidney Webb—one in particular, achieved both a very large circulation and an immense effect: *Facts for Socialists*, issued in 1887. Here was propaganda of a then novel kind: the authentic propaganda of the deed. Little or no argument, but a marshalling of things done and doing that spoke for themselves. In the next year, *Facts for Londoners* drove the demonstration further home, and laid the main lines of an intensely practical programme.

Webb loved London dearly: he also saw it, as it was: and the sight appalled him and haunted him. Born in mean streets, in closest contact with poverty at its grimest and yet, like every Londoner, also in visual contact with wealth, with Radicalism in his blood on both sides, and a brain of phenomenal grasp, the facts that he wrote into these two Tracts had, all the days of his upgrowing, pressed in upon him, on every hand. That “things as they are” are wrong, and stupidly wrong, was, for him, a matter of early, everyday observation. He already possessed a wealth of exact knowledge on history, politics, economics, far beyond that of any of his associates, or anyone whom he, at this stage, encountered in debate. To this store he was continually adding, his great aids being his remarkable memory and his power of incredibly rapid reading. He really is the omnivorous reader: but, unlike most such, he remembers what he reads. One glance at a printed page stamps its contents on the tables of his mind, and no accumulation produces either congestion or disorder there. He knew his facts, even in the 'eighties. He knew, further, what he wanted to do with them. For him, already, the central idea of Socialism is

“the conscious and deliberate substitution, in industrial as well as in political matters, of the collective self-government of the community as a whole, organised on a democratic basis, for the individual control over other men’s lives which the unrestrained private ownership of land and industrial capital inevitably involves.”

He saw this substitution going on, but neither consciously nor deliberately. The immediate job, therefore, was to make people aware of what was, in fact happening, so that orderly planning might accelerate an inevitable process and lessen its friction.

Socialists had then as always since, to fight on two fronts. They had, that is to say, to convince the unconverted that Socialism was reasonable and practicable: and at the same time to persuade them, and make clear to themselves, that what they stood for was neither Anarchism nor Social Democratic Marxism, and why. Bernard Shaw has frankly admitted that he was, for a time, and perhaps temperamentally always, attracted by rebellion, for its own sake. G. R. S. Taylor, who was in the first decade of the twentieth century, on the Fabian Executive, sees him, when, as he puts it, “speaking on his own,” as a revolutionist: but he adds—

“Then he gets lured back to the Fabian Society. . . . He seems in the grip of some powerful influence which coils round his mind: one thinks of the tale of Svengali, who was, if we remember rightly, a dark man with a pointed beard, of weird hypnotic influence.”¹

Mr. Taylor here suggests, of course, the “Machiavellian” view of Sidney Webb: his certainly was the “powerful influence” he has in mind. But there was no need for any “hypnotism” in the matter. The intellectual influence of Webb operated by purely intellectual means. For

¹ *Leaders of Socialism*, by G. R. S. Taylor, New Age Press, 1908.

him, none of the varieties of what he has called "Impossibilism" had any attraction whatsoever. The lecture which he gave to the Society in 1894 on *Socialism, True and False*¹ expresses, the more compellingly that its tone is, throughout, so gentle, the iron hand so completely sheathed in the velvet glove, what he thought, from the first:

"In 1884, the Fabian Society, like the other Socialist organisations, had its enthusiastic young members—aye, and old ones, too—who placed all their hopes on a sudden tumultuous uprising of the united proletariat, before whose mighty onrush kings, landlords, and capitalists would go down like nine-pins, leaving society quietly to re-sort itself into Utopia. The date for the Social Revolution was sometimes actually fixed for 1889, the centenary of the opening of the French Revolution. I remember myself that one of our friends, in his zeal that the rural districts might not be forgotten, printed and circulated a proposal that a few Socialist missionaries should buy a gipsy caravan and live in it 'until the Revolution,' an event evidently to be expected before the ensuing winter!

It was against all thinking and teaching of this catastrophic kind that the Society gradually came to set its face—not, as I believe, that we were any less earnest in our warfare against existing evils, or less extreme in our remedies, but because we were sadly and sorrowfully convinced that no sudden or simultaneous transformation of society from an Individualist to a Collectivist basis was possible, or even thinkable.

On the other hand, we had but little sympathy with schemes for the regeneration of mankind by the establishment of local Utopias, whether in Cumberland or in Chile. To turn our back on the Unearned Increment and the Machine Industry seemed a poor way of conquering them. We had no faith in the recuperative qualities of spade husbandry or any devices for dodging the Law of Rent. In short, we repudiated the common assumption that Socialism was necessarily bound up with Insurrectionism on the one hand or Utopianism on the other, and we set to work to discover for ourselves and to teach to others how practically to transform England into a Social Democratic common-wealth."

In this highly characteristic passage, the keywords are the *practically* in the closing line: and the refusal to attempt

¹ Reprinted in *Problems of Industry*.

to "dodge the Law of Rent." If one were to try to summarize the distinctive contribution made by Webb not only to the Fabian outlook, but to the development of British Socialism, one might cite this steady insistence on the practical, and this equally steady refusal to dodge. Practicality and truthfulness came, alike, not from a cold temper but from an enthusiasm seeing the actual problems as far too instant and too serious for mere light-headed playing with them.

In the quite early days, a group within an association known as the Hampstead Historic Society settled down with the estimable intention of reading Karl Marx. The first volume of *Das Kapital* was available, in French. Graham Wallas, then teaching in Highgate, was, with other members of the Quartette, a party to this effort. He records that the students started off with the expectation of finding themselves in agreement with Marx. To their surprise, they found that they were not. Sidney Webb early brought up the Ricardian Law of Rent, which Marx skilfully evades by his use of the Hegelian dialectic, and insisted that it had got to be faced: met, and not "dodged." His arguments: his report on the third volume, which he had perused in German, and pronounced to be "no good": his marshalling of the Jevonian doctrine of Marginal Utility, combined to convince the group that, so far as the strictly economic side of Socialism went, they were not Marxians.

In the subsequent gradual working out of what was to be the typical Fabian approach, he, again, took the lion's share. The results were far-reaching. Had he, and his associates in the years between 1885 and 1892, or in the years from 1892 on, accepted the Marxian analysis and the Marxian dialectic, the course of the British Labour movement must have run along entirely different lines. He and his Fabian colleagues reached their conclusions

after the most rigorous facing of all that they involved, and the most candid interrogation of the arguments one way and the other; arguments brought forward from many differing intellectual as well as temperamental angles. For, if it be true that, in these arguments, he dominated by his knowledge, his resolute and untireable persistency, and his immense power of ordering and mastering hard facts, he, in his turn, owed an immense amount, in his mental development, to constant contact with the singularly different minds of Shaw, Olivier and Wallas. Sydney Olivier, with his rich background of culture, tinged with a streak that can only be called romantic, perhaps derived from his Latin heredity, was, in the Quartette, the voice predominantly of the moral sense. His instinctive feeling of human brotherhood had a warm ardour; he was always there to remind the others of certain imponderables, and to bring colour into their social constructions. Graham Wallas—who, alas, even while this was being written, died at his desk—brought not so much the underlying seriousness of the Nonconformist manse whence he came as his humour, his gaiety, his keen psychological insight, his quick human sense and his rare generalising faculty. Shaw, of course, counted most, and that not only through his vivid vitality and irrepressible sparkle. Through him, as in part through the other two, Webb, with his passion for getting things done, was made aware of another kind of intellectual effort: that “agonies and bloody sweat” through which the artist arrives at truth. With humility, he paid homage to this in his friend.

Having taught themselves what they thought, and what they did not think, and while this education was going on, the Fabians generally, and the Quartette in particular, set to work busily and very cheerily teaching others. “Every Sunday,” Shaw records, “I lectured on some subject which I wanted to teach myself.” They had a pretty clear notion

of what they wanted to happen. The changes they desired were to come about by democratic action: through politics: through the creation of a new political party. They were out for what Webb was later to call "a new orientation in British Politics."

"From 1887 at any rate, we looked to the formation of a strong and independent Labour Party, which should take over the banner of social and economic reform from the Liberal Party, which, as it seemed to us, had faltered at the task, and could no longer satisfy the aspirations of those who stood for change."

They looked to it; but facts compelled them to see it in the distance. Sidney Webb goes on:

"We preached continuously the doctrine of Socialism as a matter of abstract economic and political theory. But we also set ourselves—and this was the specific feature of the Society's work, in which it stood alone—to detach the conception of Socialism from such extraneous ideas as suddenness and simultaneity of change, violence and compulsion, and atheism or anti-clericalism. What helped to do this was our no less practical translation of Socialism into separate projects of social and industrial reform, adapted to the circumstances of Great Britain, which could be carried into effect by separate Acts of Parliament. And, as a Society, we welcomed the adhesion of men and women of every religious denomination or of none, strongly insisting that Socialism was not Secularism; and the very object and purpose of all sensible collective action was the development of the individual soul or conscience or character. It is no small gain that the British Labour Party is the only Labour or Socialist Party in Europe that is not Secularist and anti-religious. Nor did we confine our propaganda to the slowly emerging Labour Party, or to those who were prepared to call themselves Socialists, or to the manual workers or to any particular class. We put our proposals, one by one, as persuasively as possible, before all who would listen to them—Conservatives whenever we could gain access to them, the churches and chapels of all denominations, the various Universities, and Liberals and Radicals, together with the other Socialist Societies at all times. This we called 'permeation': and it was an important discovery. Most reformers think that all they have got to do in a political Democracy is to obtain a majority. This is a profound mistake.

What has to be changed is not only the vote that is cast—not even the heart as well as the vote—but also the mental climate in which Parliament and the Government both live and work. The atmosphere of politics has to be transformed before the necessary revolution can be achieved. We realised, more vividly than most of our colleagues, that, at any rate in Britain, no political Party, however 'proletarian' its composition or its sympathies, and however attractive its programme, could ever carry far-reaching reforms in Parliament by the support merely of the members whom it enrolled, or even of its sympathisers at elections. Nothing of importance, we thought, could be effected in social transformation unless public opinion generally, and all the other Parliamentary Parties, had been 'prepared' by prolonged 'education,' to entertain and consider definite and detailed projects—even when they were continuing, with apparent determination, to offer to them the most uncompromising opposition. Hence the work of the Fabian Society has—avowedly and without the least concealment—persistently been along two separate lines. To the politicians who deigned from time to time to notice us, we presented simultaneously two fronts. On the one hand, as we frankly told them, we worked continuously for a new and powerful Labour Party, into which our members threw their energy. On the other hand, the Society strove as continuously, with the aid of all its members able to devote themselves to this work, to persuade all sections of public opinion, and all political Parties, of the advantages of the series of economic and social reforms into which we were perpetually translating and retranslating the abstract Socialism that we preached."¹

Shaw puts a similar view with characteristic pungency in the "peroration" of his *Early History of the Fabian Society*—

"Whilst our backers at the polls are counted by tens we must continue to crawl and drudge and lecture as best we can; when they are counted by hundreds we can permeate and trim and compromise. When they rise to tens of thousands, we shall take the field as an independent party. Give us hundreds of thousands, as you can if you try hard enough, and we will ride the whirlwind and direct the storm."

In the 'eighties, the backers rose, at best, from tens to hundreds. If permeation was, at this stage, applied mainly

¹ *St. Martin's Review*, February 1929.

to Radical and Liberal bodies, the reason was, in part, that, as Webb has more than once frankly stated, the Fabians did not, at this stage, in the least appreciate the importance of the Trade Union movement; partly that, again at this stage, Liberal minds seemed the most suggestible. Up and down the country, and notably in London, Radicals and even Liberals of the orthodox brand were becoming restive. They were bored with Ireland, many of them. In London, in particular, they were deeply perturbed about social conditions. Consummate ingenuity was brought to bear upon these perturbed spirits. The Fabians not only gave lectures; with superior cunning, they invited well-known politicians and economists to come and lecture to them. They invited them to Willis's Rooms, "the most aristocratic and also the cheapest place of meeting in London at the time." They listened, and then, at question time, fell upon them and "made them wish they had never been born." An article in a contemporary Radical periodical (1888) suggestively entitled "Butchered to make a Fabian Holiday" gives a vivid inside account of what it felt like, supplied by a well-known M.P., thus lured into the "Webb."

Fabian members were urged to get inside their respective political associations, whether Radical Club, Trade Union or Co-operative branch, or Conservative Association, and stir them up. *Facts for Socialists* and *Facts for Londoners* had begun the subversive work; it was followed up by getting a stream of resolutions sent up by Radical Clubs, Liberal Associations and Trade Union branches in favour of a legal Eight Hours Day: of municipal ownership and administration of water, gas, tramways and docks for the benefit of the ratepayers: of an unlimited extension of free education and health services: and, to meet the cost of all this, of stiff taxation of wealth by increased and

steeply graduated income taxes and death duties. The Holborn and Strand Liberal Associations, in particular, were notably fertile in resolutions of a most advanced kind; Hampstead and Highgate displayed a point of view that hardly seemed natural. Not only were the resolutions sent up: Fabians, or Fabian sympathisers, got themselves appointed as delegates of their branches to regional and Party Conferences, where they pressed their points home with trained expertness. They wrote reports of the meetings at which they themselves spoke: or if reports could not be got into the Press, local or national, were assiduous in their use of the correspondence columns. For many years, *The Star*, founded in the mid-'eighties, was to all intents and purposes collared: its assistant editor, H. W. Massingham, being himself a Fabian for a time. When *The Star* was found out, by its proprietors, *The Daily Chronicle*, to which Massingham transferred, was exploited. Sidney Webb wrote regularly in *The Star*, as, later, in *The Chronicle*; and displayed marvellous fertility of resource in getting his points in, whether in articles nominally of a strictly descriptive kind: in reviews: in reports of Conferences; or in innocent looking notes and paragraphs. In season and out of season, Radical discontent was fomented, and Liberal Associations were honeycombed with ideas far more revolutionary than those who were led to entertain them realised. It was largely by this tactic that the famous Newcastle Programme of 1891 was actually "put over" on the Liberal Federation; it was largely by this tactic that London, when the first elections for the County Council took place in 1889, returned a definitely Progressive majority to that body, and a Progressive majority "full of ideas that would never have come into their heads had not the Fabians put them there." Shaw goes on—

“The generalship of this movement was undertaken chiefly by Sidney Webb, who played such bewildering conjuring tricks with the Liberal thimbles and the Fabian peas that, to this day (1892), both the Liberals and the sectarian Socialists stand aghast at him.”

It was all tremendous fun: the greatest fun, no doubt, at the stage when “permeation” was still really anonymous. But it was too well done and too successful to remain anonymous. Liberals began to wake up to what was going on. Their new weekly, *The Speaker* denounced Fabianism as

“a mixture of dreary, gassy doctrinairism and crack-brained farcicality, set off with a portentous omniscience and flighty egotism not to be matched outside the walls of a lunatic asylum.”

A spleen so blatant must have delighted the Fabian Junta, and not least the “portentous omniscient” and the “flighty egotist.” It was an eloquent tribute to their success. That success, however, made the maintenance of anonymity impossible.

It came to an end, when, in the winter of 1889, there appeared a modest and most attractive looking pale green volume, entitled *Fabian Essays in Socialism*. This contained eight pieces by seven hands: Bernard Shaw (editor); Sidney Webb; Sydney Olivier; Graham Wallas; Annie Besant; William Clarke; Hubert Bland. All but one of the essays had been delivered by the essayists, as lectures, in the previous months. Sidney Webb’s account of the historic basis of Socialism had, however, not been spoken by him, since, in the company of Edward Pease he had, in October 1888, sailed for a short trip to the United States. They got back, however, in time to assist in publication. That publication was enterprising and original. He has described it himself, in the Preface he wrote to the 1920 Edition of the famous Essays.

“The book was produced without the services of any publisher. For the original edition, we decided ourselves the format, chose the type, and gave the order to the printer. Walter Crane kindly designed for us a striking cover, and Miss May Morris a decorative back, both of which we imposed on the book-binder, taking care, with both printer and binder, to choose firms paying the Trade Union rate of wages, and of good repute among the operatives. We issued a circular asking for orders for copies; and as the orders were received the copies were packed up at the Honorary Secretary’s house by himself and the volunteer Assistant Secretary, and posted to the subscribers. To our surprise, the first edition was immediately sold out, yielding a modest profit to the Fabian Society, to which the seven authors had formally conveyed their copyright. A second impression was also rapidly sold, and then the book was entrusted to a publishing firm for the issue of successive cheap reprints. It has been repeatedly reprinted in the United States, and has been translated into most of the languages of Europe.”

There are many interesting things in this 1920 preface, not the least interesting being its author’s own statement that he finds himself “mainly concerned to note where we went wrong, and what we omitted.” Most of those omissions he was himself to correct, long before the preface to the 1920 edition was written. Whatever they were, the book made a great stir, at the time: represented the sounding of a quite new voice. It has been described by G. D. H. Cole, no wilfully amiable critic of anything written over the name of Webb, as “The most important single publication in the history of British Socialism.”

For one, anyhow, of its authors, this coming out into the open represented a decision clearly taken, and the end of a phase, clearly seen. Sidney Webb had reached the point when he felt that he ought to take a share in administration: learn the machine from inside: if possible, permeate and control it. Impassioned Londoner as he was, he hailed the establishment of the London County Council with enthusiasm, and had helped, potently, to bring its Progressive majority into being. The next stage,

plainly, was to get on to it, himself. In 1891, accordingly, he resigned the post in the Colonial Office which he had occupied for ten years. His economic basis, on his very modest standard, was secured: he had saved enough to provide, with writing, the necessary resources. He settled down to winning Deptford for the Progressives at the 1892 L.C.C. Election, and for Deptford, when the election came, he was elected, by a very large majority.

This change in the form and circumstances of his life marks the end of an epoch in it. It coincided with an event even more important, which carried with it a much more far-reaching change. From his own personal point of view, the most significant reaction from the publication of *Fabian Essays* was that produced in the mind of a brilliant young woman, to whom an early copy had been sent by a friend. In a drawing-room in Monmouthshire, she read it from cover to cover; in sending it on, to be read by another friend, she remarked:

“By far the most significant and interesting essay is that by Sidney Webb: he has the historic sense.”

The first, if still distant, contact between Beatrice Potter and Sidney Webb had, actually, occurred some months before this. In *The Star* he wrote a review of the first volume of Charles Booth's *Life and Labour in London*, in the course of which he stated that “The only contributor with any literary talent is Miss Beatrice Potter.”

CHAPTER III

BEATRICE

A LONG jump, certainly, from Cranbourn Street to Standish House in the Cotswolds, where Beatrice Potter was born on January 2nd, 1858. It was a large, white, rambling mansion ("more like an institution than a home") looking, from the windows at the front which faced south-west, over extensive flower gardens and the artificial water of the period, to the lovely valley of the Severn. A thoroughly Victorian house, the rooms at the front were comfortably, even excessively, furnished, with heavy, shiny mahogany, draperies, carpets, curtains, ornaments and nick-nacks; but the children—nine girls, of whom Beatrice was the youngest but one—lived mainly in the sunless and stone-passaged regions at the back. Here were the school-room, the nurseries, the girls' bedrooms and those of their governesses, the single bath-room, as well as the smoke-room and the billiard-room of the master of the house.

But while Standish was the headquarters of the Potter family, they were, partly as a result of Mr. Potter's business avocations, partly because the social status of a governing family of the period demanded the possession of several abodes, constantly on the move. "The restless spirit of big enterprise dominated our home life." Spring thus generally found them occupying a furnished house in London, where the girls "came out"; in the summer, Rusland Hall in Westmorland, where Mr. Potter had another set of timber yards over and above those in

Gloucestershire, was frequently used; to The Argoed in Monmouthshire, another large house, overhanging a romantically lovely part of the Wye valley, the younger members of the family were apt to be despatched at seasons when the elder were entertaining house parties at Standish. At any given moment, one or two of the girls might be abroad, either finishing their education (which, of course, was a matter of governesses and tutors, not of school) on the Continent, or accompanying their father on one of his numerous business trips to the United States, Canada or elsewhere. The whole scale of existence was rich, ample, various and important. Not only did the Potters occupy a series of extensive and expensive houses; they moved, as of easy natural right, in the best circles: those socially distinguished and those moreover politically and intellectually most commanding. Their friends were people at the tops of their respective trees; within that limitation to those somehow or other prominent, their acquaintance showed a vast diversity, and was governed by an easy unconventional tolerance, especially on the part of the father; it covered all the worlds then recognised, in specimens of kaleidoscopic variety. The world of labour, of course, was hardly recognised as one: labour, Mr. Potter, kindly but quite instinctively, regarded as a commodity.

While the whole atmosphere was one of success, of easy mastery and accepted command, life was not in the ordinary materialist sense luxurious. Beatrice Potter, in the clear-cut picture she was later to draw of it, says:

“There was no consciousness of superior riches: on the contrary, owing to my mother’s utilitarian expenditure (a discriminating penuriousness which I think was traditional in families rising to industrial power during the Napoleonic wars) the Potter girls were brought up to ‘feel poor’.”¹

¹ *My Apprenticeship.*

Poor, but powerful. Powerful, and conscious of power.

“As life unfolded itself, I became aware that I belonged to a class of persons who habitually gave orders, but who seldom, if ever, executed the orders of other people. My mother sat in her boudoir and gave orders—orders that brooked neither delay nor evasion. My father, by temperament the least autocratic and most accommodating of men, spent his whole life in giving orders. . . . When, one after another, my sisters’ husbands joined the family group, they also were giving orders.”

This sense of natural and instinctive power was the most important distinguishing colour in the picture of the world which unfolded itself to the eyes of the girl as she grew up. From intimate inside knowledge comes the conviction, to sound so often in her mature writing, that insolence is the hateful fault from which the “upper classes” suffer. That intimate knowledge she has, with a truly magnificent candour, given to the world in the first volume of autobiography which she calls *My Apprenticeship*, published in 1926: a book as fascinating in its delineation of a social period as in its portrayal of a mind. From it, we may know her inner history as never that of her husband; know it so well that any description of her life before she met him must consist mainly of quotations from one of the great books of our time.

Although she was brought up mainly in the south-west, her parents, on both sides, were children of the north of England: that new north which came into power with the Industrial Revolution and the 1832 Reform Act. Her paternal grandfather, Richard Potter senior, was one of the Potters of Tadcaster: Lawrence Heyworth, her maternal grandfather, after whom his only daughter was named Lawrencina, came from Rossendale in Lancashire. Both were Radicals, Nonconformists, and supporters of John Bright; both became members of the post-1832 House of Commons, Richard Potter being returned by Wigan in 1832, Lawrence

Heyworth by Derby in 1847. Richard Potter further was one of the founders of the *Manchester Guardian*. When Georgina, one of Beatrice's elder sisters, wrote the story of the Tadcaster Potters, calling it *From Ploughshare to Parliament*, she describes Mary Seddon, whom the first Richard married, merely as a "handsome and gipsy-like girl," and draws a thick veil over the circumstances of the subsequent separation. Beatrice, on the other hand, with that superior frankness which is one of the vivifying and distinguishing notes of her writing, speaks of her paternal grandmother as that "Tall dark woman of Jewish type," who, long before Zionism, dreamed of leading the Jews back to Jerusalem; and tells us that she spent part of her latter days in an asylum. From that grandmother, whose story is like a flash from other more perilous regions across the even safe normality of the Potters and the Heyworths, she may well have inherited not only her vivid darkness of colouring and her finely aquiline nose—the true dominant nose, Roman rather than Hebraic—but a fire within which, thanks to the difference in their generations, found a happier scope than Mary Seddon's.

Richard Potter the second planned for himself and his bride, the leisurely life of a country gentleman. The financial crash of 1847-8, however, swept away his handsome inherited fortune; he had to take up the active business life which, with marked success and enjoyment, he carried on, on an expanding scale, until within a few years of his death on January 1st, 1892. Family connexions helped him to a partnership in a timber merchant's business in Gloucester, and afterwards made him a director of the Great Western Railway; thanks to his own considerable abilities, his interests developed on an ample, even an international, scale. As President of the Grand Trunk Railway of Canada, director of the Hudson Bay Company, and of Dutch-Rhenish as well as other home railways

besides the Great Western, he was a representative general of industry and high finance, and moved easily through the world of large concerns, international operations, and world politics. As a result, his children grew up in contact—a contact which in Beatrice's case was close and intelligent, especially in the later years of his life, when she acted as confidential secretary and aide-de-camp, as well as housekeeper—with a “maze of capitalist undertakings” seen through the eyes of one of their controllers: were intimately and at first hand acquainted with the ruling forces of the life of their day.

The girls adored their father, as he them; but one, at any rate, pondered early and earnestly over “the ethics of capitalist enterprise” as presented to her by the actions and axioms of a man of high personal character and rare charm, possessed of what Herbert Spencer called a “noble amiability,” who “thought, felt and acted in terms of personal relationships, and not in terms of general principles,” and who “had no clear vision of the public good.” “‘A friend’ he would assert, ‘is a person who would back you up when you were in the wrong, who would give your son a place which he could not have won on his merits.’ Any other conduct he scoffed at, as moral pedantry. Hence, he tended to prefer the welfare of his family and personal friends to the interests of the companies over which he presided, the profits of these companies to the prosperity of his country, the dominance of his own race to the peace of the world.” He was eminently a good man, by his own standards; but “the circumstances of mid-Victorian capitalist enterprise were hostile to any fixed standard of morality.”

Although born a Radical, he had, by the time his daughter knew him, long ceased to be one. For him, Cobden and Bright were fanatics, deceiving themselves with notions. Although brought up a Unitarian, he

became, in middle life, an Anglican, as well as a Conservative. Women he genuinely believed to be superior to men—a view his wife—and daughter—was far from sharing; but, while he would have enfranchised them, he was no democrat. He enjoyed intellectual society, and Huxley, Tyndall, James Martineau, Cardinal Manning and Bishop Ellicott were all friends, but for philosophy and philosophising he had a large measure of the Englishman's native contempt. Herbert Spencer was for years an intimate of the household and the first person who definitely stimulated and took a real interest in Beatrice's intellectual struggles: but for her father, "he lacked instinct," and the Synthetic philosophy "bored him past endurance."

If she inherits from the father she adored, the forceful drive of personality, the habit of command, the "genius for planning rather than executing," from her mother comes that self-centred, at times mystical, sense of spiritual conflict and spiritual need that was revealed, in a manner surprising enough to many at the time, when she lectured under the Fabian auspices in the Essex Hall in 1907, on "The Faith I Hold." How deep in its roots, and how early in its manifestations, was this religious aspiration, the extracts from her girlish diary printed in *My Apprenticeship* fully reveal. To her mother the problem—the unsolved problem—of faith was central. In many ways, she must have been a far from happy woman: unhappy above all in her sense of thwarted purpose: a tragedy far commoner with women in those days than was understood, or even guessed at, at the time. Reared by and with men, moreover, Mrs. Potter disliked women. Her only son died in infancy: she was surrounded by nine daughters—"not the sort of women she liked or approved." Their father laughed at and enjoyed their unconventionality, not so their mother. She died in 1882: it was only very near the end of her life that there sprang up between

her and Beatrice a sympathy which seems to have been born of a sense on her part that possibly the daughter of whom, as but a child, she had said, "Beatrice is the only one of my children who is below the average in intelligence," might yet be destined to realise her own smothered, hardly admitted, ambition for service and public work.

Beatrice's own picture of her youth suggests a not happy and rather hostile isolation. Her affection for her mother was a late growth: her father, a glowing radiant figure, gave her all sorts of contacts and freedoms, but spiritually left her alone. It was the Synthetic Philosopher who best understood her. "As a little child" she says, "he was perhaps the only person who persistently cared for me: or rather who singled me out as one who was worthy of being trained and looked after." His certainly was a commanding influence in her development: but for him, she might, in a hundred ways, have grown up into a very different woman. Her autobiography is largely a record of that influence: immensely stimulating on the mental side, but possibly actually thwarting on the moral and emotional. Nothing is more arresting, in those fascinating pages, than the remark she drops, apropos of his death, that "if I had to live my life over again, according to my present attitude, I should, I think, remain a conforming member of the National Church." With a strong mystical sense, and a deep natural Puritanism, appearing and re-appearing in manifold guises throughout her career, she was compelled, by his influence, into a long sojourn in the arid wastes of a kind of Rationalism that could never satisfy her temperament; nor was she ever wholly to escape from the shape of his style. His influence was the more potent that there was nothing in her environment to offset its intensely intellectual bias. There is an element of passion in her temper that cries out for

some kind of artistic outlet. A home of rich regulated Victorian ugliness offered little scope to this through eye or ear; Spencer, aware of this vivid spark, dedicated it on the altar of his own philosophy, and so, indirectly, prepared it for social economics. But the passage through Spencerism cost her a great deal: and shaped her mind perhaps a little artificially. His "singling her out" anyhow, was a determinant fact in her growth. Not unnaturally, as a late comer in a very large family, it was for this that her ardent young mind was pining.

If, in her picture of her girlhood her elder sisters, with the exception of Margaret, seem rather dim, this is explained no doubt by the difference in their ages; if she herself seems rather constantly overshadowed by a sense of sin, of loneliness, of not being truly at home in the world of "rootless social relations" whirling round her, one has to remember that, on all this period, one is, in the main, reading a diary. Any diary exaggerates both self-centredness and the gloom associated with it: the phenomenon she most aptly describes as "being under one's own shadow." Of hers, the outstanding trait is a tendency to argue with herself. Later, long economic and sociological disquisitions find place in it; at all times, one is in contact with a woman whose mind is the most important part of her. So far as the years of adolescence go, much of the melancholy that broods over her entries must be taken as proper to the age of the writer, her then unstable health, and the form of self-revelation. Here is an eager, ardent, highly self-conscious young creature, with a painfully active mind, amply stimulated and fed, seen from within. The other half of the picture, that seen from without, largely invisible to its subject, requires to be added. Tall, slight, with dark, flashing eyes accentuated by eye-brows of clear line but short curve, a powerful chin, an eager aggressive aquiline nose, and a mass of dark not too smooth

hair, Beatrice Potter was always a striking and often a more than commonly handsome apparition—a fact that must have entered into and affected her approach to life. The tone of personal ascendancy, even of domination, was inevitably hers; through the world, she moved with something more than ease. She might disapprove: she can never have been afraid of it.

At sixteen, she accompanied her father to the United States, where she had a rather serious illness. Then, at eighteen, she was plunged into London society, since—

“In the 'seventies and 'eighties, the London season, together with its derivative country-house visiting, was regarded by wealthy parents as the equivalent, for their daughters, of the university education and professional training afforded for their sons, the adequate reason being that marriage to a man of their own or higher social grade was the only recognised vocation for women not compelled to earn their own livelihood.”

She went through it all,

“presentation at Court, riding in the Row, calls, lunches and dinners, dances and crushes, Hurlingham and Ascot, not to mention amateur theatricals and other shain philanthropic excrescences,”

realised the purpose of it all, carried on sometimes “with genteel surreptitiousness,” sometimes with “cynical effrontery”; and has given an unforgettable picture of a world whose “occupational disease” is personal vanity, and whose most destructive poison is a cynicism about human relations. For six years, between eighteen and twenty-four, she lived the life thought proper to the young lady of her age and social class; and lived it on the best terms it had to offer. Six months in London for “the season” alternated with periods in the country and abroad—six months in one year for example, in the Rhineland, another six in Italy. She saw what she calls “the idol of personal

power" at close range, and as one apparently destined to be one of its more distinguished hierophants. She knew, from personal experience, the heartlessness of its scale of values:

"The rumour of an approaching marriage to a great political personage would be followed by a stream of invitations; if the rumour proved to be unfounded, the shower stopped with almost ridiculous promptitude."

She knew too, the strain on health, temper and character:

"By the end of the season, indigestion and insomnia had undermined physical health; a distressing mental nausea, taking the form of cynicism about one's own and other people's characters, had destroyed all faith in, and capacity for, steady work."

So it might be, with most. But there was remarkable stuff in this girl: something fibrous, that resisted and grew through the most unfavourable circumstances; behind it a will of enormous potency. With herself, she is as harshly frank as she was, ever, later, to be accused of being with others. Constantly, here, she rates herself again and again for vanity and all its tribe of sins. Is vanity really the right word for this tenacious mental and spiritual vigour? Is it not rather ambition, the urge to domination and self-expression?

The months in the country anyhow were months of hard and omnivorous reading, and of intense, if largely painful, thinking. Book-buying was the Potters' one extravagance; even when the girls were very young, their father's comment, if a book they wanted to read happened to be banned by the libraries, invariably was—"Buy it, my dear, buy it!" The books that she read, at this time, were concerned less with human fragility than with science, philosophy and sociology, Spencerian and other. It was about this time that she settled down seriously to

study the *First Principles* and other works of her old and constant friend. In earlier days she had merely played games with his intellect: collecting facts in support of his theories, and learning from him "To discern not the truth but the relevance of facts." Now, as she read him systematically, his generalisations began to serve as an illuminating guide—a guide, in many directions, to views far enough away from his. This was eminently the case with her views on religion. Her American trip had increased the "intellectual difficulties of faith" by which the girl of eighteen was already tormented; before she was twenty, her "feeble hold on orthodox Christianity" had disappeared. But she found it impossible, hard as she tried, to put the religion of science in its place; nor were her efforts, under the inspiration of Frederic Harrison and his wife, to find a home in the Religion of Humanity, any more satisfying.

The death of her mother, in 1882, changed the colour of her life and of her outlook. By then, through struggles that seemed, at the time, largely self-defeating, she had found something to her of immense and lasting importance. Years were to pass, middle life was to be reached, before a "true metaphysical resting place" had been achieved; nevertheless, she had, by twenty-four, discovered that, for her, some element of what can only be called mystical communion with the unseen and unknowable was a necessity for tolerable existence.

"During the ten years intervening between my mother's death and my father's death and my own marriage,—crucial years during which I acquired the craft of a social investigator, experienced intense emotional strain, and persisted in continuous intellectual toil under adverse circumstances—it was the habit of prayer which enabled me to survive, and to emerge relatively sound in body and sane in mind."

In her Diary, on the day after her mother's funeral, she records:

“Now that I have experienced what the death of a dear one is, and have watched it and waited for it, a deep yearning arises for some religion by which to console grief and stimulate action. I have, if anything, less faith in the possibility of another life. As I looked at our mother dying, I *felt* it was a final dissolution of soul and body—and an end of that personality which we call the spirit. This was an instinctive conviction: on this great question, we cannot reason. But, though my disbelief in what we call immortality was strengthened, a new and wondrous faith has arisen within me—a faith in goodness—in God. I must pray, I do pray and feel better for it; and more able to put aside all compromise with worldliness and to devote myself with single-heartedness to my duty.”

The fundamental issue, faced sooner or later by every truly animate mind, already stood before her: is the world a blind and infernal chaos, or is there in it some order, some deep underlying connexion, some pattern which justifies our “sense sublime of something far more deeply interfused”? She felt an overpowering need to see what she has herself called “a purpose in the process.” Much as its form was to change and develop, an accepted sense of purpose is the guiding thread, from this time on, in her life, and the key to its development.

Practically, as well as spiritually, her mother’s death was a turning-point. She became, and until his death, ten years later, remained, not only the head of her father’s household, and effective guardian of her one younger sister, but his close associate in business. New responsibilities brought new strength. “From being an anæmic girl, I became an exceptionally energetic woman”; one who habitually put in many hours of hard and exacting reading—mathematics, logic, philosophy, economics—before the early breakfast that started the official day, at 8 a.m. It was as a London society hostess, and not any longer as a mere marriageable girl, that she had that intimate friendship with Joseph Chamberlain—by far the most brilliant and challenging figure in the world of politics at the time—

that makes so arrestingly coloured a thread in the tapestry of this section of her life. In him, she felt a rare, an exciting quality—passion: intellectual passion; knew a human being in whom there had taken place a complete release of the drive towards self-expression that agonised her; knew further, one with whom “the political creed is the whole man.” Fascinated and thrilled, she yet saw with singular clearness:

“By temperament, he is an enthusiast and a despot. A deep sympathy with the misery and incompleteness of most men’s lives, and an earnest desire to right this, transforms political action into a religious crusade; but running alongside this genuine enthusiasm is a passionate desire to crush opposition to his will, a longing to feel his foot on the necks of others, though he would persuade himself that he represents right and his adversaries wrong.”

So she wrote in January 1884: it is impossible not to connect this with the passages, again from her Diary, in which she describes what she calls the “dead point” in her life in that and the following year. Of these years she herself says:

“I gather that I saw myself as suffering from divided personality: the normal woman seeking personal happiness in love given and taken within the framework of a successful marriage; whilst the other self claimed, in season and out of season, the right to the free activity of a ‘clear and analytic mind.’ But did the extent of my brain power—I was always asking myself—warrant sacrificing happiness, and even risking a peaceful acceptance of life, through the insurgent spirit of a defiant intellect? For in those days of the customary subordination of the woman to the man—a condition accentuated in my case by special circumstances—it would not have been practicable to unite the life of love and the life of reason.”

Doubts as to the rightness of her decision might still visit her; but it was made; by 1894 she had chosen the life of the “professional brain worker.” Moreover, the particular

line of brain work which was to be hers was becoming clear. According to her own account, it was environment, far more than any native faculty, that impelled her to take up and equip herself for the craft of a social investigator.

“I had neither aptitude nor liking for much of the technique of sociology; some would say for the vital parts of it. I had, for instance, no gifts for that rapid reading and judgment of original documents, which is indispensable to the historian; though by sheer persistency and long practice I acquired this faculty. And whilst I could plan out an admirable system of note-taking, the actual execution of the plan was, owing to an inveterate tendency to paraphrase extracts I intended to copy, not to mention an irredeemably illegible hand-writing, a wearisome irritation to me. As for the use of figures, whether mathematical or statistical, I might as well have attempted to turn water into wine!”

These are defects; but she had also qualities she does not mention—intellectual curiosity, imagination of a special kind, persistency, and a very strong impulse towards self-expression, which, in the lack of any tinge of purely artistic feeling, could find no outlet in art or craft. Poetry was, in the strict sense, a sealed book: the form had to be “translated” before she could get at its meaning; the absence of any real concern with either painting or music is a notable gap in her picture of the dense world she lived in. The air of that world was, on the other hand, thick with questioning about social relations, economic assumptions, and political actions. Social reform was not only in the air: it was the substance of her circumstances and her surroundings at this stage.

As a London hostess, she constantly met and argued with prominent politicians, writers, economists and scientists on their own ground. “A rather hard and learned woman, with a clear and analytic mind”—that was the impression she made, at this stage, on a keen observer. The angle of her interest was rather special: she brought a point of view

of her own; had she been born thirty years later, she might, as she herself says, have become a social psychologist, instead of a social investigator. But the drive was absolutely authentic. Proof of this is in the fact that not only did she practise descriptive writing, for the fun of it; she also set out, in the year after her mother's death, to explore, for herself, the unknown world of labour. A romantic point of departure was afforded in the possibility of visiting, incognita, so far as they were concerned, her mother's relations in Bacup, weavers living as weavers generally do. There she met for the first time many phenomena hitherto unknown, including the Co-operative store; and learned things never forgotten about the actual existence of the poor. She also liked her relations, very much: as they her. This adventurous expedition, sandwiched into a life otherwise occupied with large-scale social obligations and engagements, help to her father in his business affairs, arguments with Comtists and others, and a reading that ranged over everything that could fit under the shade of economics, politics, philosophy or science, gave a decisive turn to her self-development.

It happened that, about this same time, the world of labour was beginning, painfully, to impinge upon the mind of Mr. Potter, and talk about it to penetrate the home circle, as it was penetrating that of so many home circles in contemporary Britain. His interests, again about this time, were deflected from the American to the British market, with the result that Labour came to mean to him—

“no abstraction at all, but a multitude of restless, self-assertive and loss-creating fellow-creatures, who could no longer be ignored, and therefore had to be studied.”

From this point of view then, Mr. Potter began to take a certain unquiet interest in the rent-collecting which his daughter Kate had for some years been pursuing in the

East End, under Miss Octavia Hill: and in the Charity Organisation Society visiting which Beatrice began to do in Soho. Miss Hill was a friend of his: more intimate and constant visitors to the household, and friends of Beatrice as well as of her father, were Samuel and Henrietta Barnett, and her cousins Charles and Mary Booth. About this same time, too, "three politically-minded brothers-in-law joined the family group." Margaret, her favourite sister, married Henry Hobhouse in 1880: in the next year, Theresa married C. A. Cripps (afterwards Lord Parmoor), then a barrister, with strong political leanings, deep and serious interest in social questions, and a fine mind, against which Beatrice loved to sharpen her own: while Kate in 1883 married Leonard Courtney, who

"brought to bear upon our discussions a massive intelligence and an amazing memory, combined with the intellectual integrity and personal disinterestedness of a super-man."

All of them were interested in politics: all however would have agreed with the point of view expressed, in 1880 by Mr. Gladstone, when he wrote to Lord Rosebery,

"What is outside Parliament seems to me to be fast mounting—nay, to have already mounted—to an importance much exceeding what is inside."

Among the forces thus working outside was philanthropy: a philanthropy animated by a "class-consciousness of sin."

"The social reformers in parliament, whether Conservatives or Liberals, belonged, almost invariably, to the groups of public-spirited men and women within the metropolis or in the provincial towns who were initiating and directing the perpetual flow of charitable gifts from the nation of the rich to the nation of the poor."

Of this philanthropy, the Charity Organisation Society was the outstanding organised form; with it both Miss

Octavia Hill and Canon Barnett were closely associated at one time, although the Barnetts broke away, definitely, in 1886, when it became clear to them that neither honesty nor thrift could save the poor from poverty: only organised action by the whole community of which they were a part.

All this made a stimulating atmosphere. Beatrice was not satisfied however, either by discussion or by reading; determined to see for herself, she first did some visiting in Soho, and then took up the rent collecting her sister Kate laid down on her marriage. In 1885 she became, with Miss Ella Pycroft, jointly responsible for a block of working-class tenements known as Katharine Buildings, managed by Miss Octavia Hill for a group of philanthropists who had undertaken the difficult task of providing new housing for the dockers and others displaced by the slum clearance activities, near St. Katharine's Dock, of the Metropolitan Board of Works. It was a dreary structure, in which

“all amenity, some would say all decency, had been sacrificed, to the two requirements of relatively low rents and physically sanitary buildings.”

She worked extremely hard and conscientiously and with the keenest observations; at the end of a year's steady toil her conclusion was that, “These buildings are an utter failure.”

This was in November: on November 26th, the day on which London polled in the General Election of 1885, Mr. Potter, who had gone out to vote, was struck down by paralysis. He had to withdraw not only from business but from all social intercourse. Rent collecting, everything but care for her father, had to be abandoned. He had to be nursed and tended; his affairs had to be attended to. So soon as he was able to be moved, she took him down to Bournemouth.

It looked as though the career she had seen as just beginning had suddenly and definitely come to an end. Worse, this enforced inactivity came at a time when her own personal unhappiness, her doubt, even, as to whether she had not made a mistake in the essential direction of her own life, was at its darkest. The work of which she was now deprived seemed the one narcotic which could enable her to bear the "vain repetition of the waves of feeling." It must have been a very bad moment; but if she ever saw it as more, she grotesquely underestimated the fibre of her character and the energy of her intellectual drive. Indeed, in the midst of despair, she was enough concerned to prevent the attraction of more labour into the already over-stocked market of the Docks to write to the *Pall Mall Gazette* a protest against a plan, then being mooted, for the establishment of relief works in that area. By return of post, she got a letter from the editor: "May we place your signature at the head of the article?" This cheered her, somewhat, as well it might; it was the first, and a valid, recognition of her quality as a writer on social questions. Nor is there any hint of real despair, or of real abandonment of hopes of the career, in her next step.

"Having sampled the method of observation and experiment, what I most needed was historical background, and some acquaintance with past and present economic theory."

To see this, was to act upon it.

"Owing to my habit of early rising, I was able to get through a good three hours of sustained study and concentrated thought before breakfast."

The reading was the stiffest possible—Ricardo, Marx, Jevons; but, more and more, she was, and knew she was, passing out of the stage of mere reading of books by others. "Concentrated thought" was beginning to take more and

more of her time: she was beginning to have ideas of her own. Writing naturally followed. She planned an article on Social Diagnosis. The plan, which survives, is altogether admirable, and was to be put, amply, into practice; but the writer's mind moved on to project two other essays, one on the History of English Economics, the other on the Economic Theory of Karl Marx. The first of these was finished in the autumn of 1885; the second in the spring. In her very sharp and acute criticism of the Marxian theory of value, she is, along similar lines, and for similar reasons, reaching the same conclusions that were, about this same time, being formulated by the Fabian Quartette, under the guidance of Sidney Webb. She explains, in an interesting entry in her Diary, that the dogmatic and authoritative tone she naturally assumes in writing arises not out of vanity, but out of the clarity and apparent inevitability of her own conviction as to the point of view she expresses.

“I can't help my ideas taking a positive form; and if I try to express them in a hesitating way, I am only affected. It is either ‘I don't know, for I am not capable of judging,’ or ‘I believe with my whole heart and soul that black is black and nothing will persuade me to say that it is white.’ It is this hopeless independence of thought that makes my mind so distasteful to many people; and rightly so, for a woman should be more or less dependent and receptive. However, I must go through the world with my mind as it is, and be true to myself.”

Meantime, while she was working thus intensively, enduring, in fullest measure “the intolerable toil of thought” and finding release in thus grappling with objective problems, the way was opening which was to lead her into the heart of the citadel. Her cousin Charles Booth had, already, taken her into his closest counsels in planning out that great Enquiry into conditions in London which was, when completed, to act as a most potent impetus

towards social change, and even towards Socialist thinking. Charles Booth was, by chosen profession, a great captain of industry, a shipowner and much besides; by conviction he was a Comtist. His cousin, who admired and enjoyed him greatly, saw him as

“within my circle of friends, perhaps the most perfect embodiment of . . . the union of faith in the scientific method with the transference of emotion of self-sacrificing service from God to man”;

the embodiment in other words, of what she calls the “Victorian time-spirit.” In him, this type was dashed with a genuine originality. He had a passion for asking questions, of himself and others. Thus, when the “condition of the people” was a phrase on every lip, he retorted “Who are they? Who are the people of England? How do they live? What are they like? What do they care for?” Answers to his questions, fundamental as they were, were not forthcoming. He determined to supply them. It was an enterprise that roused all Beatrice’s enthusiasm; she longed to work with him: but in view of her tie to her father, it seemed impossible. In the autumn of 1886, however, it became plain that Mr. Potter’s illness had passed out of the acute into a stationary stage; her married sisters, therefore, insisted that they should, in turns, take her place at his side, so releasing her for at least four clear months in the year. At once, she sped up to London to see Charles Booth, who, so far, had been working single-handed; and he, in view of her knowledge of the Docks area, put her in charge of that section of his survey. After spending the winter with her father at Bournemouth, in March 1887 she went up to London, betook herself to the headquarters of the Quakers at Devonshire House, Bishopsgate, and settled down to work.

The work was hard, and in its nature depressing: but

she enjoyed it. Above all, she enjoyed the growing sense of power and capacity which convinced her that her choice of the career of social investigator, was right. In addition to interviewing school attendance officers and so on, she studied at first hand the life of the docker, whether casual or permanent; talked with dock workers of every type and with their Trade Union officials; attended meetings of diverse kinds; and showed, at this early stage, that remarkable knack of getting on easily with men of all sorts and conditions which co-exists with what some find her arrogance in purely social relationships. At a meeting in the Tabernacle, Barking Road, advertised to appear and speak at a meeting of dock labourers, she had her first experience of being cheered on entry, as a public character.

By August she had written a report of her experiences, and in September, thanks to the interposition of Herbert Spencer, this was published in the dignified pages of the *Nineteenth Century*. It later appeared in the first instalment of the Booth Enquiry, published in 1889. Encouraged by this, convinced

“that although I know I have no talent and am almost lacking in literary faculty, I have originality of aim and of method, and I have faith that I am on the right track, and I have the sort of persistency that comes from a despair of my own happiness,”

she offered to undertake another piece of work in connexion with the Enquiry. This time she proposed to investigate the Sweating system; and in order to make the picture that was to result not only actual but dramatic, determined to live for a space among the workers, “as one of them.”

“Whilst yet in the country, I started to plan out my campaign, so that the autumn and spring holiday months should be used

to the greatest advantage. All the volumes, blue-books, pamphlets and periodicals bearing on the subject of Sweating that I could buy or borrow were read and extracted; the Charles Booth secretariat was asked to supply particulars of the workshops within the area selected for exploration, classified according to the numbers employed in each; friends and relatives were pestered for introductions to public authorities, philanthropic agencies and all such enterprises (not only wholesale and retail clothiers, but also shippers, sewing machine companies and others) as were likely to have contact with East End workers, whether sub-contractors or wage-earners. Once settled in the Devonshire House Hostel, my time was mainly occupied in interviewing employers and employed, School Board visitors, Factory and Sanitary Inspectors and members of the Jewish Board of Guardians; in visiting the home workers and small masters whom I happened to know, and in accompanying rent-collectors, or the collectors of payments due for the hire of sewing-machines, on their rounds of visits. In the intervals of these interviews and observations I trained as a trouser-hand, successively in the work-rooms of the Co-operative Wholesale Society and in the 'domestic workshop' of a former tenant of Katharine Buildings, by way of preparation for 'finding work' during the busy season of the spring months."

The *Nineteenth Century* subsequently published the results of this particular piece of work in the shape of four articles, of which the one that scored a real success, rather to the author's own annoyance, was the *Pages of a Workgirl's Diary*¹—a vivid picture of her own direct experience as a not-too-competent trouser-hand in an East End sweater's workshop. This, she says, was "my one and only literary 'success'"; another was to follow, nearly forty years later, with the publication of *My Apprenticeship*. Out of her investigations, as out of her experiences, she was really in a position to make a true diagnosis of the Sweating problem, although not one that she could get accepted at the time. To her disgust, she found, when she was called to give evidence before the House of Lords Committee on the Sweating System, in May 1888, that less attention

¹ Reprinted in *Problems of Industry*, by S. and B. Webb.

was given to the admirable sound sense of what she said, than to her dress and appearance. But the fact that she saw sweating as arising wherever working conditions escaped the regulations either of the Factory Acts or of the Trade Union, was, for herself, a shaft of light cast forward and one that was to carry her far.

Altogether, her experiences with the Charles Booth Enquiry were decisive. It was then that her mind began to work on, and to challenge, the whole system established as the outcome of the Industrial Revolution, that "most far-reaching experiment with the lives of other people," and to seek for alternatives—if there were any—to the dictatorship of the few over the many. The Social Democratic Federation loudly asserted that there was such an alternative, but she found little comfort in them: they were preaching

"what seemed to me nothing but a catastrophic overturning of the existing order, by forces of whose existence I saw no sign, in order to substitute what appeared to me the vaguest of incomprehensible Utopias."

But there was another alternative—that of the "self-employment" practised by the Co-operators. Into this, she became anxious to enquire. Professor Alfred Marshall, whom she met during a visit to her great friends, the Creightons, at Cambridge, tried to put her off. She ought rather to settle down to study female labour.

"If you devote yourself to the study of your own sex as an industrial factor, your name will be a household word two hundred years hence; if you write a history of Co-operation it will be superseded and ignored in a year or two,"

he told her.

Professor Marshall was, however, dealing with a keener mind than he realised. She knew that the unique qualification he saw her as possessing for the historian of female

labour was precisely the fact that here was a very able woman who was not a Feminist—any more than he was. Indeed, largely under the influence of Mrs. Creighton and of Mrs. Frederic Harrison, she went so far, in the spring of 1889, as to append her name to the notorious manifesto, drafted by them and Mrs. Humphry Ward, against the giving of the vote to women. Nowhere does the reader of *My Apprenticeship* admire her candour more than in her explanation of how she came to take this false step. She sees quite clearly and faces quite frankly the advantage which an able woman, in her day, had in being a woman.

“At the root of my anti-feminism lay the fact that I never myself suffered the disabilities assumed to arise from my sex. Quite the contrary; if I had been a man, family pressure and the public opinion of my class would have pushed me into a money-making profession; as a mere woman I could carve out a career of disinterested research. Moreover, in the craft I had chosen a woman was privileged. As an investigator she aroused less suspicion than a man, and, through making the proceedings more agreeable, she gained better information. Further, in those days, a competent female writer on economic subjects had, to an enterprising editor, actually a scarcity value. Thus she secured immediate publication and, to judge by my own experience, was paid a higher rate than that obtained by male competitors of equal standing.”

After which, there really is no more to be said.

So far as Co-operation was concerned, neither Alfred Marshall nor anyone else could keep her off the grass, once she had made up her own mind to tread it. It was dreary enough grass, at first; months and months were spent by her in the country with her father, toiling through files of Congress Reports and the Co-operative journals. They might not teach her to understand the movement: but they did give her

“a bunch of keys: key events, key technical terms and key personalities, by the use of which I could gain the confidence of

the persons I interviewed, unlock the hidden stores of experience in their minds, and secure opportunities for actually observing and recording the working constitution and diverse activities of the different types of organisation within the Co-operative Movement."

So equipped, she could and did, in the months of freedom, attend sectional conferences, members' meetings and the like all over the north: and settle down for days or weeks at a time in great centres like Manchester, Leeds, Newcastle or Glasgow, interviewing co-operators great and small. Mitchell, the Chairman, and J. C. Gray, the Secretary, became and remained friends.

"Three or four times I have dined with the Central Board. A higgledy-piggledy dinner; good materials served up coarsely, and shovelled down by the partakers in a way that is not appetising. But during dinner I get a lot of information, mostly chaff and rapid discussion. Occasionally, I am chaffed in a not agreeable way about matrimony and husbands, and the propriety of a match between me and Mitchell. But it is all good-natured, and I take it kindly. After dinner, in spite of the Chairman's disapproval, we smoke cigarettes, and our conversation becomes more of business camaraderie."

At "contacts" she must always have been remarkably good; and one aspect of these days which was to prove of immense and lasting value was that through them she got very thoroughly inside the Labour movement. In addition to Mitchell and Gray, John Burnett and J. J. Dent (both at this time of the Labour Department of the Board of Trade) and Benjamin Jones, the Co-operator, were warm friends, the last three indeed having been her "sponsors in the World of Labour." In spite of her inevitable cigarette, to say nothing of their knowledge of her antecedents, she seldom had any difficulty of any kind in getting on with these intelligent and serious working men, or in getting them to take her seriously, even when she began to develop a distinctly heretical opinion about

Co-operation itself. They thought, most of them, that what they were doing was to establish government by the producers; their ideal still was the "self-governing workshop," although with minds dominated, like those of the economists of the day, by the barren distinction between "distribution" and "production," they never dreamed of applying this ideal to their own employees. Really, as Beatrice Potter saw, with one of those swift imaginative flashes that make her far more than a mere investigator, they were doing something quite different from what they imagined: they were engaged in an effort

"To organise industry from the *consumption* end, and to place it from the start, upon the basis of 'production for use' instead of 'production for profit,' under the control and direction not of the workers as producers, but of themselves as consumers."

This was her first discovery; her second was that if democracies of consumers are to serve as an alternative to private profit-making they require to be complemented by "democracies of workers by hand and brain—by Trade Unions and professional societies."

To herself, these discoveries were of cardinal importance. In a sense, their full relevance was not to be appreciated for many years: not, indeed, until the partners saw the secret of Soviet Russia's organisation as lying in the fact that there, State Social Economy is organised from the consumption end. Nevertheless at the time their importance for her was immense. They were bringing her right up to the crucial experience: to the moment at which with full conviction, full knowledge of what it meant, and an unequalled understanding of the arguments intellectual and factual, she could break the shell of circumstances and of habit, and make the great affirmation: "Now I am a Socialist." With this affirmation, she won, for herself, intellectual freedom and a clear sense of purpose.

On this affirmation, further, she was ready for the emotional transformation of her life, now at hand.

In contributing, in 1928, some *Reminiscences* to the *St. Martin's Review*, (Reminiscences fascinatingly different in tone and approach from those which Sidney contributes to the same periodical,) she opens that dedicated to The Consumers' Co-operative Movement by saying:

"If I had to answer in half a dozen words why I became a Socialist, I should say 'because I discovered the Co-operative Movement'; and were I allowed another six words to complete this tabloid confession, I should add 'and discussed it with Sidney Webb'."

The mysterious tides of fate were, in fact, swiftly now bringing them together. Her friend, J. J. Dent, had talked to her of the Fabians, and told her that

"the man who organises the whole business, drafts the resolutions and writes the tracts, is Sidney Webb."

But of the Fabians she knew as yet nothing but the names. When in 1889 a sudden turn for the worse in her father's illness called her away from her Co-operative work, and she was face to face with the fact that he might now linger on, hardly conscious, in a veritable death-in-life, for months or even years, a mood of despair again almost overwhelmed her, and a sense of the wanton cruelty of life. At times, he hardly knew her: at others, she was for him the "little Bee" of years ago, and he murmured "I want one more son-in-law"—a remark that she took as a proof that he felt near his end, since, for her, he had previously discouraged matrimony. She did not then suspect, and Mr. Potter was never to know, how near that son-in-law now was. When she read *Fabian Essays* at The Argoed in the intervals of nursing her father, she "spotted" him, but had no idea then of an early meeting. Yet that meeting was to take place in the first days of

January 1890; and was to arise directly out of her Co-operative work. Mr. Potter survived the crisis; and Beatrice, exhausted, was sent to London by her sister Kate, for a week's rest and recreation. This, to her, meant the chance to fill in the historical background for her earlier chapters. In search of this, she applied to W. E. H. Lecky, whose reply, however, led her nowhere. She was on the look-out for another guide, when a friendly woman journalist said,

"Sidney Webb, one of the Fabian essayists, is your man. He knows everything and when you go out for a walk with him, he literally pours out information."

An interview was arranged; on the spot, a list of sources, drafted out then and there "in a faultless handwriting," was handed to her:

"a few days later brought the first token of personal regard in the shape of a newly published pamphlet by the Fabian on the Rate of Interest, thus opening up a regular correspondence."

His next parcel contained the poems of Rossetti. On her next visit to London, in February, he dined with her to meet the Charles Booths. At Whitsun, they are travelling up to Glasgow together, for the Co-operative Congress; and Vaughan Nash, also of the party, notes

"He is humbler than I have ever seen him before; quite a different tone."

In the evening, they walked together through the Glasgow streets under a glorious sunset sky, knocking up against drunken Scots.

"With glory in the sky and hideous bestiality on the earth, two Socialists came to a working compact."

Many meetings after that; a week-end at Haslemere, he staying with the Pearsall Smiths, she with the Frederic

Harrisons, followed by a day in Epping Forest, where he read Keats and Rossetti aloud to her; then, throughout the later months of 1890, a busy correspondence. Partly about Trade Unionism, which she proposed next to investigate; partly about other things. The endless long letters which served him as excuse for not walking in the Bavarian Hills when he and Shaw went to Oberammergau in 1890, were, of course, to her. They came and went daily, these letters. Could he read her handwriting? If so, he accomplished what no one else in the world has been able to do.

His own mind he seems to have known from the first. In her case, there were hesitations. Her father's condition, anyhow, made any public engagement impossible: there had to be a certain amount of subterfuge about meeting, for that reason. Steadily, however, affection was completing what intellectual sympathy had begun. In the spring of 1891 she sent him the proof of her book, *The Co-operative Movement*. By the press it was received with respectful enthusiasm; he, however, said frankly that he was disappointed; the book ought to have taken her six weeks to write, not seven months. She needed his help, for future work. For more than future work she had come to realise that. In May, they became privately engaged. Only a few close friends, like Mrs. J. R. Green, the Pearsall Smiths, the Frederic Harrisons, and, of course, G. B. S., were in the secret.

On the first day of 1892, Mr. Potter died. Six months later, in July, Sidney Webb and Beatrice Potter were married. They set forth together for Ireland, to combine a honeymoon with investigation into Trade Societies in Dublin.

CHAPTER IV

CHALLENGE TO HEDONISM

To her Diary, on July 7th, 1891, a couple of months after her engagement, and a year and some weeks before her marriage, Beatrice Potter confided a survey of the possibilities of what she often calls "the firm of Webb." Like nearly everything she writes, it is unsparingly frank, and, in the circumstances, both illuminating and characteristic.

"We are both of us second-rate minds, but we are curiously combined. I am the investigator and he the executant; between us we have a wide and varied experience of men and affairs. We have also an unearned salary. These are unique circumstances. A considerable work should result if we use our combined talents with deliberate and persistent purpose."

As an expression of opinion on the part of a woman presumably in love—and that she was in love there is convincing ground for believing—this is certainly unusual. As an affirmation of purpose, it is not less striking. Pleasure of a personal kind out of the new association she expected and she got: about this, she says nothing. There was, in fact, no need to say anything. The point, for her, was that it, and the "unique circumstances" that went with it, were there to be used, to produce a "considerable work." That was its justification and its end.

He, who says somewhere that he is "not given to reflection"—a process he distinguished with logical accuracy from ratiocination—has confided to no one what his expectations were. They were almost certainly much

simpler. He saw an enrichment of life and work through happiness such as he had never experienced. No need for him to admonish himself towards "deliberate and persistent" action. That, with him, is native; with her, a fruit of the "intolerable toil of thought" and the conscious discipline of a will and imagination that, even after forty years of purpose, still sometimes flash out rebellious, and justify Fabians of the more sober mental hue in feeling, under their admiration, that she is, somehow, somewhere, fundamentally "flighty." Did they understand or even guess how that tendency to flight into more skyey regions than he knew is just what fascinates him?

However that may be, two minds in as complete unison as it is given to human beings to know, had laid down a plan of future action, and begun to work upon it, even before the deeds formally and finally constituting the "firm of Webb" were signed and sealed. The honeymoon journey carried on investigations already begun, while he was, nominally, doing a turn as her secretary, into Trade Unions. Together, and happy in being together, they inspected Trade Societies in Dublin; then crossed to Glasgow to attend the Congress meeting there. They paid some visits, including a week-end spent in Scotland with R. B. Haldane, a warm friend of both. Then they returned to London. The business of finding a home that would suit them had already been accomplished. In house-hunting, as in everything else, it is an immense advantage to know what you are looking for. They knew. They wanted a place that should be at once reasonably central, airy, sunny, big enough for their books and their secretary or secretaries, and within their means. About fashionable quarters, good addresses and so, they cared not one jot. Nor did they care what anybody else thought.

Among the "unique circumstances" mentioned by her is the possession of an "unearned salary." England, so

she often remarks, was, before the war, the freest country in the world to live in, for anyone so equipped. They had that freedom. They had £1,000 a year. It was enough: but if it was to provide the things they thought really important, it had got to be carefully expended. If secretaries, foreign travel from time to time, country excursions, and aid to good causes were to be covered, high thinking must go with plain living. She had years of experience behind her in the administration of a very large income, and the running of very large houses. In the choice of an abode now, as in its menage, new standards had got to be applied, and were applied: even a touch of the 'discriminating penuriousness' of Mrs. Potter. Unlike most people, they are parsimonious about small comforts for themselves, generous in gifts to others. Rent, now, was not allowed to consume too large a proportion of income.

41, Grosvenor Road met their requirements. It is just inconvenient enough, from the conventional standpoint, and just near enough to some of London's forgotten and forsaken fringes, to be, for Westminster, relatively cheap. Yet it is so near to the Houses of Parliament, and, what was more important at the time, to the headquarters of the London County Council in Spring Gardens, as to give any moderately active person just the right amount of morning exercise by way of a walk.

For any patriotic Londoner, the sheer waste of opportunity presented by our river is truly tragic, and nowhere more so than in regard to this stretch, right in the heart of the metropolis. There is only one side of our Thames to walk or drive on, or see from, whereas the Seine, like any rationally managed river running through a great city, has two banks; and, even on that one side, it is impossible to pursue an unimpeded course. Until very recent days, anyone who set out to walk westward from West-

minster, found, very soon after he had passed the House of Lords, both scale and splendour slipping away into squalor. On his right, a series of small dwellings, good in design, but visibly decaying and gone down in the world, continued round the corner after he had turned on to the river front, where, after a brief period, he became involved in double rows of commercial buildings, wharves and warehouses, blocking any outlook, and in themselves dingy and depressing to the last degree. Now, at last, the shabby little houses into which Abingdon Street used to sink, are being pulled down and replaced by vast office structures, on the American plan, in soaring glass and concrete, leading on to the new Lambeth Bridge. Even now, however, the corner once turned, and the river glimpsed, the walker, after passing one line of modern if ugly houses which have an unimpeded view, and skirting the Tate Gallery, finds his view gone, and his sun cut off from him by the hideous Army Clothing Factory on one side and still uglier and very shabby commercial shacks and dug-outs—one cannot call them buildings—on the other. In 1892, the first twenty odd houses of Grosvenor Road resembled those round the corner. There were three or four small, low dwellings, almost cottages; there was a somewhat rowdy and disreputable public-house: there was Mowlem's Works, not too bad as a building, but with no business to be there; there were three or four larger, older houses, whose fine interior panelling showed that they had known better days, now falling into grim and grimy dis-repair. Then came an oasis, of a kind—a row of ornate modern dwellings, with their front door steps lifted above basements and adorned with much meretricious plaster work. These houses were moderately rented for their size, owing to their undesirable neighbours—decay to the left, Millbank Penitentiary to the right. By way of compensation, they have, and had, a marvellous

and unimpeded outlook. Their windows look direct on to the water, with Lambeth and Doulton's factory as landmarks on the Surrey side.

In the heart of London, the place, nevertheless, had the air of remoteness and inaccessibility that belong to a spot conveniently reached only by walking or driving. The roadway was of course not traffic-free, even in the 'nineties, but in those days before the ubiquitous motor, and above all, before the motor lorry, it was relatively quiet and, at night, absolutely so. Air washed and surrounded it. Sunshine streamed through the houses. Facing east by south, the front windows held all the morning sun, at all times of the year, while the principal sitting-rooms, both on the entrance floor and on the floor above, had windows also at the back. In front, nothing between them and the river, as, in 1928, the inhabitants were to realise to their cost. Then, they looked out as from the ark, from upper casements, to see dining-room tables and chairs floating on a turbid flood which had inundated the first-floor apartments. But floods are rare; they are a risk anyone who has ever lived on the river will gladly take, so endlessly and variously fascinating is its panorama. Grosvenor Road, in addition to the magic of sky and water, has wonders of its own, since, with the wind in certain directions, the dome of St. Paul's can be seen rising fairy-like above the wharves and warehouses of the Surrey side, beyond the curves of the bridges, or sparkling like a jewel in the evening sun. This, in the day-time; at night, mystery and enchantment brood over the entire scene.

So, when they found a house to be had in Grosvenor Road, they acquired a long lease, at an inclusive rental of £110, which was near enough to the tenth of income regarded, in those spacious days, as the proper proportion to be assigned, in a family budget, to house room. On

No. 41, even now that Grosvenor Road has had its identity merged in Millbank, a tablet will no doubt in due course be placed to tell succeeding ages that for well-nigh forty years, the Webbs dwelt and wrought here. Externally it is, it must be confessed, a distressingly ugly house, although the Virginian creeper is doing its best to soften both its harsh colour and its ill-proportioned shape. A bad specimen of an architecturally bad period, ornate outside and space-wasteful inside, it is showy without being dignified, and the lavish decoration accentuates the shoddy design. Tenants more indifferent to these aspects, however, could hardly have been found. The rent was right; the location was right; the size was right; the number of rooms was right. They had agreeable neighbours. There was Mrs. J. R. Green, who really "invented" Grosvenor Road, at 43; there was B. F. C. Costello, an able Progressive colleague on the County Council, next door; there were the Pearsall Smiths; there was H. W. Massingham. And they knew, for that matter, that of neighbours they were independent; few were the persons in London or elsewhere who were not only too eager to come and see them. They meant them to come, and they did come. But there was no hurry about that.

The social side of 41, Grosvenor Road, which was to become so famous, and was so important, did not come fully into play for a year or so. With skill and tact Mrs. Webb let that side develop slowly. They made no rush at people. That was not their way. Socially, as politically, the method of permeation was gradual, and carried through with the minimum of display. It was as a workshop that they saw the house in the first instance. It was from that point of view that they rejoiced in the existence of a little room at the turn of the stairs, half-way up towards the long white painted drawing-room. This drawing-room they furnished very simply, so that

it could accommodate the maximum number of people, with plain matting on the floors, some plain chairs, and a number of by no means remarkable water colours (wedding presents at a guess) on the walls. The little room they at once saw as the Secretary's den. It was lined with blue-books: blue-books, which, despite the annual turnout, on which Mrs. Webb, as a well-trained housekeeper, insisted, flowed over into the narrow hall and got mixed up among the coats and hats there: and also lined the walls of the long narrow double room on the entrance floor, which served at once as dining-room and study for the partners. I remember, on the first occasion on which I went to dine in Grosvenor Road, wondering, since it was one of those London houses whose anatomy one perceives at a glance, where was the study, and deciding, that for greater quiet they must have converted some airy upstairs bedroom to that purpose. It was not so. Actually, they worked on the dining-room table. There, after breakfast had been cleared, they settled down; thence, at a quarter to one, they removed themselves and their papers, on the entry of the maid to lay lunch. To me, at the time, it seemed an intolerable arrangement. To them, it was not intolerable, and that for an interesting reason. He deals with papers of every sort,—letters, reports, documents—so rapidly that his desk never has any *paperasses* on it. Whereas most of us glance at an Agenda or Report, coming by the post, and lay it aside for future study: make notes and have to keep them somewhere: his eye travels at an incredible speed over written or printed matter, and records what he wants to retain indelibly on his memory. So, while the wastepaper basket bulged every morning, the files were not there. He once gravely offended a most important personage who brought him a solemn document to study by handing it back after the briefest and apparently most casual inspection. He

had to prove—as he easily did—that he had mastered all that was in it, and a good deal that was not, before the personage was mollified. Over and above this trait, was the fact that both of them knew all that there was to be known about how to use a secretary. *Paperasses*, such as had to be retained; the piles of separate sheets on which the perfect note-taker, according to their technique, keeps his notes; the dossiers of all sorts that recorded results of investigations—this lived not on their table but in the files in the Secretary's room. Their table was therefore, each morning, as fair and clear as that of a Minister of the Crown, or great Captain of Industry. The bigger the man, the fewer the papers.

A daily routine was ordered from the start. Very often, in these early days, their Secretary, F. W. Galton, would arrive at Grosvenor Road for an 8 o'clock breakfast. While the table, that function rapidly despatched, was being cleared, the three would sit round the fire with cigarettes, and he would be instructed as to the course of the day's work—where he should go for material, whom he should see, what he should prepare for them. Often this involved journeyings into the provinces. After he had spent some time in any centre, making preliminary surveys, the partners would go down for a week end or longer if necessary, to complete the enquiries and see key people, on the spot. As a rule however, when Mr. Galton went off, either to his den above or to the world without, they sat down to the table.

Among the services for which subsequent students are in their debt is the creation of a technique of social research. That was largely worked out at this period, to be employed by them ever after. Of it they give a most illuminating account in the Preface to *Industrial Democracy* (published in 1897). At this stage they were themselves doing most of the research lying behind their two great books on

Trade Unionism: taking the notes, studying the documents, making the interviews, which, for later books, were largely prepared by secretaries. Certainly no picture of their life at this, or any other period, can begin to be truthful which does not put work—hard, unremitting, regular, sustained and often dull—in the forefront. No work of their kind but includes great stretches of sheer drudgery. Companionship sweetened this; but it was there; they faced it, and carried it through, day after day, week after week, year after year. The structures that they reared may be criticised from many points of view; never from that of shoddiness.

Work occupied every morning. In any work jointly done, there is an element of mystery; and perhaps the question "How exactly do you divide it?" is one that cannot be answered: least of all when between joint workers there is a complete sympathy. But, on a normal morning, after their secretary had left them, they would, together, read the notes of interviews and visits, and the precis of documents, already made; made either by one of themselves or by the secretary. They read, and discussed them. At a certain stage, her eyes would light up. She would spring to her feet and pace up and down, waving her cigarette. "That implies . . ." She would then start off, on a chain of argument, he swiftly writing the while, using his matchless power of finding appropriate and exactly fitting words for what she was sketching out in broad and vivid outline. Any idea or general view thus struck out by either was subjected to an intensive mutual testing. Then, after thoroughly thrashing it out together, they took it to be tried on others.

Among those others, Bernard Shaw and Graham Wallas came first. Far from breaking up any of his old friendships, Mrs. Webb accepted them; and, in the Fabian Quartette, Sydney Olivier having gone to Jamaica, she

took his place, and the new Four were well-nigh as inseparable as the old. Shaw, in particular, during the years between 1892 and his own marriage in 1898, spent practically every holiday with them, and was also constantly at Grosvenor Road. Shaw and Wallas read the proofs of *Trade Unionism*, when it had reached that stage; to Shaw, "our oldest friend and comrade" they express gratitude for doing a like service with regard to *The Decay of Capitalist Civilisation*, in 1923, "in the midst of a general election in which we were otherside engaged." At every stage, long before that, these two were taken into counsel, for argument, discussion, the most thorough sifting and testing of every view and point. So were many others, on specific points. It is in an atmosphere of friendliness, of frequent cheerful, open talk, of impassioned and never dreary preoccupation with their chosen piece of work, that one must see them, if one is to see them at all, in the early days at Grosvenor Road; and indeed throughout their lives. They took their work with them, wherever they went, just as they talked about it, trying out their ideas, with everyone they met. When they left London for the country—generally Surrey—in the summer months, they changed the scene but not the occupation. Of the life they lived when thus withdrawn, an amusing vignette is given by Shaw in a letter to Ellen Terry. He writes from Dorking, in May 1897, when he, his future wife (Miss Payne Townshend) and Miss Beatrice Creighton (daughter of the Bishop, for whom, while he lived, as for his widow afterwards, Mrs. Webb had a particular admiration) were sharing a house there;

"I wonder what you would think of our life—our eternal political shop; our mornings of dogged writing, all in our separate rooms; our ravenous plain meals; our bicycling; the Webbs' incorrigible spooning over their industrial and political science."

Bicycling was one of their great recreations, in those days. They all bicycled ardently in the country; Mrs. Webb used also to ride in Battersea Park, in company with Charles Trevelyan and other active young politicians. It was apropos of this bicycling that, according to one of their intimates, Sidney was seen for the first time to be thoroughly flustered. She had a slight accident, when thus riding, and was brought home in a cab, her blouse bespattered with blood. Then, for a moment, if only for a moment, he "went off the deep end." Shaw tells another story, to prove that, unlike most of the ladies of his acquaintance, Beatrice was never in love with him. They were all three staying somewhere in the country, and in a shed attached to the house, he discovered an authentic velocipede, such as he had never ridden. He brought it forth in triumph, Beatrice looking on, and tried to make it go, without success. At last, he was driven to taking advantage of the fact that the lawn was arranged in a series of sharply sloping terraces: on the down grade, the thing did go, only to collapse again on the flat, throwing him violently and suddenly to the ground, and bringing him, so he says, to within an ace of departure from this mortal scene, at each essay. She, however, instead of sympathising or showing any concern, laughed with delighted amusement. The sounds brought Sidney to the window; he looked out, enquired what was going on, and came running forth, intent on trying what his skill could effect. Whereupon Beatrice cried with insistent passion, "No, no, Sidney, you mustn't." From which moment, G. B. S. realised the bitter truth. Or so he says. Nevertheless, with native nobility, he continued at the opening of each bicycling season to get out Sidney's bicycle, as well as his own, and see that it was in order—an operation which his friend was incapable of performing for himself. Skill with his hands is no part of Mr. Webb's

equipment: nor do most of those who know him believe that he is speaking the whole truth when, in *Who's Who*, he puts down "walking" as his recreation. He does walk—but his walking is part of the regimen of the regulated life.

Of that regulated life, so definitely accepted and determinedly followed, the shape, in these early days, has a fairly simple outline. The mornings were devoted to common work. Lunch, more often than not, produced somebody, or several somebodies—the number very soon grew—to whom they wanted to talk, on whom they wanted to try out some idea connected with their work. Then, on five afternoons of the week for nine months of the year, he trotted off to the London County Council, of which he was a most active member for eighteen years. She occupied herself variously. Perhaps some hours were devoted to that Diary she has kept all her life: the Diary which supplies the most vivid portions of *My Apprenticeship* and will, when it is published in full, be one of the great books—though not for us. She went out to see her friends, or they came to see her. There was never a time when the call of friendship was not followed; thus, between 1892 and his death (despite his expressed views on her marriage) she went down constantly to Brighton, to see old Herbert Spencer, and was at his side when he died in 1903. Many other instances there are, of swift and affectionate intervention on her part. She might be rather too fond of trying to "arrange" the lives of her friends, but her attachments were genuine, warm, and lasting. If, as time went on, they tended to see more and more of the people who could be "useful," that was part of the price of the "life according to plan," to which they were committed. That plan, in its turn, gave to their existence so much of a uniform texture, that one may well, here, try to see it, as it was to be, in broad outline, throughout the best part of forty years.

So far as work went, they began as they meant to go on, and did go on. Their standard of work is tremendous; for forty years they have worked with a passion and at a pace that is a standing reproach to slackness, and influences, to some degree, everyone who comes in contact with them. In this, there is no change between 1892 and 1932. But, as time went on, the portion of their non-working time devoted to a thoroughly planned sociability sensibly increased. Thus, if many of their later visitors would be hard put to it to give any picture, however rough, of the first-floor drawing-room, that is because it was apt to be too full of people for any of its non-human features to be discerned, and of people so varied and often so remarkable that no other impression but of them, and of the noise they made, could be registered. People met each other there who had never met before and often never met again. From some point of view, or for some purpose, they were, at the moment, "key people"; some of them might be, to all appearance, unimportant: others were visibly terribly important; there they all were. Everybody who is anybody in any of the multitudinous worlds that make up London, with the possible exception of the merely social, has been to the Webbs, at some time or other. Mrs. Webb, says Mr. Wells, in that portrait which would be so much more brilliant if it were more accurate and less malicious,

"got together all sorts of interesting people in or about the public service, she mixed the obscurely efficient with the ill-instructed famous and the rudderless rich, got together in one room more of the factors in our strange jumble of a public life than had ever easily met before. She fed them with a shameless austerity that kept the conversation brilliant, on a soup, a plain fish, and mutton or boiled fowl and milk pudding, with nothing to drink but whisky and soda, and hot and cold water, and milk and lemonade. Everybody was very glad indeed to come to that."

They certainly were, Mr. Wells, for several years, among them. And why not, one might ask. At the same time, this point about the food deserves a word, since many visitors to 41 did undoubtedly come away with the impression that they had not had enough to eat. Perhaps they had not, in those days when by our slimmer standards, so many people ate too much. There also were stages when she was trying some new diet fad, and, of course, imposed it: that she knows better than other people what is good for them, is the conviction of hers that has caused more trouble than any other. In general the food was very plain, and you took what was offered: there were no choices. Food undoubtedly figured in the chapter of economies. But my own impression is that, if there was nothing specially tempting either to eye or palate about the table, the food was there. After all, Mrs. Webb retained the same two maids almost throughout her married life, and maids do not stay where there is not enough to eat. Part perhaps of the reason why some visitors felt hungry is that not only does she herself eat extraordinarily little (there are friends to-day who hold that, partly out of sheer asceticism, she starves herself), but both host and hostess eat extraordinarily fast, even when they are talking: so that it often happened that plates were being cleared away before slower jaws had emptied them, far less asked for more. The time actually spent at table was cut to a minimum. They both wanted to be talking: that, rather than eating, was what meals were for. And the talk was not of the kind to assist digestion for the ordinary mortal.

It was good talk, no question about that; much better talk than is generally achieved when numbers of distinguished persons are assembled. It was about interesting topics, and had a strong feel of reality and central importance; something might even "come of it." Mrs. Webb, in particular, if a poor listener, not only talks with keenness,

freshness, a brightly personal approach, and, every now and then, a sudden swoop of positive intellectual brilliance; she has a rare faculty for gathering a conversation together, bringing it to a point. If it failed of being the best kind of talk, the reason perhaps was that this "point" was a little too obvious. It was all *for* something: not, as is the best talk, for itself. The mere play of mind on mind is not one of their pleasures: nor was talk at their house, even when the company was intimate, of the kind to evoke those long pauses, in which ideas, feelings, even aspirations, reverberate, and set up sympathetic echoes. They talk, as they walk, for a purpose. They collected people and talked to them. They tried out ideas on them. Sensitive interlocutors at times had the feeling that, their opinions or reactions once extracted, they were "placed": and, placed, were done with. To discover what they were like, in themselves, was no concern or interest of their host and hostess. They had got them classified; they "knew where they were"; as mere individuals, they did not signify. They were put down in a certain tabular column, and that was that. "People," she once remarked, "are really quite simple." Whether or no, they do not, as a rule, care to be thought so, or to feel themselves assigned to a category.

She, it is true, can, at times, talk nonsense, of a kind, and delights in gossip: mere gossip, stories about people. With a kind of ironic and slightly contemptuous interest, she keeps in touch with the follies of the world of Society with a big S, the world she so definitely left. She also has a very strong feeling about conduct; a Puritan outlook on more things than mere eating and drinking; and gossip feeds this. Even here, however, an extrinsic interest can be sensed, behind her easy narrative flow; the stories are being arranged, like the people and the facts, into materials for judgment and classification: the thing, even at its

apparent lightest, has an ulterior motive. "Deliberate and persistent purpose" has, in fact, entered into the blood.

It is perhaps because this ulterior motive was too easy to perceive that they were not always as successful in conversion as, with their combined talents, they ought to be. But it is also the case that they are never out to "catch" people unawares. Of course, they did, again and again, impress their views on their colleagues and associates in common enterprises; for example, in 1894, Sidney wrote out the Minority Report of the Labour Commission, presented over the names of Tom Mann and his associates, just as he was, in 1909, to write the Minority Report of the Poor Law Commission, to cite only two cases out of a long series. They not only talked with friends and allies: they talked with any and every possible or actual adversary who could be, at best, converted into an ally, or deflected from opposition, or, at worst, "sized up." Year in year out, they gathered the bright young men, and, to a slightly less degree, the bright young women, just down from the Universities, or doing something interesting in some field or other in the Provinces or in London, or anywhere on the face of the globe. They gathered them in, mixed them, and "permeated" them, in so far as they were capable of sustaining that operation. But entice them blindly into the Socialist fold they never did. On the contrary, at a certain point, they invariably put before the acolyte every difficulty—social, professional and personal—that he might be going to meet. What did his wife think? Had he realised what such a step might mean professionally? Was his faith strong enough to sustain being laughed at? Through key-people, they certainly did, over years, exercise a far-reaching influence, impossible to measure or assess; the point to be made is that there is nothing Machiavellian about the process. It is, on the contrary, almost shamelessly open.

Not only do they reinforce one another in an almost total incapacity to be bored either by people or by things with any bearing on their preoccupation: they are alike in an utter absence of secretiveness about it. This last quality, rare enough in writers and not common among politicians, is one of their outstanding characteristics. Neither can ever have known what it is to be afraid of testing an opinion by the utmost openness of discussion, nor has either ever had any impulse to keep hidden anything of public interest. When they were on Trade Unionism, John Burns, Tom Mann, Ben Tillett and a whole host of Trade Union leaders were constantly about the house: every point at issue was put to them. Employers and economists, so far as they could be got at, were treated in the same way. The book, when it came out, held neither surprises nor shocks for anyone concerned with its subject matter. It has been the same throughout their career. On Education, on the Poor Law, or Local Government, as, much later, on Russia, they never had anything "up their sleeves." All their results have always been presented, and designed to be presented, to the public. Sometimes, it is true, public presentation is made by, and public thanks, if any, given to, somebody else. That never troubles them. They are as generous in giving as in taking. In all their work, they meet friend and enemy in the open, from the start. They read the MSS. of other people, and they get other people to read theirs. They revel in critics on the hearth. Shyness, of any kind, is not in them. One odd result is that they have been freely stigmatised as arch-plotters, simply because so many people have always known about their "plots," as when they were "working" anything or anybody, or "getting" at anyone.

Actually, they are planners rather than plotters, but the planned life is rare enough to seem to most people

almost like a plot. That is, perhaps, the smallest among the sacrifices it exacts. Any form of life exacts some: of this, the major compensation is that it gave them the sort of freedom they valued. Have they not defined personal liberty as "the practical opportunity of exercising our faculties and fulfilling our desires?" They saw order, regulation, plan, in a word, as the road to this end for themselves. Arnold Bennett, who occurs to the mind as it seeks for comparable cases of loyalty to what the Germans call "Planmasessigkeit"—that thing for which the English language has no word of its own—expresses, in an illuminating passage in his *Diary*, his regret his own planned direction was not more steady and more strict.

"Another example of the indiscipline of the brain. Yet I have gradually got my brain far better under control than that of most people. Always haunted by dissatisfaction at the discrepancy between reason and conduct! No reason why conduct should not conform to the ideas of reason, except inefficient control of the brain. This that I am always preaching, and with a success of popular interest, too, I cannot perfectly practise. The rough carpentry instead of fine cabinetry. The unnecessary friction. The constant slight inattention to my own rules. I could be a marvel to others and to myself if I only practised more sincerely. Half an hour in the morning in complete concentration on the living-through of the day, and I should work wonders! But this all-important concentration is continually interrupted—interruptions which weaken it; sometimes deliberately abandoned for matters of admittedly inferior importance. Strange! One can only stick to it."¹

Much in this passage, so drearily familiar to the average worker, striving after, and failing to achieve, steady concentration, may read, to the Webbs, as simply funny. They have worked "wonders" and do not wonder at them. They are not a marvel to themselves, and would not greatly care to be a marvel to others. Immune, too, they are to many of the distractions that called to Arnold

¹ *Diary*, May 23rd, 1908.

Bennett. No inclination, with either, to sit too long over mere food and drink; no perilous questionings from the merely sensual man; no insistent calls from the purely aesthetic. By unnerving response to the simply beautiful they can rarely have been troubled; when the morning sun poured in at the windows of Grosvenor Road, making the water dance and the sky sparkle, they felt little nausea of the desk, no call to the open road. These immunities must have helped to make discipline lighter and easier. Yet no reader of *My Apprenticeship* can doubt that, in her case, some sacrifice was involved in accepting it, even as an act of deliberate choice.

Part of the price that must be paid in accepting and sustaining a routine may be more obvious to their friends than to themselves. The things they have not got, which made it relatively easy for them to do it, have been cleverly pointed out again and again. Countless caricaturists, in word and in line, have made them, for our generation, the classic exemplars of a monumental industry purchased at the price of human charm. Although this cleverness is really too easy, its excuse is that they share certain common peculiarities; and that, as a couple, especially in days when they were younger, there was something about their aspect and their approach that can only be called funny. This element leapt to life for the reader of a rhapsodic description, which must have deeply displeased them, made in the heyday of the Poor Law campaign, by Alfred Ollivant. He spoke there of "The Darkling Lady and her little Lord." The visible contrast between Beatrice, handsome, flashing, dominant, aggressively vital; swift and masterful in gesture both of mind and body: an eagle among human birds; and Sidney, tiny, unassuming, soft, husky and slightly lisping in utterance, glasses never secure on nose, yet never taken off, a mere modest sparrow—this contrast could seem absurd, did not the observer

suddenly catch, in his eye, a glint suggesting that he, too, sees what the observer is thinking: sees, and does not in the least mind; a fact that, swiftly redressing the balance, makes the said observer slightly hot behind the collar.

Set, as they have now been for so many years, against a chosen background of such strenuous and constant endeavour as is a challenge to average inconstancy of aim and slackness of action, they provoke those whom they thus shame. The easy retort has been to say that they have no souls. At some stage or other, the ascetic does paradoxically rouse the hedonist to such an accusation. Can it be sustained, in their case, except by leaving out most of the facts? That was of course the trick employed by Mr. Wells: and his *New Machiavelli*, written in 1911, not long after he had flounced out of the Fabian Society in a pet, is the one picture of the partnership that is familiar to the common reader. But Mr. Wells is not merely malicious: he is stupid; he leaves out the two major premisses that have made the life according to plan possible and successful.

The first is the simple fact of mutual attachment. That the Webbs are, as are few, happy—this is the most obvious fact about them for anyone who knows them. Something deeper than cheerfulness and warmer than optimism surrounds them. Its warmth is its unmistakable note. Nonsense like E. T. Raymond's "two typewriters clicking as one" could only have been invented from reading. Here is not comradeship only, here is loving comradeship. Sheer blindness to refuse to see it, because its form is odd. When they were younger, what Shaw calls their "spooning" embarrassed some of their friends; but behind it was a stuff which has securely stood the test of time. The one thing either of them really dreads is the possibility of separation. Could he compound with the Deity, he

would, so he has said more than once, gladly give up his one year of juniority in return for an assurance that when Death comes to either, it may come to both. They have their own quaint ways of expressing this close affection. Once, when they had as guests a young couple to whom they are much attached, they took them out for a walk. Sidney and the husband got on ahead. He looked back at the other two.

“I can tell you what Beatrice is saying to your wife.”

“Yes?”

“She is telling her that we call marriage the waste-paper basket of the emotions.”

They waited for the ladies to join them. When they came up, they were asked what they had been talking about.

“I was telling her that we call marriage the waste-paper basket of the emotions,” said Beatrice.

With this first premiss of mutual affection, the second condition of success is closely associated. They are Socialists who have, with set intention, devoted their lives to the furtherance of their belief. They have a view of happiness radically connected with it. Tolstoi, when one of his sons was about to marry, wrote him a letter in which he speaks frankly of the disappointments often experienced in the state, and goes on:

“All this, because the idea shared by many, that life is a vale of tears, is just as false as the idea shared by the great majority, the idea to which youth and health and riches incline you, that life is a place of entertainment. Life is a place of service, and in that service one has to suffer at times a great deal that is hard to bear, but more often to experience a great deal of joy. But that joy can only be real if people look upon their lives as service, and have a definite object in life outside of themselves and their own happiness.”¹

¹ *Reminiscences of my Father*, Count Ilya Tolstoi.

Take any view you like of the service actually rendered to humanity by the Webbs, it is yet impossible to deny that to render such service has been their steady, unswerving and disinterested aim throughout. In its course they have had to meet the normal share of misunderstanding, of criticism, even of ridicule. Against resentment, against bitterness, against all the myriad forms of uncharitableness, private and public, they have been protected by the integrity of their will to serve, and by the secure possession of their private talisman of affection. They do not mind what anyone says. They just go on with their work. As G. D. H. Cole said, in a moment of not uncommon exasperation, "The worst of Webb is that he is permanent."

Permanent, and in a sense not only a permanent challenge to hedonism, but a permanent question mark to the mind. For the plan does exact its price; something there is that is lacking. What is it? Partly, of course, all that is lumped together, vaguely and loosely, under the general vague head of "aesthetic values." A largish compartment of human experience, this: to some, the most vital, that which gives significance to the rest. For them, in any serious sense, it is not there. And there is something else, too, harder to get into words. When Mr. Wells' egregious hero comes out of the house in Chambers Street, which is blatantly a picture of 41, Grosvenor Road, and leaves its "administrative fizzle" to pass out into the London night, he is intensely aware, emotionally, of a quality in its obscure and deep pulsations that eludes the Webb thermometer: of some element, irrational and yet passionate, in human creatures and in human existence, which it does not register and cannot account for. For those who do leave it out, living may be easier, yet they are ignorant of something the complete man must know. One interrogates their story, in the effort to track this blind spot down. The things left out, so far as one can

give them names, are mainly painful. Neither has known either poverty or the grinding economic anxiety and strain that undermine confidence, as they undermine health. Since they discovered one another, neither has known any acute emotional stress, shock or loss. Neither has any acquaintance with the acrid taste of failure, in the world's esteem, or in their own. Toil, sweetened by companionship, has been made easy by success. They have, throughout, been able to go their way in freedom. Is it, perhaps, this relative ease of circumstances and of accommodation: this feeling one gets that the world's woes, hard as they work to redress them, do not keep them awake at nights and that its more searching and tormenting problems remain largely unplumbed: is it this that gives to their touch a distinct flavour of dry unreality, and makes it natural for them to see people in categories and express them in institutions? To define what is left out is as difficult as not to be aware of it. It is the standing puzzle about them, who are, otherwise, the least puzzling people in the world.

CHAPTER V

TRADE UNION ANATOMY

IN the first volume of her fascinating *Memories of Lenin*, Krupskaya, his wife and life companion in work, records how, during their years of exile in Siberia, between 1898 and 1901, "In the mornings, Vladimir Ilyitch and I set to and translated the Webbs, which Struve had obtained for us." It was from this translating that this other remarkable pair acquired such English as they brought with them, when, in their second period of exile, they came to London in 1902. Their spoken English then proved unintelligible to the natives; nor did they then or ever meet the authors with whom they had been busy. The work that occupied them in their Minussink mornings was of course *The History of Trade Unionism*: when it came to the second part of what Krupskaya calls "the Webbs," *Industrial Democracy*, although Lenin's name was affixed to this translation also, the actual work had been done by another hand.

Lenin's swift recognition was a bright symbol of the effect, first in England itself and, very soon in every country of the world, including in due course China and Japan, produced by the publication of the first joint product of the labour of the partners. There are a few books, in history, which are events, and are recognised as events on their appearance. *The History of Trade Unionism* was one of these. Reviews of a column or more length, on the day of publication, in all the leading journals, sounded a universal chorus of admiration. In approach, in handling,

in theme, the work was hailed as "masterly" by *The Times*, as "invaluable" by the *Observer*, as "true history" by the *Newcastle Chronicle*. When the experts followed the journalists they had, out of self-respect, to ask some questions, and posit some doubts; but they too, had to and did pay tribute to the fullness, the accuracy, the lucidity and the power of the authors. When *Industrial Democracy* followed three years later, the same chorus of praise was repeated with emphasis. The common reader began by feeling that here was something he ought to read. Rather apprehensively, he took it up and to his surprise, found that a work of economics could be as absorbing as any novel: much more so than most. Everybody read, everybody talked about *Trade Unionism*. The authors could almost have said, if they had been so inclined, that, like Byron, they woke up one morning in 1894 to find themselves famous. They were become, at a bound, public characters, and public characters of serious significance.

That works, so new both in approach and in handling; in subject matter and in style, should make a great impression on their appearance, did not, of necessity, carry with it any assurance of wearing. But *Trade Unionism* and *Industrial Democracy* have worn well. Far from going out of circulation, or being superseded with the passage of time, they have not only come to be an indispensable part of the equipment of every serious student: they have had, throughout the years, a steadily growing ordinary reading public. Translated into seventeen languages, they are as readable, as intensely interesting to-day, as they were thirty years ago. Anyone who takes up either of them, now, will find it impossible to lay it down until every page has been perused. This is the more noteworthy in view of the fact that in 1894, the Webbs, in settling down to write about Trade Unions, were proposing to describe a part of life about which few persons

knew anything, whereas in 1932, everybody knows, or thinks he knows, all about Trade Unions and Trade Unionism. Subsequent researches, the flood of recent knowledge of and interest in the topic, have not dispossessed their analysis or made their description out of date. They made their own, when these books came out, a certain section, and that a very important one, of history; and it is still primarily theirs. On these two books alone—to say nothing of the great series that was to follow them—they take their place among the creative describers; those who, literally, so *see* an object that for the first time it comes into the effective view and effective possession of others.

The History of Trade Unionism was issued in 1894: *Industrial Democracy* followed in 1897. The two are, in effect, one book. From many points of view the most important book of its kind produced in the second half of the nineteenth century, it is also, in the opinion of many, their masterpiece. Here, the method they ever afterwards followed themselves, and have taught to a host of subsequent students all over the world, is first and most effectively exemplified in action. A vast mass of material is organised on an intellectual design whose authority is due, in no small part, to the fact that the detailed research behind it is, at once, matter of first-hand observation by the authors, and has been tried, tested and sifted by every conceivable test. Here is the scientific method in application to the observation and description of social facts, of which Beatrice Potter had dreamed. A gentle reminder to the critic that he had better know before judging comes, in its place, like a hammer stroke, driving in the rivet of acceptance of judgments based on immense accumulation of ordered facts, handled here with the ease of accomplished and familiar mastery. All this, the reader of the nineteen-thirties can appreciate and does appreciate, as he reads. It is harder for him to do justice to the

revolutionary character and effect of the publication, forty years ago, of a work which so fully effected its transformation of opinion that its main points are now taken for granted. Actually, however, these volumes revealed a world, at the time regarded with dread largely because it was shrouded in darkness. They also revealed a person, till then as little known—the authentic British working-man. Contemporary history took on a new meaning; contemporary thought, and even contemporary feeling, were given a new direction. The method of approach to the writing of history was, henceforth, altered; so was its substance. Inheriting this alteration, we take it for granted. No English writers did as much to bring it about as did the Webbs.

The intellectual origins of such a work are worth tracing. Thanks to *My Apprenticeship*, supplemented by an article written by Sidney in 1928, they can be traced. With his habitual frankness he says it seems to him to-day

“a little strange that Trade Unionism, which came near to monopolising my thinking for years on end, did not reach me effectively till I was thirty. It had not place in the five or six years of study and discussion out of which the Fabian Society emerged. It is scarcely alluded to in *Fabian Essays*. . . . The same attitude of thought was typical of the whole past history of British Socialism. . . . Karl Marx himself . . . gave to Trade Unionism, in his view of the social organisation of the future, no greater importance than, right down to the last decade of the nineteenth century, the Fabians had done.”

What Karl Marx, the Social Democratic Federation, and the Fabian intellectuals alike overlooked, Beatrice Potter perceived. In her mind, the idea of writing a full scale description of the Trade Union movement was definitely born in 1889; and for reasons that implied a clear, though of course not at that stage a full, understanding of its significance.

1889, year of the Match Girls' Strike, of the Gasworkers' Strike and of the great epic of the London Docks, of course brought the idea of Trade Unionism, and of what lies or might lie, behind it, in some degree home to many minds, in and out of London, previously hardly aware of the existence of such a thing. No such external incident directed her intelligence to question and enquire. She was deeply stirred by the great London Dock Strike, of course; but while it was going on, she was at Dundee, attending the meeting there of the annual Trades Union Congress. What took her thither was neither journalistic curiosity, nor any sudden awakening of interest in the mind of that mysterious being, the British workman, such as was stirring many to fear and some to hope in the autumn of 1889. She had a clear problem before her mind. Engaged at the time in writing her book on Consumers' Co-operation, she had reached a notable conclusion. Thinking, without knowing that she was so doing, very much on the lines then occupying the brain of her future partner, she perceived that the Co-operators' nominal ideal of the "self-governing workshop" was rooted in the commonly held theory, accepted by Karl Marx from David Ricardo, William Thompson and Thomas Hodgskin, that "Labour is the source of all value." But this she found, "did not work!"

"What the Rochdale Pioneers had unwittingly discovered by the method of trial and error, was that the essential element in the successful conduct of production is the *correspondence* of the application of labour with some actually felt specific desire. . . . They were in fact Jevonians before Stanley Jevons. . . . To organise industry from the consumption end, and place it, from the start, upon the basis of 'production for use' instead of 'production for profit,' under the control and direction, not of the workers as producers, but of themselves as consumers, was the outstanding discovery and practical achievement of the Rochdale Pioneers."

Nevertheless, John Mitchell, the "business genius, who had built up the English Co-operative Wholesale Society," was unable to perceive this; or to see that

"consumers' co-operation, unless tempered by the intervention of the political State through Factory Acts, and by due participation in the management of each enterprise by powerful Trade Unions, might become an effective coadjutor of the existing capitalist employer in the exploitation of the worker."

She however did clearly see that "the existence of strong Trade Unions, enforcing standard rates and the normal working day," was essential, even on the assumption that the Co-operative movement was comprehensively organised. The Co-operative movement in fact, like the majority of the contemporary world, was, as she puts it, simply "absent-minded" about the conditions of employment, etc., of their staff. They were thus dropping a link of vast importance.

She herself had begun to see the importance of Trade Unionism, though not yet in its full significance, nor all its connexions, at the time of her being called, in 1888, to give evidence before the House of Lords Select Committee on Sweating. The appointment of this Committee was, of course, a result of the publication of Charles Booth's great Enquiry. When she appeared before them, one of the members put a question to her which was, in effect, a request to this remarkable young woman to write the Committee's Report for them:—"How would you define the Sweating system?" he asked. Her reply came, pat.

"An enquiry into the Sweating system is practically an enquiry into all labour employed in manufacturing which has escaped the regulation of the Factory Acts and Trade Unions."

Had this reply been accepted by the Committee—as it is now, in practice, accepted—machinery for dealing with sweated conditions could have been installed far earlier, and operated far more effectively than is even

to-day the case. For she saw then, as she says in the review of the *Report of the Committee* she wrote for the *Nineteenth Century* in June 1890, that

“If we wish to determine whether the presence of middle-men, machinery, and sub-division of labour are at once the cause and the essence of the evils of sweating, we must take a *wider survey of the industrial facts* than that afforded by the four volumes of evidence published by the Committee. We must use the *comparative method*: we must lay, side by side with the organisation of production in the sweated trades, the organisation of production in those industries admittedly free from the grosser evils of sweating. In short, to discover the constitutional disease, we must compare the diseased body with the relatively healthy organism.”

Convinced therefore, as early as 1888, that “free competition” had got to be controlled, not “exceptionally or spasmodically” but universally, she saw Trade Unionism as working in the same direction as were Public Health legislation, Public Education, and the establishment of the Factory codes.

This was in her mind, when she set to work on her own first book, on Co-operation; her first meeting with Sidney actually turned on an enquiry arising out of work on that book, which was to lead her to form the project of investigating and writing about Trade Unionism. He, at once, saw the point; very soon, he was co-operating in the project.

In writing to her in May 1891 he says

“Why not let me help you in the investigation into Trade Unionism? Whilst you interview officials and attend Trade Union meetings, I can rush through reports and Trade Union minutes at the Trade Union offices.”

This suggestion, of course, came after many of those talks between them that counted so infinitely for pleasure in the lives of both, and became so frequent after their first meeting in 1890. She actually started the investigation into Trade Unionism, before her Co-operative book was published, and worked at it with a sort of fierce intensity, in

the holidays that her sisters' interposition in the care of their sick father allowed her. Thus, September 1891 finds her attending the Trades Union Congress at Newcastle, and, after the "hurry-scurry of that week," saying, in her Diary:

"I have drudged in offices on records, or trudged to interview after interview. The work is stupendous and, as yet, the material does not shape itself. I do little but work and sleep and then work again. My fingers, cramped with hours of note-taking, threaten revolt, and my brain whirls with constitutions, executives, general councils, delegate meetings, district delegates, branches, lodges, socials, with objections to piece-work and 'subbing,' demarcation disputes—until all the organs of my body and my mind threaten to form into one federated Trade Union and strike against the despotism of the will."

In a few days, she writes to Sidney a letter interesting in itself, and significant as showing the driving impulse easily forgotten by the outsider because, in the insider, it is so strong and constant that it seldom comes to the surface:

"I get so sick of these ugly details of time-work and piece-work, over-time, and shop-rent, and the squalid misfortunes of defaulting branch officers or heckling by unreasonable members. Who would choose to imprison the intellect in this smelly kitchen of social life if it were not for the ever-present 'thirty, per cent' (Charles Booth's statistics of those who were below the line of poverty), with the background of the terrible East End streets? The memory of the low, cunning, brutal faces of the loafers and cadgers who hang about the Mint haunts me when I feel inclined to put down the Trade Union Reports and take up a piece of good literature."

To this heroic wail, he at once replied

"You are not fit to write this big book alone; you would never get through it. When I really get to work on it, you will find me not only a help instead of a hindrance but also *the* indispensable help which will turn a good project into a big book."

So it was to prove. The book—for the two volumes are really one book—is not only big in its comprehensiveness and sweep; it is big in another sense. It was highly original in its subject matter. Here, their success tends to mask

from us the scale and scope of their achievement. They have done their work so completely that nobody to-day dreams of writing the history of any epoch without building into his survey some account of the condition of the working class, and, if he is writing modern history, of working class organisations.

Such, however, was not the case in the second half of the nineteenth century. When Mrs. Webb consulted W. E. H. Lecky as to what the working classes of England were doing and thinking in the first half-century after the Industrial Revolution, his reply "led me nowhere"; he told her in sum, that they were doing nothing in particular: in effect, that they did not signify. When, in their own Preface to their *History*, they mildly remark that

"The history of the general movement, to which we have confined ourselves here, will be found to be part of the political history of England,"

they were not emitting a universally accepted platitude; very far from that. Nor did everybody, then, agree with, still less practise, the statement that follows—

"In spite of all the pleas of modern historians for less history of the actions of governments, and more descriptions of the manners and customs of the governed, it remains true that history, however it may relieve and enliven itself with descriptions of the manners and morals of the people, must, if it is to be history at all, follow the course of continuous organisations. The history of a perfectly democratic State would be at once the history of a government and of a people. The history of Trade Unionism is the history of a State within our State, and one so jealously democratic that to know it well is to know the English working man as no reader of middle-class histories can know him."

At this point, they came into sharp collision with then accepted opinion. There were, in the late 'nineties, plenty of people, some philanthropic, others merely enlightened, who were prepared to take an interest in, and feel a respect for, the individual working-man, and to strive,

quite hard and earnestly, to improve his lot for him. Such people even went so far as to welcome the presence of workmen in the House of Commons. It was another matter when they were asked to consider the notion of *organised* workmen, forming associations, whether industrial or political, to improve their own lot: possibly even alter the general arrangement of lots. On this issue the real controversy turned; it was to the education of minds on this crucial point that the Webbs made a contribution that has coloured the general outlook, and the outlook of statesmen, with positively transforming effect. They began this education with the very first sentence of their History.

“A Trade Union, as we understand the term, is a continuous association of wage-earners for the purpose of maintaining or improving the conditions of their working lives. This form of association, has, as we shall see, existed in England for over two centuries, and cannot be supposed to have sprung at once fully-developed into existence.”

Very skilfully do they play here, upon the tendency of the English mind to think that anything that has, in fact, existed for a long time must be quite all right. Of course they reject the false analogy, later sought to be established, between the Medieval Guild and the self-governing association of workers: at the same time, they point out that, so long as industry was carried on mainly by small masters, the “industrious apprentice” might reasonably hope, if not to marry his master’s daughter, at any rate to set up in business for himself. So, while

“industrial oppression belongs to all ages, it is not until the changing conditions of industry had reduced to an infinitesimal chance the journeyman’s prospect of becoming himself a master, that we find the passage of ephemeral combinations into permanent trade societies.”

Through a detailed survey, based on contemporary documentation, of the flourishing associations that did exist

among tailors, clothiers, hatters, printers, weavers, hosiery workers and shipwrights, they show that, while it is historically correct to associate any general expansion of workmen's combinations with the great changes in industry that massed them in factories, trade clubs would anyhow have been a feature of English industry. Clubs, however, of a wholly different character, representing as they did an industrial society

"divided vertically, trade by trade, instead of horizontally between employers and wage-earners."

Modern Trade Unionism came into being with the acceptance by government of the new economic doctrine of free competition, which found its fullest expression in the legislation of 1799 and 1800 expressly penalising all combinations. The word Trade Union does not occur till well into the nineteenth century.

"It is in leading articles of 1830-4 that we first come upon references to some great Power of Darkness vaguely described as 'The Trades Union'."

Here, the contemporary emphasis is on the *the*; The Trades Union was the ideal of the revolutionary period. In its ferment of ideas, Robert Owen of course played a leading part. Of Owen, and of the "jumble of Communist aims and ordinary Trade Union aspirations" which, as a mixed heritage of good and evil, he left behind him, a most vivid picture is given—

"In short, the Socialism of Owen led him to propose a practical scheme which was not even Socialistic, and which, if it could possibly have been carried out, would have simply arbitrarily redistributed the capital of the country without altering or superseding the capitalist system in the least.

"All this will be so obvious to those who comprehend our capitalist system that they will have difficulty in believing that it could have escaped so clever a man and so experienced and successful a capitalist as Owen. How far he made it a rule to deliberately shut his eyes to the difficulties that met him, from a burning conviction that any change was better than leaving

matters entirely alone, cannot be guessed; but it is quite certain that to a great extent he acted in perfect good faith, simply not knowing thoroughly what he was about. He had a boundless belief in the power of education to form character; and if any scheme promised just sufficient respite from poverty and degradation to enable him and his disciples to educate one generation of the country's children, he was ready to leave all economic consequences to be dealt with by 'the New Moral World' which that generation's Owenite schooling would have created. Doubtless he thought that 'the Trades Union' promised him this much; and besides, he did not foresee its economic consequences. He was disabled by that confident sciolism and prejudice which has led generations of Socialists to borrow from Adam Smith and the 'classic' economists the erroneous theory that Labour is by itself the creator of values, without going on to master that impregnable and more difficult law of economic rent which is the very corner-stone of collectivist economy. He took his economics from his friend William Thompson, who, like Hodgskin and Hodgskin's illustrious disciple, Karl Marx, overlooked the law of rent in his calculations, and taught that all exchange values could be measured in terms of 'labour time' alone. Part of the Owenite activity of the time actually resulted in the opening of Labour bazaars, in which the prices were fixed in minutes. The fact that the expenditure of labour required to bring articles of the same desirability to market varies enormously according to the natural differences in fertility of soil, distance to be traversed, proximity to good highways, waterways or ports, accessibility of water power or steam fuel, and a hundred other circumstances, including the organising ability and executive dexterity of the producer, was left entirely out of account. Owen assumed that the labour of the miner and of the agricultural labourer would spontaneously exchange equitably at par of hours and minutes when the miners had received a monopoly of the bowels of the country and the agricultural labourers of its skin. He did not even foresee that the Miners' Union might be inclined to close its ranks against newcomers from the farm labourers, or that the Agricultural Union might refuse to cede sites for the Builders' Union to work upon. In short, the difficult economic problem of the equitable sharing of the advantages of superior sites and opportunities never so much as occurred to the enthusiastic Owenite economists of this period."¹

¹ *History of Trade Unionism*, pp. 146-7.

The magnificent hopes of 1829-42 ended, of course, in bitter disillusionment, but not without leaving ineradicable marks behind them. As Chartism dwindled, Trade Unionism, on much more modest lines, revived; the "new Spirit" led to the "new Model": "the generous but impracticable 'universalism' of the Owenite and Chartist organisations was replaced by the principle of the protection of the vested interests of the craftsman in his occupation." This was, largely, the work of that able group of remarkable men known as The Junta—of whom an unforgettable series of portraits are drawn: men of high personal character and exceptional business capacity, shrewd, conciliatory, competent, disinterested, with "a large share of that official decorum which the English middle-class find so impressive." Their steadiness carried the Trade Union movement through the strain and stress of the depression of the 'sixties and 'seventies; the time of the "Sheffield Outrages" and the Royal Commission of 1869-70, when such superb aid was lent to their cause by men like Tom Hughes and Frederic Harrison; and, when the General Election came in 1874, largely contributed to the defeat of the Gladstonian Government and the repeal, by the Tories, of his Criminal Law Amendment Act of 1871: an act as much resented in its day as was the Taff Vale Judgment a quarter of a century later. The price of this success was however that, while the leaders complacently accepted the dominant economic outlook of the day, the movement sank into a complacent quietism "crossed by an embittered sectionalism."

From this it was sharply roused by events and by the challenge of a series of young, new leaders, all personally known to the Webbs. In a chapter as lively as it is authoritative, they give an account of events within their own knowledge, including the shift of the centre of gravity in the Trade Union world from the craftsmen's organ-

isations to those of the labourer, of which the 1889 Dock Strike was the portent. To these chapters, the student of nineteenth century history will, despite all that has been written since, continue to go back. Nowhere else is the story told with anything like the same vigour, the same inside knowledge, the same power of detaching the lastingly significant, the same courage in criticism. In the final chapter, the Trade Union world of 1890 is sketched in. The toil that lies behind this chapter may well make the student of to-day bow his head in shame of his own faint-heartedness. In 1894, statistics of Trade Union membership, as of its distribution locally, had to be collected *ad hoc*, by the investigators; the Webbs had to, and in effect did, take their own Census. There were then, no official figures even of the numbers of manual workers. Of the toil involved, the tremendous Appendix, in the shape of a bibliography of over forty very closely printed pages, gives no adequate idea.

In the concluding paragraph of this first volume, the authors state

“We have endeavoured to confine ourselves to a statement of facts in such detail as is necessary for any understanding of the Trade Union movement. We have purposely refrained from summing up those facts, either in the course of the narrative or in a final chapter. Throughout this volume, we have avoided arguing whether the numerous conflicts and temporary successes of various bodies of organised workmen have or have not resulted in a permanent and progressive elevation of the Standard of Life, either of particular sections or of the whole class of wage-earners. Nor have we attempted to discuss the intricate problems presented by the existence of a sectional organisation by trades in the midst of a community of non-Unionists. On these points we have, in the course of our investigations, formed definite opinions. To state and justify our views would involve a detailed analysis of the actual workings of Trade combinations.”

To this “detailed analysis” the first half of *Industrial Democracy*, published three years later, is devoted. For it,

the closing pages of *Trade Unionism*, in the original edition, had already laid the basis, since it is there suggested that not only does Trade Union history afford a rich field for economic and political research; it gives, in many directions, practical guidance to "the student of Democracy." That student

"is always deploring the narrow range of observation and experiment afforded by the brief histories of the few modern republican states. To him the Trade Union world affords the century-old experience of a thousand self-governing working-class communities, with unrestricted capacity for adaptation and change."

In fact,

"their prolonged trial of the best-known machinery of representative government, and their frequent invention of new forms and devices for the better administration of their little republics—all afforded unrivalled material for generalisations full of significance to the philosopher and the statesman."¹

In *Industrial Democracy*, when it came out in 1897, these promises were amply redeemed. Strange, now, to recall that when it was published, some critics "ridiculed the idea of attaching even so much importance to the workmen's organisations as to write a book about them." These critics were a defeated rearguard; the general tone of the press was given by *The Times* when it described the book as "a permanent contribution to the sum of human knowledge" and commended it to the public as a "monument of research and full of candour." *The Times* further said it was "indispensable to every publicist and politician." Indispensable it has remained. In spite of the water that has flowed under the bridges, between 1897 and 1920, *Industrial Democracy* stands, both as an analysis of Trade Union structure and function: and as containing in its latter pages both a classic defence of Democracy itself, and a classic exposition of the policy of the National Minimum, which runs, like a scarlet thread, through all

¹ *History of Trades Unionism*, 1894 Edition, pp. 475-6.

the Webbs' work. One very interesting point, which is also suggestive in its bearing on the judgment a reader may attempt to pass on the logical validity of their analysis, is that they express the view that the Trade Union in some form or other is a necessary and permanent element in any society, however highly evolved, and however far its evolution has carried it away from the Capitalist form we now know. On this view, at the time, they were criticised from two main, though contradictory angles. Orthodox economic and political opinion—and the two were never very clearly distinguished—disliked, and feared, the Trade Union as a “class” organisation. Socialist opinion, at any rate on the continent of Europe, was perturbed, because the view that the organisation of producers known as the Trade Union was destined to continue indefinitely, ran counter to “catastrophic” Marxian philosophy. Their conclusion as to the probable permanence of the Trade Union seriously upset the leaders of the German Social Democratic Party. Indeed when Eduard Bernstein's translation of *Industrial Democracy* appeared in Germany at the end of 1897, as it happened, accidentally, a few weeks before the publication of the English book, in December, the translator, although already a tried and trusted veteran in the German Social Democratic Party, was severely blamed for introducing such heretical ideas into the Socialist flock; indeed, he narrowly escaped dismissal from his party offices. That was in 1897. The critics took the orthodox Marxian view: a view the Webbs rejected. It remained the orthodox Marxian view: and in Russia when orthodox Marxianism triumphed in 1918 Trade Unions were officially abolished. By 1930, they had been reinstated, with honours, as one of the main, and indispensable, pillars of the Soviet State.

The first quality, to-day, that will strike any reader of either of these two volumes is their vitality. Later, the

authors were to develop a style which militates against and impedes this quality: what one feels to be the typically dictated style. But these two books are *written*. True, in the Preface to *The History of Trade Unionism*, thanks are rendered to Bernard Shaw and Graham Wallas for "whatever literary merits" it may have, but this, one may be sure, is but another example of the authors' general generosity. Phrasing and picture one is sure are their own: and they are alike admirable. The portraits of the early Trade Union Junta, as of Burns, Mann and their associates, fixed their features in the mind, lastingly; and these portraits are but incidental high points in a general disposition of light and shade that is masterly. The authors possess their subject, and they possess it with a living interest that they know how to communicate.

Vitality is the first quality, since its constant presence keeps the reader reading, and reading with concentrated attention. As he does so, and, still more markedly, when he re-reads, he becomes aware, and is in general retrospect increasingly aware, of another quality, even more distinguished. This is organisation. The vast intractable material is not only dissected and made intelligible in its separate parts; it is attached to its fundamental bones. The structure and articulation of a world of diverse impulses, histories, forces and human beings is here, is alive, and is coherent. It lives not only in items, but as a whole. This result is achieved through an intellectual planning and an intellectual control of the first order. The events seem irresistibly, and by natural law, to order themselves into sequences, and those sequences to acquire significance. This result is secured partly through the authors' sheer mastery of their material: partly through their remarkable self-restraint. Neither facts nor comments belonging properly to Volume II—the analytical volume—are permitted into Volume I, which is strictly historical

and descriptive. There, the clear stream of narrative is never broken by argument, nor the steady progress of building up the picture delayed by moralising. The fruits of the judgment and the self-control exercised in Volume I are reaped in the later chapters of Volume II. There, the reader, literally possessed by facts so put before him that he feels them to be facts and nothing but facts, is lifted up above them, on the wings of an argument so sure and powerful that he is carried along, quite unresisting, and absolutely absorbed in the pleasant sense of confidence in the skill, authority, vision and reliability of his pilots. He has been given, in *Trade Unionism*, the background of history, before he is invited to take, or make, any judgments on the ideas of Trade Unionists.

That the authors themselves had no "point of view" they never maintained. There is a story which figures among the many, legendary and otherwise, that have gathered around the name of Webb, to the effect that Levine, the French economist, after a visit to 41, Grosvenor Road, reported;

"Yes, yes, they have got the facts. All the facts. But if any fact goes against their theories, so much the worse for the fact."

Reviewers, later, familiar with their practice of making notes on separate slips, at times suggested that some awkward slip had fallen beneath the table, and been conveniently left there. But against such criticisms must be set this: the general view they hold, whose possession they never denied, ran counter to the general view held by most of their critics, who tended to regard the latter, *ipso facto*, as "the facts." The Webbs never made a secret of their own view; but no critic has succeeded in convicting them of any distortion in its interest. No one has accused them, on the other hand, of that dulness of approach involved in the attempt to apply the really impossible theory that history should be written without any "point of view." If the student must absorb and dissect facts,

“This does not mean that the scientific observer ought to start with a mind free from preconceived ideas as to classification and sequences. If such a person existed, he would be able to make no observations at all. The student ought, on the contrary, to cherish all the hypotheses he can lay his hands on, however far-fetched they may seem. Indeed, he must be on his guard against being biased by authority. As an instrument for the discovery of new truth, the wildest suggestion of a crank or a fanatic, or the most casual conclusion of the practical man, may well prove more fertile than verified generalisations which have already yielded their full fruit. Almost any preconceived idea as to the connexion between phenomena will help the observer, if it is only sufficiently limited in its scope and definite in its expression to be capable of comparison with facts. What is dangerous is to have only a single hypotheses, for this inevitably biasses the selection of facts; or nothing but far-reaching theories as to ultimate causes and general results, for these cannot be tested by any facts that a single student can unravel.”¹

On “far-reaching theories as to ultimate causes and general results” they have waged war, in the name of scientific method, throughout the long years of their common effort. Their own point of view was not of this kind; and it was buttressed by and founded on the most laborious investigation, covering six years.

Of this investigation, he said, many years later that it covered

“certainly six years of ‘good hunting’—of hunting of facts about the past in the ten or a dozen cities of the United Kingdom in which the Trade Union head offices were then situated; of hunting after the relations between these facts and the general course of law and history; and of hunting for the generalisations and the ideas that transformed the chaotic tangle into a philosophy. We found it a fascinating task, dry and fatiguing as it came to be in patches—like all long tasks! It proved well worth doing, even for Trade Unionism alone, but in the process we got new light on all the rest of British history, and we learned a lot about other factors in social organisation, and about the changes in their relations one to another through which society itself is transformed—in short, about Socialism itself.”

They learned, through their investigation; they also taught. The publication of *Trade Unionism* and of *Industrial Democracy*

¹ *Industrial Democracy*, Preface to 1927 edition.

not only revolutionised the subject matter of history; they revolutionised its method. They practically created, for English students, the method of research. They showed, in action, what research was; how much intensive work had to go behind published material; they also showed how it ought to be conducted. They set a standard; they forged an instrument; they gave an example. In the Preface to *Industrial Democracy* they give an account of their own method, reminding the student that it is his primary business to find out "not the ultimate answer to the practical problem that may have tempted him to the work" but what is "the actual structure and function of the organisation about which he is interested." From the outset, therefore, he must adopt "a definite principle in his note-taking." They suggest the separate sheet: and advise the putting of "a great deal of work into the completeness and mechanical perfection of note-taking, even if this involves, for the first few weeks of the enquiry, copying and re-copying his material." Before beginning the actual investigation into facts,

"it is well to read what has previously been written about the subject. . . . It is here that the voluminous proceedings of Royal Commissions and Select Committees find their real value. Their innumerable questions and answers seldom end in any theoretic judgment or practical conclusion of scientific value. To the investigator, however, they often prove a mine of unintentional suggestion and hypothesis, just because they are collections of samples without order and often without selection."

For actual investigation into facts, three good instruments of discovery are cited—the Document, Personal Observation, and the Interview. What they say upon each of these is instructive: above all, what they say on the Interview.

"The expert interviewer, like the bedside physician, agrees straight away with all the assumptions and generalisations of his patient, and uses his detective skill to sift, by tactful cross-examination the grains of fact from the bushels of sentiment,

self-interest or theory. Hence though it is of the utmost importance to make friends with the head of any organisation, we have generally got much more actual information from his subordinates who are personally occupied with the facts in detail. But in no case can any interview be taken as conclusive evidence, even in matters of fact. . . . It must never be forgotten that every man is biased by his creed or his self-interest, his class or his views on what is socially expedient. If the investigator fails to detect this bias, it may be assumed that it coincides with his own! Consequently the fullest advantage of the interview can be obtained only at the later stages of an enquiry, when the student has so far progressed in his analysis that he knows exactly what to ask for."

The temptation to quote extensively from their description of the instruments is great: but their advice on this, if not yet universally followed, is universally accepted. The method of research actually employed is the Webb method. If the results are not up to the sample, they serve, in that, to show how remarkable were the gifts actually brought by the two pioneers to their chosen task. If scientific investigation into social and economic phenomena is to "yield new scientific laws" there must, so they say in the preface to *Industrial Democracy*, be posited of the investigator

"The possession of a somewhat rare combination of insight and inventiveness, with the capacity for prolonged and intense reasoning."

This "rare combination" is realised, in their case. If insight strikes one as, pre-eminently, her gift, in inventiveness no one has ever surpassed him. For reasoning, prolonged and intense, both had a capacity sharpened by conscious development into a habit. These are not imitable gifts; they are the gifts that have made their books on Trade Unionism standard works, and saved them from the doom of dulness that is apt to attach to books in that estimable category. In 1898, with these two volumes behind them, they could say that the "considerable work" had, indeed, been achieved.

CHAPTER VI

LONDON PRIDE

WHEN W. T. Stead, in the early years of the new twentieth century, was moved to cry, "Since Mr. Chamberlain arose in Birmingham, there has been no man so like him as Mr. Sidney Webb," he was not thinking of the great works on Trade Union history and function, nor of any other monument of learning and industry associated with the name of Webb. He was thinking of an immense and immensely practical accomplishment—the creation of that great network of civic services in London, which are now taken for granted by Londoners, few of whom realise how much of their daily comfort and convenience they owe to him, how much of the opportunities available to their children.

Of the London of his childhood, he drew an impressive picture which registers the challenge its then conditions delivered to his youthful mind

"It is impossible, with any brevity, to convey an intelligible notion of the deplorably low state of urban civilisation of the London of my childhood. Seventy years ago, the London of three millions of inhabitants had no metropolitan government. Such municipal jurisdiction as existed in the 120 square miles was scattered among a maze of parish vestries, the very existence of which was generally unknown, together with the ancient City Corporation, which took no heed of anything beyond the one square mile under the Lord Mayor. Needless to say, the administration was as primitive and barbarous as the jurisdictions were complicated and obscure. The slums: the all-pervading stench: the alternating seas of mud and clouds of poisonous dust of the macadamised streets; the floating 'blacks'

that darkened the air; the scantiness and impurity of the water supply, with the Thames an open sewer: the recurring pestilences of enteric fever and small pox: the chronic tuberculosis and rheumatism: the perpetual ill-health and appalling infantile mortality of the London of my childhood cannot be imagined to-day. There were not schools for even half the boys and girls, and such as there were (apart from a few ancient foundations that were out of my reach) were more rudimentary than would now be thought possible. The only 'social services' that I remember were the national museums and picture galleries, the Royal Parks, and the blue clad police, who, a generation previously, had been forced on the Metropolis by Sir Robert Peel. The next quarter of a century saw much improvement under the Metropolitan Board of Works and the School Board; but of a London civic consciousness there was still next to nothing."¹

Such were the conditions he early determined to help to change. They were, with but small variation, the conditions still in existence when he became, in 1892, a member of London's new County Council. The establishment of that Council he had hailed as an event of far-reaching importance, and immense potentialities. Until then, there was no single responsible body to look after London's needs: with the result that so far as the life of its ordinary, and, above all, of its poorer citizens, went, it was far behind the more progressive municipalities of the Midlands and the North. Not poverty and degradation only, but dirt, insanitation, public disease and public ignorance had been revealed by the Booth Enquiry of 1886; that Enquiry powerfully stimulated, in minds like his, the sense of local as well as of national patriotism. It was intolerable that London should actually be what we now call a "backward area." This civic pride and civic patriotism, was with him, a potent motive. In some ways, though he may look continental, he is *au fond* very British; responds to motives and feelings that do not animate the typical "advanced" mind. This instinctive

¹ *St. Martin's Review*, 1928.

patriotism was to divide him, when the Boer War came, as when the Great War came, from many of his Socialist colleagues; it was an effective lever to bring him into active administrative work in London. No note is more definite, in the articles collected in that lively little volume, *The London Programme*, than this of pride in and for his native city. So, he says,

“the reform of London government . . . is no mere matter of cleaner streets and better drains. . . . The greatest need of our Metropolis is the growth among its citizens of a greater sense of common life. That ‘Municipal Patriotism’ which once marked the free cities of Italy, and which is already to be found in our provincial towns, can, perhaps, best be developed in London by a steady extension of the sphere of civic as compared with individual action.”

The first elections for London’s new Council took place in the spring of 1889. He was out of England during the preceding months, visiting the United States. He had for two years saved up his leave at the Colonial Office, so as, now, to have a clear three months at his disposal. In the autumn of 1888, accordingly, he, with his friend and Fabian colleague, Edward Pease, sailed across the Atlantic on a slow boat. They played chess; and he read everything in the ship’s library, including purely nautical works. When they got to America, he saw a great deal, and established many contacts in New York, Chicago, Cleveland and elsewhere. But he did not get home until the opening of 1889, and then, according to himself, “took no part in the election.” “No part” seems to be a slight exaggeration on the side of humility; as a matter of fact, he admits that, so soon as he got back to London, he did “something that turned out to be important.” In January 1889, he got the Fabian Society to “importune” (his own word) all candidates to commit themselves to reforms in London government along the

lines of Municipal Socialism. Some of them did. A Progressive majority of a rather vague and diverse kind was returned, to the surprise of everybody—but the Fabians. So far so good. The Progressives set to work; but their ideas turned out, in action, to be bounded by securing purity and efficiency of administration—good enough things in themselves, but by no means sufficient, least of all to meet the actual conditions in London. Big changes were required in more than administration. Take one small point—the water supply. Down to 1893, the supply of water for London was in private hands. It cost under £700,000 a year to supply London with water: but London had to pay more than £1,700,000 for the water so supplied. The water, too, was often of doubtful quality; the supply was partial and irregular; many poor streets had to depend on a distant and insufficient tap. Baths, even in private houses, were a rare luxury: public baths were unknown. The result of this lack of the most elementary necessity of sanitation was the prevalence both of disease and of noxious smells. But no action was taken with regard to this by the first Council; and this was only one of many crying and immediate evils.

“We accordingly set ourselves, in the Fabian Society, to work out, in the ensuing three years, a detailed programme of administrative reforms, to be made the basis of a consolidated Progressive Party, which should ignore the political differences between Liberals and Conservatives and appeal for the support of all good citizens.”

Of this effort, he was the life and soul. *Facts for Londoners*, a booklet on which he “spent some months in 1889,” published at sixpence, told Londoners, for the first time, all about their actual and possible municipal services. In the *Speaker*, then a lively Liberal weekly, run by the group which also compiled *Essays in Liberalism*, including H. W. Massingham, J. L. Hammond, J. A. Simon, Hilaire

Belloc, F. W. Hirst and C. F. G. Masterman, he wrote a long series of anonymous articles, "describing, with such fervour and such eloquence as I could command, what these services might be made." The articles produced a great effect; in 1891, they were reprinted in a book, published in Swan Sonnenschein's *Social Science Series*, entitled *The London Programme*. In the Preface, the author modestly states—

"The following pages are not presented as a contribution either to science or literature. They aim at nothing more pretentious than describing, in language easily read and understood, the more important of those reforms in the administration of the Metropolis which are often known as 'The London Programme.' The present exposition of that programme is in no sense authoritative, and the writer has no other warrant for his task than a lifelong acquaintance with London, and a very real and deep affection for his native city."

At the close he says

"We should 'municipalise' our Metropolis, not only in order to improve its administration, but as the best means of developing the character of its citizens."

Nearly a dozen leaflets, also of his authorship, were in 1891 published by the Fabian Society, and

"the free distribution of this incendiary literature went a long way to the construction of a municipal programme. This was clinched, as the second election approached, by the organised presentation to each of the candidates, by scores and sometimes hundreds of his own electors, of signed 'Questions for London County Councillors,' to which the elector demanded written replies, intimating that only the candidates giving favourable answers would receive his vote. The device was then a novelty; and it succeeded, not only in forcing a whole series of reforms on the attention of the candidates, but also in convincing them that these were the reforms that London required. By articles in the Press and by incessant lectures in the Radical Clubs, we had seen to it that these particular ideas were 'in the air.' When the L.C.C. election of 1892 produced a large majority of Coun-

cillors definitely united as a Progressive Party, this Party found itself equipped—perhaps it never understood quite how—with a programme that was as far removed from the political conceptions of the Liberal Party leaders of the time as it was from the Individualism of the Manchester School.”

In this second, 1892, L.C.C. Election, he was not merely the organiser of victory: he was himself a candidate. He offered himself as a Progressive candidate to Deptford—then a

“mixed district of villa residents and manual wage-earners and strongly held for Parliament by a Conservative—a district in which I knew only one person. It was then I studied the technique of electioneering, with at least this much success that I won the seat by a large majority and kept it at five subsequent elections; and also brought in a timorous and elderly Progressive colleague, whom my proceedings and projects had, I fear, terrified, and who was presently succeeded by an able young Fabian, the late R. C. Phillimore.”

Actually, in 1892, he was returned at the head of the poll with 4,088 votes: his colleague receiving 2,503. He was, in fact, as his friend Stephen Sanders puts it “the consummate electioneerer.” Far from concealing his Socialist opinions, he here, as always, most frankly stated them, as if, in fact, such were the only rational opinions: frankly, but never aggressively. Mr. Sanders, reminiscing about Deptford, says that

“his tact, his powers of persuasion, his toleration of other people’s views, his evident disinterestedness, and the absence from his speeches of any personal attacks upon his opponents, together with his complete mastery of the issues of the contest and the ease with which he can deal with any question or questioner, secured for him support from most unexpected quarters”;

He tells a story which makes this clear, in most entertaining fashion:

“No one is less like a ‘sportsman’ either in habit or in appearance than Sidney Webb, who states that his one recreation is walking. Yet, at one London County Council election, when some absurd issue was raised about a threatened restriction of

'sport' by the Council, a body with a name something like 'The Sportsmen's League,' and with strong Conservative tendencies, waited upon him to hear his views on this momentous subject. He received the deputation with his usual affability, listened to them with becoming gravity, and then gave them an address on 'Sport' which must have aroused their enthusiasm for his candidature, for, the next day, every public-house in Deptford contained a bill appealing to the electors to 'Vote for Webb, the British sportsman'.¹

They did: they went on returning him, through six successive elections.

Of his eighteen years' membership, his own account is that it was "a somewhat strenuous, occasionally an exciting and, on the whole, a joyous episode." But it is no use going to his own account for any description of "how he did it." "More important than my own personal experience is the achievement of the Council"—that is how he, in the very next sentence, goes on. No suggestion of *quorum pars magna fui*, even when he continues: "The special note of the Council's work during the next fifteen years was its perpetual attempt to provide for London, in all departments, not only the best but also the utmost that Municipal Collectivism could secure"—in other words, to carry out the 'London Programme.' This was accomplished through a Progressive majority which was certainly not Socialist, but was, in effect, thoroughly permeated and most skilfully led, almost without its knowing it. He never drove: he infused.

Civic pride, administrative efficiency—from these notes he, and the colleagues who worked with him, extracted such appealing music that, over a very wide area of the local government of London, and following London's example, of the entire country, collective provision for public needs was instituted over an extensive field of public need, without more than a very occasional battle-

¹ *Book of the Labour Party.*

royal over theory. He did not, on the Council, talk about Municipalisation or Municipal Socialism, but, during his active period as a member of it, he got the foundations so truly laid that there was no removing them. Adoptive Acts, instead of lying in the pigeon holes, were brought out and put into operation with regard to Health and Housing, the regulation of Docks and Markets, the provision of Parks and Open Spaces. Through inspection, regulation, and control, the standard of decency and comfort of the Londoner was lifted. The supply of water was brought under public control, as a first step to its complete transference to public supply. The regulation of gas, the control of electricity, the provision of libraries, parks, trams, slaughter-houses, wash-houses and playing fields; the control over docks; the clearance of slums and erection of houses—these things came bit by bit, as part of an efficiency programme, and of a campaign for public health and sanitation carried through patiently, and without unnecessary advertisement of the controlling purpose behind the different parts of the work, each good, even irresistibly and obviously necessary in itself. Sidney Webb, as in his Fabian days, was the brains and the driving force behind the whole steady transformation of London into the place as which we know it.

It was not got through, this collectivisation, without fighting and finesse. All his tact, resourcefulness and persistence were required and were given to the task. It was accomplished at a period when, for the most part, Conservative Ministries were in office. They grumbled. So did the Conservative representatives on the Council, and the wealthy ratepayers of the City and West End. Yet they dared not attack the policy root and branch. Social Reform was in the air: was not Sir William Harcourt even saying "we are all Socialists now"? All they could, and did say was that the Council was "overdoing it"

by way of reform. Must it go so fast? They fumed; but the work went on, and just as fast as Webb could make it go. Fast, but without needlessly exasperating flourishes.

Reports to the whole Council would come up, from this Committee and from that; reports that pushed the wedge of Collectivism in, each one a bit further. The Chairman would mutter, "The Webb mixture, as before." But a smile would accompany the mutter. The Report was, invariably, workmanlike; its proposals practical, and such as would redound to the credit of the Council. The guiding spirit never advertised itself. The draftsman never rubbed things in. Things got done; that was what he cared about.

He was on more than one committee, and as Edward Pease says, speaking from long familiarity with his ways, "Whenever Webb is on a committee, it may be assumed, in default of positive evidence to the contrary, that the Report is his work." He was also largely responsible for the shaping of the internal organisation of the Council's work: for its Standing Orders and for the admirable form and fulness of its Agenda—in a word, for the forging of an efficient instrument of administration. He took a directing part in this, as in the steady extension and transformation of London Government into a great organ of collective provision, and, for these services, all Londoners owe him gratitude. But, important as his work in these spheres during his eighteen years membership from 1892 to 1910, his greatest administrative accomplishment, and the piece of work which W. T. Stead had predominantly in mind, was his creation for London of an educational system.

In no respect did London lag more disastrously behind than in this. For no issue did Webb feel more passionately than this: on none was his knowledge greater or more

intimate. Passion may seem an odd word to use in connexion with him, but to his feelings about education, no other is applicable. It is one of the very few topics on which he has ever been known to get heated. Normally, of course, his controversial manner is wholly one of sweet reasonableness; he wins his way by the most scrupulous fairness both in stating his own case, and in meeting that of his opponent; he seldom raises his soft, slightly lisping voice; he is never betrayed into any outward sign of strong partisanship, although, at times, he can say the hardest things in the gentlest way; so hard and sharp that it is only when they, as it were, echo in the mind, that their real bite is appreciated. Yet he revealed an excitement that, although almost perfectly controlled, was nevertheless perceptible to his audience, when, in 1909, he was addressing the Association of Technical Institutes on the question of compulsory attendance at some form or other of Continuation School. To that, as a graft on the existing system, under which thirty to forty per cent of children left school to enter some blind-alley occupation, he expressed himself as unalterably opposed. "The proper occupation of youth up to twenty-one is in education and instruction." This statement, at question time, roused, from various quarters, a number of the usual enquiries, as to how, then, was the community, to get its hewers of wood and drawers of water? Must not some people go to work early for our convenience. In his reply he was so angry as to be guilty of exclamatory, verbless sentences.

"I may be a dreamer of dreams, but I thought that the doctrine that education was only for a part of the nation was buried a hundred years ago: it certainly does not consort with twentieth century ideas to imagine that there is to be a class of hewers of wood and drawers of water. I want no class of hewers of wood and drawers of water: no class destined to remain there, and prevented from rising, because we do not provide for it. I cannot

believe that we are only to provide the means of instruction for a certain limited number of people, who we think will rise, while the rest are to toil for our convenience. For our convenience! Who is to hew? Who is to deliver our bread? *Our* convenience! *Our* comfort! Our comfort is to stand in the way of enabling these people, our fellow-citizens, to attain anything better than being mere hewers of wood and drawers of water! I must apologise for having been betrayed into a little heat, but I do object to the notion that, for our convenience, we are to keep people as hewers of wood and drawers of water."

The occasion was a revealing one, to many who were there. So easy is it to believe that self-control, a calm exterior, a perfect consideration for others, an unvarying amiability of manner, imply a want of ardour or intensity of concern. If the test of an authentic passion be the accomplishment of some valid service towards its object, however, what he did for education, both school and university, in London, stands as proof of passion of the most enduring kind.

Reading *The London Programme*, one notes, with some surprise, that the fact-packed survey of London as it was in the 'nineties, and that picture of London it was to be, contains no mention of education. The ideal of municipal activity set out, was, thanks to him, in London largely to be realised. By its schools and schooling, he was to do at least as well. If he says nothing about it in this place, the reason of course is that, at the time, primary education was outside the scope of the Council and assigned to another body—the School Board: and, although the Council was the authority for technical and higher education, it had made, until he got on to it, little use of its powers. To such separation and division of authorities, he was opposed: but his tactic for reform was neither to attack the School Board nor assail, directly, the system of separation. It was, rather, so skilfully to extend, aggrandise, and make efficient the Council's department, for which he, as Chairman of its so-called Technical Education Board, was mainly respon-

sible, that the case for handing control over education as a whole to the Council became irresistible.

His own brief and dry account of the matter is illuminating, in its way.

“My own work on the Council was primarily concerned with education. We pressed the Council to exercise its powers under the Technical Instruction Acts, and I induced a friendly Board of Education so to define the Council’s scope as to include as technical education the teaching of every conceivable subject (other than ancient Greek and theology) elsewhere than in a public elementary school. This made the Council, to the astonishment of some of its own members and of the School Board, the authority for secondary and technical education in London. I suppose we must have done the job in style, as it was certainly the Council’s work in this sphere that largely contributed, in 1902-3, to the transfer to the County and Borough Council of all the functions of the School Boards, as well as to a vast expansion of public educational enterprise.”

It was at this “vast expansion of public educational enterprise” that he was aiming, from the start: what his School Board associates found hard to forgive him, at the time, was the fact that the supreme efficiency of his work on the Technical Education Board, was the main lever by means of which the unification of educational authority, through which alone that expansion could be secured, was carried through: and carried through by the elimination of the School Boards.

His first step was characteristic. He got a comprehensive Survey of technical education in London made, by a brilliant young civil servant, Hubert Llewelyn Smith; a survey which included everything but primary education. Equipped with this exact and detailed knowledge of what provision for non-primary education existed, he set to work to level up its standard, and, so far as possible, bring it under the effective control of his Board. The Board, under his Chairmanship, knew what institutions, of all kinds, there were, and what they were like: a position of immense strength, and one which he knew how to use to the full.

Only his associates of that day know how much hard work, how much ingenuity and resource, how much tact and patience, went to the achievement he modestly describes in the paragraph quoted above. At the end of his time as Chairman of the Technical Education Board, London actually had a larger proportion of its children in secondary schools of some sort or other than had either Paris or Berlin. Of these schools, some eighty-five were, by 1904, publicly managed, in fairly good buildings, and tolerably well-equipped, though weak in staffing and above all, as regards the teachers' salary scales. "About half the publicly managed schools," so he wrote in *London Education* (1904), "are sufficiently well off to be independent of its (the Council's) aid. The other half, including practically all those in need of assistance, have already shown by their cordial co-operation with the Technical Education Board their willingness to come into line." His technique for bringing them either up to standard, or into line, was of amazing dexterity and infinite resourcefulness. For instance, in the very early days, he brought up to the full Council, from the Board, proposals for a scheme of free scholarships to enable bright boys and girls to go on with their education after they had finished with the primary school at thirteen or fourteen. On the desirability of this, the case was overwhelming: the Progressives rallied to a man; the Council voted for scholarships, on a practically unlimited scale. Everyone felt happy; felt that a good day's work had been done. Only on the face of the Chairman of the Technical Education Board was there a slight shadow. "The resolution is all right," he said. "The Council has done the right thing. But, unluckily, there aren't any schools." Result—the schools for the scholarship children to go to had to be provided by the Council. Actually, there were at the time so few secondary schools that only a tiny fraction of the children affected by the resolution the Council had so joy-

ously passed could be accommodated in them. He, of course, knew this: and he meant the schools to be provided. He knew, too, that had he begun by demanding the money to create the schools, he would never have got it. As it was, he did get it, and the Board went ahead. Again, he worked tirelessly to bring such schools as existed up to a satisfactory standard. A school would, for instance, be given one year, a small grant for laboratory equipment, sewing machines or what not; next year, when the renewal of the grant was applied for, a bland enquiry, terrifying in its accurate and detailed familiarity with the facts—would be put, as to cloak-room accommodation, teachers' pay, or some other point of weakness. So "cordial co-operation" meant a steady, irresistible advance towards control.

If, however, it was possible for the Technical Board to bring its department up to a reasonably high level of efficiency, the position in relation to elementary education was vastly different. It was the condition of the elementary schools of London that mainly impelled his mind towards the working out of a comprehensive plan of reform. In any such plan the keynote was bound to be co-ordination under a single authority. Not co-ordination for its own sake, still less co-ordination for the sake of uniformity—co-ordination for the sake of education. Above all, he wanted to lift the entire conception of education out of the ragged school, or, to use his phrase "rescue work," standpoint; the standpoint, then still so common, from which both School Board and Technical Education Board were but agencies for the "education of the poor"—the emphasis being on poor.

The actual position was clearly set out by him in 1903 in a series of articles in *The Nineteenth Century*, afterwards reprinted in a small book, *London Education*.

"In spite of an expenditure of nearly four millions of public money, and a large but unknown amount of private money, London education falls short of decent efficiency at many points.

It fails alike at the bottom and at the top—we succeed neither in maintaining a high standard of common schooling for all London's children, whatever their poverty or the creed of their parents; nor yet in disseminating culture, developing reasoning power, or promoting original research."

The position at the bottom was truly alarming—

"Putting together what little is really known of all the thousand public elementary schools of London, including both Board and voluntary, there are competent observers who declare that nearly half of them containing about a quarter of the children, would probably be condemned as inefficient, either in respect of buildings or of sanitation, of staffing or equipment, of curriculum or real success in child-training, by a Swiss, a Danish, a Saxon, a Prussian, or a Massachusetts school inspector. As for the standard of education . . . in the absence of a common national inspection, no one could answer."

It was perfectly true, and in his articles he states quite frankly, that the level of the voluntary schools was lower than that of the Board Schools, poor as that in many cases still was, and deplorable as the general level of absenteeism. What proportion bad Board Schools bore to the whole, or how bad were the worst, only the School Board Inspectors knew; so far as the two-sevenths of children educated in voluntary schools

"There is no resisting the inference that nearly all the hundred Roman Catholic Schools and probably three-hundred of the three-hundred and thirty-one Church Schools—having in the aggregate more than 150,000 children—are, so far as secular education is concerned, calamitously behindhand."

To have to pass this considered judgment on the average level of London education, came, so he says, as a shock of surprise to him. He does not say precisely when he received this shock; but, the facts once clear, his mind set to work upon them, with remarkable results.

He rejected the view taken at the time by most of his Progressive friends that, since the voluntary schools were the worst, and since the Anglican, and still more the

Roman Catholic, managers found it impossible to collect voluntarily the heavy sums required to make their schools fit for twentieth century children, the way out was to "crush them out of existence, and have one uniform Board School system, with undenominational Christian teaching." His rejection of this is significant. The common, uninformed view of the natural Webb reaction to such a problem would be that he would be all for uniformity, for a neat scheme and for the elimination of nonsense, and possibly pernicious nonsense at that, like Catholic or Anglican or Jewish denominational instruction. Not at all. Genuinely impassioned for education, genuinely tolerant of views different from his own, what he was concerned to secure was the utmost variety and flexibility in educational system, consistent with the attainment of a reasonably high standard. He also believed strongly in and desired freedom for all parents, however poor they might be, in regard to an item which seemed to them of cardinal importance, whatever it might seem to him. He was against intolerance, under whatever name it might masquerade: against the cut-and-dried imposition of certain views, whatever they might be. As he wrote in *The Nineteenth Century*, in 1901,

"One party has backed denominational schools, and has only grudgingly admitted the need for Board Schools. The other party, with at least equal intolerance, has backed Board Schools, and only grudgingly allowed Denominational Schools to exist. The result of this sectarian and unsectarian narrowness, and of the incapacity of the Education Department itself, is that after a whole generation of nominal compulsion, we are still only at the beginning of the task. Over at least a third of England, the schools, the training of the teachers, the scope and content of the curriculum, and even the attendance of the children are so inferior as to amount to a national scandal, whilst only in the picked samples of a few towns do we rise to the common level of Switzerland."

He faced the denominational issue (although possibly, at the time, he underrated the intensity of feeling it engendered)

when thinking out plans for reform of London education, and rejected the notion of crushing the denominational schools out of existence.

"I had seen in the United States and Victoria (Australia) the consequences of such action; I did not like the policy of crushing out minorities. I thought the imposition of 'undenominational Christianity' as unfair to the Jews, Unitarians, and Secularists, as the imposition of the Anglican Church Catechism on Roman Catholics and Nonconformists, or of the Roman Catholic formularies on Protestants. Moreover, I knew that the result would not be the closing of the Roman Catholic schools, but (as in the United States) their continuance entirely at private cost at a still lower level of efficiency, which would be calamitous for the very large and perhaps growing number of children who would resort to them. Above all, I wanted to preserve variety in education, rather than an officially prescribed uniformity—variety in methods of teaching, variety in the subjects taught, and variety in 'atmospheres.' I wanted to leave the door open to new and unthought of experiments in schools."

"For all these reasons," he goes on,

"when the Conservative Government in 1902 proposed to find out of the rates and government grants the salaries of the teachers in these Anglican and Roman Catholic Schools, and to put these, like all other public elementary schools, under the administration of the County and Borough Councils, I gave this measure my hearty support, and have never since regretted my decision."

"Hearty support" is, as a matter of historic fact, not quite the right description for his action. It is the truth, but by no means the whole truth. Politically, of course, the Balfour Government is the author of the Acts of 1902 and 1903; but their "onlie begetter" is the author of Fabian Tract No. 106,—*The Education Muddle and the Way Out*. On its title-page, this Tract bears no name. In its first form, it was not drafted by Sidney Webb: indeed, he objected to the original draft. Thereupon it was remitted to him to re-draft; as published in 1901 it was his handiwork. Before it actually appeared in this form, Sir John

Gorst, then President of the Board of Education, sent down to the Fabian Offices, and asked to be supplied with fifteen galley pulls of Webb's Tract No. 106 for the instruction of the Cabinet. So far as Gorst himself went, and so far as Mr. Balfour, the Prime Minister went, their instruction had been carried through some time before this, at 41, Grosvenor Road.

Permeation, at Grosvenor Road, had not only been applied to members and supporters of the Government. It had been going on, assiduously and effectively, over a wide range. Balfour, at the time, was almost an intimate there: and he and Haldane saw pretty much eye to eye with one another, and with Webb. So hopeful were they, indeed, that the intention was to make the measure an agreed one; of this, lively hopes had been entertained at one time, by the friends of education. Among the Liberals, not R. B. Haldane only, but H. H. Asquith, Edward Grey, and even Lord Rosebery were, at this stage, constant visitors at Grosvenor Road. Lord Rosebery had been the first Chairman of the Council, and had a strong pride in his child: of him, about the turn of the century, the Webbs had great expectations. The notion of "educating an Imperial race" appealed, powerfully, to his lively imagination, as to those of his section of the Liberal party.

Here however, as with the Progressives on the Council, and Liberals throughout the country in general, bitter disappointment awaited those who insisted on looking at the education of the children from an educational point of view. No sooner were the schools mentioned than, in the country as a whole, and in London in particular, the tides of sectarian prejudice surged up, menacing. The Liberals, at this date, were still first and foremost a Nonconformist party. The Nonconformist conscience had brought Gladstone to heel, in the Parnell Case: it now brought Rosebery and his friends to heel against the "gift of public money

to sectarian schools." Lord Rosebery, under Webb's inspiration, made a great speech at Colchester in favour of education and nothing but education. At once, the thunder began to rumble. A few weeks later, at a mass meeting in St. James' Hall, London, with all the Liberal stalwarts on the platform, he not only recanted: he armed himself with a tomahawk against the Balfour Education Bill, and refused to see the "vast expansion of public educational enterprise" except through the glass of party and religious passion. Sidney Webb was present at this meeting: as he came away from it, he is said to have done a thing he hardly ever known to do—used strong language. "What do you think of Lord Rosebery now?" asked his friend F. W. Galton. "He's a bloody broken reed," was the succinct reply.

Nowadays, when the 1902-3 Acts are looked at strictly from the educational view, there are probably few who do not see in them the necessary practical approach to a genuinely national educational system. As such, he, as their real author, did a very good, but, as it turned out, a very hard piece of work. The controversy broke up his happy association, on the Council, with the Progressive party, and made him bitter enemies on the School Boards. On the Council, he found himself separated, on this issue, from all his Progressive allies: indeed, the Education Act controversy did worse than that—it separated him, for the time, from one of his oldest and most intimate friends, Graham Wallas. Wallas was a member, and a very keen member, of the London School Board, which the Act of 1903 abolished. Division from him was painful. No personal difficulties, however, prevented Webb from going straight ahead on the course he saw to be right: if the Education Acts had to be worked, so far as the Council was concerned, mainly with Conservative support, that was disagreeable, but—they had got to be worked. So the book

—*London Education*—he published in 1904 is not only a defence of the Acts, on their merits: it is a most cogent and earnest plea for their fair and unfettered working. He declares that, now,

“Public education has, insensibly, come to be regarded not as a matter of philanthropy, undertaken for the sake of the individual children benefited, but as a matter of national concern, undertaken in the interest of the community as a whole. *It is this notion which has, almost without the notice of the controversialists, been embodied in the Acts of 1902-3.*”

Now, under the powers assigned to it by those Acts, the London County Council is “called upon to endow London with a complete educational system.”

Loyally, through all the difficulties that met him on the Council from 1903 on—and particularly after 1906, when most of the leading Progressives won seats in the House of Commons, and after the 1907 Council elections, when the Conservatives, under the name of Municipal Reformers, captured a majority there—he continued his work towards a “complete educational system.” It is impossible to exaggerate what Londoners owe him, under that head. His work was on the Council, and also outside it: for, in addition to creating the Acts of 1902-3, he is the architect of London’s University.

On this, his closest association was with R. B. Haldane. It was over London University that these two, with Balfour, first put their heads together. Up to 1898, London University was a mere external examination board. As such, the two teaching colleges, King’s and University, wanted to sweep it altogether away: they desired to see a new, professionally-run University established, with no extra-mural examiners. Politically, this proposal, whatever its intrinsic merits, was at the time, entirely impracticable. Indeed, Haldane was driven to resign his membership of the Governing Body of University College on the point: and

it was this that brought him to seek counsel of Webb with a view to devising some practicable method of reaching the desired end. At an early conversation between the two friends on this point, Haldane is said to have asked Webb: "What is your idea of a University?" He smiled. "I haven't any idea of a University. Let's sit down and see what we can make of it. Here are the facts. . . . What we want, it seems to me, is an Act enlarging the existing University so as to give it a powerful teaching side. . . . That will grow. In the end, it will, by sheer quality of performance, absorb the purely examination side." As Lord Haldane puts it in his *Autobiography*:

"Sidney Webb and I took counsel together. He was a very practical as well as a very energetic man. We laid siege to the citadel. We went round to person after person who was prominent in the administration of the existing University. Some listened, but others would not do so and even refused to see us. In the end, we worked out what was in substance the scheme of the London University Act of 1898. The scheme was far from being an ideal one. It provided by way of compromise for a Senate which was too large to be a really efficient supreme governing body for the new composite University, and it had other shortcomings of which we were well aware. But . . . we saw that the scheme thus fashioned was the utmost we could hope for the time to carry, in the existing state of public opinion about higher education in London."

On all this, there was not only very close association with Haldane but a fairly constant association with Balfour. "We came together," says Haldane,

"because the Liberals were not up to the mark about questions of Higher Education. I was so keen about them that I did not mind accepting the opportunity of throwing myself on Balfour's side on them."

This applied even more strongly to Sidney Webb. Permeation was, at this period, at its high-water mark; he was ready to co-operate with any efficient agent to get good work done. The Act of 1898 went through, thanks

to Haldane: Lord Rosebery became Chancellor of the newly-constituted London University, and, from 1900 on, Sidney Webb was a member of its Senate, and a most active member. It is as a matter of fact about another committee of which he was a member—the Board of Governors of the Imperial College of Science and Technology at South Kensington—that the following story is told: but it illustrates aptly, his functioning on the London Senate or on any committee of the kind:

“On one occasion, a matter of great importance to the college was discussed in the absence of Sidney Webb. A decision was practically agreed upon, but, at the last moment it was thought best to take a formal vote upon it at the following meeting. Sidney Webb, considering the decision to be wrong, attended the meeting and before the matter was put to the vote, spoke for half an hour, giving a multitude of reasons why the decision should be reconsidered. He swung the majority round to his opinion and, as a crowning mercy, he brought Lord Halsbury, then a hale and hearty die-hard of over seventy, to his feet in a speech in his support.”

Thanks largely to him, development followed the lines that he and Haldane had planned for it. These lines are cogently set out in an article he wrote for *The Nineteenth Century* in 1903. Secure in the anonymity that masked this, as so many other parts of his work for London, he can there say:

“It is a tribute to the far-sighted statesmanship of those who drafted the present scheme of reorganisation, and also to the prudent catholicity which has marked its present administration, that the University of London, only five years ago an isolated examining Board, without professors, students, colleges or local connexions of any kind, forms to-day an integral part of the London education system.”

He sees London's university as having a definite character of its own. “Being, as regards its undergraduate class, essentially a university for the sons and daughters of households of limited means and strenuous lives,” it must not try to “skim off the cream,” but must aim at gathering in students by the thousands. It must be a “technical school

for all the brain-working professions of its time. Some may regret this limitation, but the practical man will see in it a great opportunity." He also sees it as a great and developing post-graduate centre. "A University is, or ought to be, much more than a mere place for teaching. Its most important function in the State is the advancement of every branch of learning." Before London, there lies a hard task—"the slow, hard and perhaps unlovely task of clearing the ground." The realisation of dreams may be very slow in coming.

"Innovators and reformers, having great ideals and a high standard, sometimes make the mistake of thinking that, even from the outset, nothing less than the best is admissible."

In phrasing, as in substance: in its quiet negativism, and serene underlying optimism, based on inflexible resolution, this little sentence is as characteristic of the man who wrote it as any he has ever penned. Great ideals, and a high standard, he had both for the London schools and for the London University: but, in either case, he was ready to make a beginning with something "less than the best," just because he knew that, once a spot of firm ground established, he could, and would, build on from it, like the beaver. Not casually, therefore, has the beaver been taken as the sign and symbol of the other great London educational enterprise of which he has been parent and fostering nurse—the London School of Economics.

In a reminiscent passage in which various "Webb myths" are killed, and no authentic doctrine or story of a personal kind is supplied to take their place, the founder of the School says that it started, in 1895,

"in two small hired rooms in John Street, Adelphi, destitute even of a promise of endowment, without professor or students, and devoid of any visible chance of academic status."

How even this was made possible, he does not tell us: and in view of his denunciation of myth about it, one has to walk warily: but it is at least generally believed that a

bequest from a North country Fabian, Hutchinson by name, of £5,000, to be spread over ten years, and administered by two trustees, of whom Sidney Webb was one, provided the nucleus, so far as funds were concerned. As to the parentage of the idea, no enquiry is necessary: that is admittedly Webb's own.

For the rest, an account from his own pen is the best survey of what the School is, and was. He begins by noting as one of "the immense changes in the mental atmosphere of Englishmen during the past forty years"—the vastly greater part now provided by Political Economy. . . . "Perhaps the School of Economics has had some connexion with this change, either as cause or as effect." Perhaps it has.

"It is to-day amazing to think how minute was the provision of economic teaching, and how lacking that for economic research, in the London of the last decade of the century. King's College had a nominal professorship which was suspended. Professor Foxwell held a chair at University College, but had only a score of students, reported to be 'one-half coloured.' A rather elementary course of lectures (which I had attended in my youth) was annually repeated at the Birkbeck College. That was all that existed in the capital of the British Empire for a population comparable to that of the whole of Scotland (or Belgium or Holland) each of them having several Universities. Nor was there any dissatisfaction. The pundits solemnly declared that the existing provision met the entire demand; and, as they also suggested, amply supplied the whole need. Only young men in a hurry could regard the idea of a single Professor of Political Economy as being as obsolete as the idea of a single Professor of Natural History. It was revolutionary to imagine that there ought to be, at each centre, a dozen professors, each pursuing his own branch of a vast field of social study, up to heights, and into details, as yet undreamed of."

That revolutionary idea, the Webbs entertained; and when the chance came to make a beginning at it, they took it. Courage, as well as imagination, were needed; the Hutchinson bequest—five thousand pounds to be spread over ten years—was but the spot of firm ground.

In the Preface to *Industrial Democracy*, they make an earnest plea for the need of some endowment for social research—

“What is not generally recognised is that scientific investigation, in the field of sociology as in other departments of knowledge, requires, not only competent investigators, but a considerable expenditure. Practically no provision exists in this country for the endowment or support from public funds of any kind of sociological investigation. It is, accordingly, impossible at present to make any considerable progress even with enquiries of pressing urgency. . . . At present, in London, the wealthiest city in the world, and the best of all fields for sociological investigation, the sum total of all endowments for this purpose does not reach £100 a year.”

They keenly felt this need; felt that after a “whole century of marvellous discovery in physical and biological science,” the study “of the conditions of human grouping and co-operation” had fallen lamentably behind, although it was of equal, perhaps of even greater importance. With eminently characteristic courage, they made a start. The modest rooms in the Adelphi were taken: for the rest, one cannot do better than quote the account he wrote of the matter:

“Mr. W. A. S. Hewins had the courage to come from Oxford to undertake the head ship of a non-existent institution without financial guarantee; and for seven years he proved not only an inspiring lecturer, but also an excellent pioneer organiser, until he elected to transfer his abilities to the field of fiscal politics. Gradually he gathered around him some notable (but until then insufficiently appreciated) teachers, such as Professor Graham Wallas, Edwin Cannan, and A. L. Bowley; and enrolled students, first by the dozen, and very slowly by the hundred; at first mainly those who could attend only in the evening, these very gradually becoming subordinated to the full-time day students. The School slowly made itself known to economists—it may at most be said in the United States and in Central Europe before it was discovered by Great Britain—as dealing with economic and political science on the basis, less of abstract and deductive theory, than of ascertained facts; not exclusively, or even mainly, of the historic past, but largely those of contemporary public administration and of ‘business’ itself.

What is not usually included in the saga is that the School had, from the outset, some very good friends. Lord Haldane was, from the first, a constant advisor and supporter, Bishop Mandel Creighton became its first president, to be replaced on his death by Lord Rosebery, who on becoming Chancellor of the University of London was succeeded by the late Lord Rothschild. The London County Council, then reaching out into Technical Education, encouraged the School by small and growing grants. Several of the 'Permanent Heads' of the Government Departments saw its value for the further training of their junior staffs. Some of them, indeed (like the late Lord Milner and Sir Robert Morant), themselves attended the lectures, and helped by their advice to mould the curriculum. Removal to superior accommodation at 10 Adelphi Terrace was made possible largely by Mrs. Bernard Shaw. Presently, the late John Passmore Edwards found the money for a building—the nucleus around which the present commodious premises have been grouped—which the London County Council allowed to be placed on a site that had been cleared in Clare Market. On the reorganisation of London University in 1899—1900, the School was already substantial enough to be admitted as a constituent college; and a new Faculty, that of 'Economics and Political Science' (including Commerce and Industry,) was created expressly for the School to dominate. Academic distinction was thus assured. Under the successive directorships of Sir Halford Mackinder and the Hon. W. Pember Reeves, a second Faculty, that of Commerce, was created with influential 'city' support, and the institution steadily progressed until the Great War. It even managed to maintain, not only its existence, but also its traditional freedom from indebtedness, during the direful years when practically all its able-bodied male students and professors of serviceable age found other parts to play. In 1919 on the retirement through ill-health of the Hon. W. Pember Reeves, the School was fortunate enough to secure, as his successor, one in whom it found a rare combination of scientific researcher and practical administrator. Sir William Beveridge (Is this another case of myth? How did the students come to choose the beaver as the School's mascot?) has to his credit not only the discovery of the particular social bacillus that causes the industrial disease known as casual employment, but also the organisation of both the nation's Labour Exchanges and, during the War, its Food Rationing. In the decade that he has managed the School, under the chairmanship of Sir Arthur Steel-Maitland, he has raised it, with a series of bounds, to its present international pre-eminence as the

most important centre of Economics and Political Science in the world. In this decade even the School premises have engendered their own myth—that in the buildings of the School of Economics the concrete is never allowed to set!”

To-day, the London School of Economics is one of the greater institutions of the Metropolis, to which students come, not only from all over Britain, but from all over the world. It has close on three thousand students, at its day and evening classes and lectures, and its professoriate numbers over a hundred (and enjoys the benefit of a most ingenious Family Endowment Fund). Its library of books and pamphlets on economic and sociological subjects is unique. Its income and expenditure approach £100,000 per annum; it has buildings and contents worth over half a million, free of debt; endowments and capital grants equal in capital value to a million sterling.

This rise was gradual and steady. The School, as its founder states, was happy in its heads: but the consistent support, the unwearying service, the steady “drive” put behind it by the Webbs has been the indispensable element in its irresistible growth. Later students may well look up to their portraits (in the group painted by William Nicholson, that hangs in the Founders’ Room) with something of awe. For many years, Sidney Webb was Professor (unpaid) of Public Administration at the school; it was at one of his lectures that the unprecedented spectacle was witnessed of the entire audience rising to their feet at the close to deliver round upon round of spontaneous applause.

That applause may well be echoed by Londoners, when they stop to realise what the child of its mean streets has done for their and his city. In the long catalogue of the work done, and the service rendered, by the Webbs to those who come after them, there is none brighter than this. Why have they not been given the Freedom of the City? There would be an honour, genuinely appropriate.

CHAPTER VII

CONTROVERSIAL

WHETHER the Webbs—as it is impossible not to call them—really know how to take a holiday is a matter sometimes canvassed by their friends. The answer is dubious. If holiday be taken in the ordinary sense, as meaning a complete relaxation of the mind, either through the joyful sinking into “mere being,” or through a total change in the habitual direction of its interest, it is unlikely. “Mere being” certainly, seems the condition of existence of which they have the smallest knowledge, and towards which they have little or no desire; nor are their minds often, for more than moments, detached from their major prepossessions. From time to time however, they have removed themselves from their ordinary contacts and from their habitual routine. They did so, early in 1898. Their first great work was completed. It had been more than respectfully received. They had become public characters, and public characters of very substantial significance. Success connoted no remission of effort; on the contrary. Plans were laid, and research was already set in train for a new and truly gigantic undertaking; *The History of Local Government in England*, before they left London for the first of their world tours. They no doubt had it in mind, as they talked to people who knew, and visited institutions which mattered, in the United States, in Canada, in Australia, in New Zealand, and elsewhere, in the course of their six months’ absence.

The fact that they spent these six months largely in learning about the Empire, and in seeing, at close range,

some of its possibilities and its problems, was not without its influence on their reaction to the changes that met them when they got home again to Grosvenor Road; above all, their reaction to the two most important of these changes. They were of very differing kinds. If the one that most people completely disregarded at the time is put first, the reason is that it was a constructive event: the initial steps had been taken towards the formation of an independent Labour Party. Who cared? when the Balfour Government was plainly drifting into war with the South African Republics. At the time, of course, to the vast majority of British citizens, this second event entirely overshadowed the first: indeed, few were those, outside the professional political ranks, who were so much as aware that it had in fact taken place, or would have cared, if they had been aware. It is, however, a little surprising to find the Webbs apparently agreeing with the general public in this view. For the event which the press and the public disregarded and barely observed represented the precise achievement the Fabians had forecast, and struggled to bring about, in the days when Sidney Webb had been the guiding spirit in their counsels.

In 1890 and 1891, as has already been noted, the Fabians, and above all, he and Bernard Shaw, were busy gingering up the Radical Clubs, and forcing a programme of constructive action upon the Liberal Party. The Newcastle Programme of 1891 was to a large extent the outcome of their efforts. The Liberal hierarchy, however, remained unmoved and apparently immovable. So, when a General Election came in June 1892, the Manifesto put out by the Fabians was a blunt declaration of disgust. It tells the workers, straight, that unless and until they form a Party of their own—which they could easily do, if they cared as much about politics as they did about horse-racing—they have nothing whatever to look forward to.

A year later, this dismal prophecy appeared to have justified itself. A specific pledge had, for instance, been given by the Liberals that they would install model conditions of employment, etc., in Government Departments and contracts. Although this could have been accomplished by administrative action, nothing had been done.

A very considerable sensation was produced when in *The Fortnightly Review*, for November 1893, there appeared an article over the signatures of Sidney Webb and Bernard Shaw, containing a stinging attack on broken Liberal promises. It bore the challenging title, "To Your Tents, O Israel!" and there was nothing ambiguous about either its positive proposals or its denunciation of Liberalism. Liberalism the workers were specifically summoned to abandon, and adjured to form "a Trade Union political Party of their own." It was to be independent: it was to be based on the Unions; it was to start by raising enough money to run at least fifty independent Labour candidates. In January 1894, this article was reprinted as a pamphlet, under the title, *A Plan of Campaign for Labour*. As such, it was widely read, and had no small influence.

The whole thing, to Liberals, was a piece of wanton sabotage of the Government. They were exceedingly angry. H. W. Massingham resigned from the Fabian Society, and attacked it and all its ways and works, in season and out of season, in the columns of the *Daily Chronicle*. The wrath of the Liberals was partly due to a deep and growing dissatisfaction with themselves, their party, their leaders, and their Government. The contrast between the cheerful effectiveness of the Progressives on the Council and the factious futility of the Rosebery administration of 1892-5 was painful. By 1895 that administration was plainly breaking up, and breaking up mainly from its own internal weakness. As Mr. J. A. Spender puts it in his *Life of Sir William Harcourt*—

"The vessel of the Government did not enter upon the session of 1895 in a very seaworthy condition. The captain had failed to fulfil the high expectations entertained of his attractive but indeterminate character; the chief lieutenant was hardly on speaking terms with him; the crew were torn with dissensions: there was profound disagreement on the line of policy that should be put before the country, and though the budget had been a dazzling success, it did not serve to cover the general sense of failure and disintegration. It was obvious that whenever the election came, the Liberal ship would founder."

It did founder. In the years between this and the outbreak of the South African War, the Webb-Shaw call looked more and more like justifying itself. Lord Rosebery was in a rather sulky retirement; the Opposition was divided into three wings—the Liberal Imperialists, who still attached their colours to his mast, the followers of Harcourt, and those of Morley. By 1898, the internal wrangles had reached a pitch which compelled first Harcourt and then Morley to resign. "A party rent by sectional disputes and personal interests," wrote Harcourt to Morley, "is one which no man can consent to lead either with credit to himself or advantage to the country." Liberalism, in these dark years, certainly appeared to be going out of business.

Meantime, the 1893 call had had, almost at once, a practical result. At Bradford, in the later part of that same year, the Independent Labour Party had been founded by Keir Hardie: and the I.L.P. was, from the start, expressly dedicated to bringing the Trade Unions into politics, and getting them to form a party whose determining policy was Socialism. As yet, the Unions stood aloof: the I.L.P. was a party formed by individuals, although the Fabian Society co-operated in bringing it into life, in so far as representatives of it attended the Foundation Conference at Bradford. Sidney Webb, however, was not one of them. Of course, part of the explanation may be that he was

otherwise engaged: his Council work was absorbing. But has there ever been a time when he has not found it possible to carry on three or four lines of activity at once? One cannot think of such. If he did not go to Bradford, or, in the years that followed, take any part in the Fabian co-operation in the I.L.P., the reason is not that he had no time for it; but that he did not think it worth while. As a matter of fact, a distinctly non-political note sounds in the closing paragraphs of *The History of Trade Unionism*, which came out in 1894, a year after this event. True, they state:

“Thus we find throughout the whole Trade Union world, an almost unanimous desire to make the working class organisations in some way effective for political purposes.”

But, while paying tribute to the “sense of solidarity” which “had never been lacking,” and remarking that the “Collectivist faith of the New Unionism” is “only another manifestation of this same instinctive solidarity,” they proceed, firmly and candidly, to stress Sectionalism as the “very basis of Trade Union organisation.” Moreover, while the question of how to make

“the Trade Union world, with its million of electors, and its leadership of Labour, an effective political force in the State, is, on the whole, the most momentous question of contemporary politics,”

the suggestions thrown out in the final paragraph, do not reach beyond

“the development of Trade Councils, the reform of the Trade Union Congress, the increased efficiency of the Parliamentary Committee, the growth of Trade Union representation in the House of Commons, or, finally, the creation of a new federal machinery.”

This last passage is, of course, mainly negative; but it sums up their conclusions, and in its very negativism suggests a much chastened optimism, when set beside “To your

Tents, O Israel!" It suggests that the Webbs were not in any very hopeful or active sympathy with the efforts at this juncture being made by Keir Hardie, and backed by John Burns and Tom Mann, to use the I.L.P. as the fulcrum for the foundation of a definitely political Trade Union Labour Party.

These efforts, in 1894, gained at least so much of success that a Socialist resolution was passed by the Trade Union Congress, in that year. In 1895, however, at Cardiff, the other side re-asserted itself, and a resolution was passed excluding from Trade Union delegacy all save persons either actually working at trade or paid officials of their Union—a decision which shut out, and was meant to shut out, M.P.'s like Keir Hardie and John Burns, if it also operated to exclude the arch reactionary (on this point) Henry Broadhurst. In 1896, at Edinburgh, worse befell: the Socialist resolution was rescinded; the tide seemed to be running hard against Independent Labourism. Under the surface, however, its course was different. In 1898, the success of the German Social Democratic Party in getting no fewer than fifty Socialist members returned to the Reichstag, with a vote behind them that had jumped from 100,000 in 1891 to over 3,000,000, was a clarion call to British Socialists. As such, it was heard: in September 1899 the Plymouth Congress decided to call a Special Conference of all Trade Unions, Co-operative and Socialist Societies and other working-class organisations, to

“devise ways and means for the securing of an increased number of Labour M.P.'s in the next parliament.”

This sounded innocuous enough, but Keir Hardie and his associates were determined to drive their advantage home, and knew how to do it. The Fabian representatives at the Special Conference, Bernard Shaw and Edward Pease, supported him, staunchly. Indeed, Edward Pease was a

member of the Labour Representation Committee which that Special Conference set up, with J. Ramsay MacDonald as its secretary.

Later on, ample tribute was to be paid by the historians of Trade Unionism to the vital importance of this step, and to the work of MacDonald in keeping the Labour Representation Committee alive so that it could be used to exploit the Taff Vale Decision¹ and so lead in 1901 to the establishment of an effective Labour Party. At the time, however, Sidney Webb was a non-co-operator. He thought the tactics poor. They smacked of that premature and enthusiastic affixing of labels to bottles, which he deprecates. For him, always, what matters is to get the patient to drink the mixture; and at this stage, and not without good arguments on his side, he thought he was more likely to drink, for his own good, and also to the promotion of sound doctrine, if advertisement was eschewed. He was deeply engaged in the alternative method. In the Progressive Party on the Council, he had got that association of good citizens for which he had pleaded in 1889 and 1890: and the Progressive Party was proving, under his leadership, a singularly effective instrument for getting a certain amount of practical Socialism quickly and quietly accomplished. So far as the foundation of the Labour Representation Committee went, the issue, as between Webb on one hand, and Hardie and MacDonald on the other, was one of method. Grosvenor Road was dedicated to a different method. Its entire atmosphere was of a kind calculated to cast doubt on the political instrument, as clumsy, senti-

¹ This legal judgment, delivered in 1901, arose out of an unofficial strike on the Taff Vale Railway in South Wales. The Railway Company sued the Railwaymen's Union for damages, which the Courts awarded it. The effect of this was to make every Trade Union, while legally denied the privileges of incorporation, liable to be sued in respect of any act committed by anyone deemed to be its agent which the Judges might hold to be actionable. Whether or no sound in law, this judgment plainly contravened the express intentions of Parliament in its 1871-6 legislation. The Trade Disputes Act of 1906 accordingly restored the pre-Taff Vale position.

mental and wasteful: as on the use of that instrument by men of the Hardie type. As against slogans, of any kind, Webb re-acted, naturally; he re-acted with particular emphasis at this stage, when to his native belief in administration was added the discovery of himself as an eminent success in the administrative role. Moreover who knew the Trade Unions, if not he? He thought, and justly, between 1893 and 1901, that they were at best lukewarm, and only accepted the Labour Representation Committee out of weariness with the persistency of Hardie. Since, therefore, little or nothing actual was going to come of it, the whole thing was showy, premature and rather futile. This is the note that sounds in his polemical journalism, at this time, and for some years after. It seemed justified by many facts.

At the turn of the century, political interest, generally, was at a low ebb. Of the rate of progress of Socialist propaganda in middle-class circles, the membership of the Fabian Society afforded a thermometer: one at which the Webbs naturally looked. It rose, steadily, if slowly, up to 1899: from that point it proceeded to decline. Part indeed, of the sheer heroism of Keir Hardie's effort lies in the fact that he carried it on, with tireless faith and unbreakable resolution, during a period of dull reaction so far as Socialist propaganda, and even so far as advanced Liberalism, was concerned. He won a formal success, partly because people were sick of his persistence. Then he and MacDonald turned that purely formal success into a real one, and did it at a time when everything was against them: when the outbreak of the war suspended ordinary political action, cut across the old political lines and produced deep internal division, even within the slender Socialist ranks.

Here, of course, we come to the major explanation of the attitude taken by the Webbs at this stage. On October

11th, 1899, less than a month, that is to say, after the crucial resolution of the Plymouth Trade Union Congress, the Balfour Government declared war on the South African Republics. War, any war, oversweeps the ordered world and swamps it under the hot tides of primitive feeling. These are not the tides in which the Webbs swim, naturally and easily. They derive from just those irrational elements in the mixed average human make-up they neither fully share nor easily comprehend. Between 1899 and 1901, as between 1914 and 1918, emotion rather than reason was in control. Passion drove minds back to "first principles," and about first principles, above all when expressed in high idealistic terms and tones, they both have always been more than a little sceptical. In some ways, the situation was even more tense than in 1914, and feeling consequently even more bitter, on either side. Not only did the actual fortunes of the war sway uncertain in the earlier years: the opposition at home was more formidable, and its position complicated by the existence of active and vocal foreign opinion, which enabled patriots to deride pacifists as being definitely "anti-British." In 1899, the small band which took a purely pacifist stand was reinforced by a much more considerable body of persons who disapproved of the Declaration of War on the Boer Republics, thought that the war had been brought about by a course of British policy wrong in itself and stupidly if not maliciously conducted, which was directed by a standpoint unworthy and unjust, and defended on grounds that were blatantly hypocritical.

The Government which made the war was a Conservative Government. True, the Liberal Opposition was divided. The Liberal Imperialists supported Balfour and Chamberlain, at first whole-heartedly; later, under the swing of opinion, rather more half-heartedly. But Campbell-Bannerman, the Leader of the party, early denounced the

“methods of barbarism” by which the war was being conducted, and roundly declared that “self government was better than good government;” and, despite the bitter attacks upon him from within the ranks of his own nominal adherents, his steadiness prevailed, his courage shamed his critics, and his point of view, in the end, became that of the Liberal Party as a whole. There was a longish period during which meetings sought to be addressed by Mr. Lloyd George, who was much more definitely a pro-Boer than Campbell-Bannerman, were regularly broken up, while Campbell-Bannerman himself was denounced in unmeasured terms, in the Press and on the platform. Yet, there they were, throughout. There was throughout a solid opposition—a fact that made the simpler sort of patriot uneasy: the more uneasy that the Boers were proving very hard to beat.

In the reaction of the Webbs, many elements combined to set them on the side of the majority. They were just back from a visit to the Empire. Imperial efficiency was a creed that appealed to them, potently. Although, in many respects, far from being “typical Britons,” they are, at bottom, very English; and in nothing more so than in a certain naïve, direct, and simple patriotic feeling. What he felt about London, they both felt about their country as a whole, and that in a perfectly normal form. To neither had the idealism or the knight errantry of Gladstone ever appealed. His Radicalism, like hers, was of the domestic Chamberlain brand, and there was much in Chamberlain’s outlook, besides his collectivist leanings, that attracted them. Their closest Conservative friend was Arthur Balfour; their closest Liberal friend R. B. Haldane. Efficiency at home and abroad: efficiency as expressed, domestically and imperially, in a high standard of education, public health, and public provision generally, was what they were out for. To have action on such lines deflected by mere

Nationalism was intolerably stupid. They had no love for the South African capitalist or his British friends, but the pro-Boer line seemed to them purely sentimental and Nationalist, and they read anti-war as pro-Boer. They were eminently not pro-Boers, though it is a travesty of their attitude to call them Jingoos. They were "Great Englanders," and could not understand the "Little England" standpoint, or what it was all about.

On this issue they found themselves in sharp collision with the Independent Labour Party, which, under the guidance of Keir Hardie and Ramsay MacDonald, was hot against the war. MacDonald, indeed, having been a member of the Fabian Executive since 1894, tried to get the Society to take his line. Webb and Shaw opposed him, on this. The Fabian Society was not a political society. They were in no sense equipped to express a view on the war: it would have no weight if they did, and would serve no useful purpose. Anyhow, the Society was divided on the matter: the effort to force the issue might break it up. That not to express a view against the war would be taken, in the hectic circumstances of the hour, as an expression of support of it, might be a description of what would be said: it was not a true description of fact. It was, however, another argument against pressing the matter to a vote, whose result, one way or the other, was certain to be misinterpreted. MacDonald however, took the view that "those who are not with us are against us." He was defeated after a postal ballot of members, which showed 217 for him, and 259 against. Inevitably, at a time when feeling ran intensely high, the defeat of the Peace resolution, as it was called, was interpreted as being a declaration by the Fabians in favour of the war. On that ground, a handful of members—fifteen—resigned, including MacDonald, and, oddly enough, J. F. Green, who was to defeat him as a "pro-German" at Leicester in 1918.

This division on the South African War between the Webbs and the Left wing of the Socialist groups lasted for some years. It accounts in the main for their alienation during the next few years from the struggles through which the Labour Party was being brought into effective life. The I.L.P. stigmatised them as Jingoese, which they were not; they regarded the I.L.P. as a bunch of pro-Boers, and regretfully saw the new Labour Party being led off into the wilderness of self-righteousness. There was, however, a great deal going on that they simply did not understand. Keir Hardie and MacDonald knew, better than they did, the oddly romantic souls of many thousands of British workmen and their capacity to be stirred by issues that had nothing to do with bread and butter. They failed entirely to grasp the emotional forces that were to sweep the Liberals back in 1906 with, as their hero, Campbell-Bannerman, simple, straightforward, not clever, but all the better for that, and with a bull-dog tenacity of will; or the immense changes of mood and surges of feeling that were, again in 1906, to send forty Labour M.P.'s to Westminster with Hardie and MacDonald at their head.

A clue to their outlook at the turn of the century is to be found in a very significant article which Sidney Webb wrote for *The Nineteenth Century* in September 1901. He calls it—he is always conspicuously good at titles—*Lord Rosebery's Escape from Houndsditch*. In this very lively piece, his point of departure is the extension, to that ambiguous statesman, of warm congratulations on having got rid of the "Gladstonian old clothes." From Gladstonian Liberalism, "dead as the dodo," with its "atomic conception of society," its "obsolete hypocrisies" about "peoples rightly struggling to be free," and its "*vieux jeu* Victorian Nationalism," the great centres of population in England are, he tells him, "utterly alienated." Unhappily, the

Socialists fail entirely to see this: to them he extends very short shrift. Thus, in a vigorous passage, he declares

“What hinders the formation of a separate Socialist party in England is always that the increase of Socialism is so much faster than that of professed or organised Socialists. By the time the professed Socialists were weaned from their primitive policy of the ‘conversion of England’ and the formation of an all-powerful Socialist Party, to a policy of permeating the existing parties, the horizon was widened by the rise of Imperialism, and the advent of modern world-politics. The Socialists, having no views of their own on foreign politics, immediately found their boom of 1885–92 collapsing; for a time, they could only account for this by the ‘apathy of the working classes.’ When the war came, the secret was out. Outside the two spheres of labour and local government, the majority of the Socialist leaders proved to be, with regard to the British Empire, mere administrative Nihilists—that is to say, ultra-Nationalist, ultra-Gladstonian, Old-Liberal to the fingertips. They out-Morleyed Morley on the burning topic of the day, and now, the Independent Labour Party is as hopelessly out of the running as the Gladstonian Party.”

No Front Bench, so he assures Rosebery, can be really effective, still less can it cross the floor of the House of Commons, unless

“it expresses not alone the views of its own political partisans, but also the inarticulate criticism of the mass of the people.”

What citizens are wanting is

“virility in government; virility in South Africa, virility in our relations with the rest of the world, and, by no means least, virility in grappling with the problems of domestic administration.”

So far as the British Empire is concerned,

“Our obvious duty . . . is deliberately so to organise it as to promote the maximum development of each individual state within its bounds. As with the factory or the slum at home, this maximum development . . . will not be secured by allowing each unit to pursue its own ends without reference to the welfare of the whole.”

Lord Rosebery is right about an Imperial race: let him also be right about National efficiency based on a National Minimum, in which Public Health and Public Education are the first chapters. Let him lay to heart the lesson of the London County Council.

“He is struck by the repeated successes of the Progressive Party in the L.C.C. But these successes are not gained by any enunciation of general principles, or merely by the declaration that the Progressives stood for progress, or for efficiency, in the abstract. They were, as Lord Rosebery knows, won by a persistent and all-pervading propaganda of a detailed programme of reform in every department: resolute and even extreme in its character; put forward by a group of men who had definitely thought out what they intended to get done; and who, at the risk of calumny and misunderstanding at the West End and in the City, did not shrink from painting the sky red with their projects.”

From this, and other articles written about the turn of the century, one gets a pretty clear view of where they stood. What they looked for was an association of men of good will for a programme of active social development. The I.L.P. had sailed off into romantic nationalist pacifism: Chamberlain was preparing to break up the Conservatives on Protection; why not cut across all this with a big social reform programme on non-party lines? If for a moment, they saw Rosebery as the man to do this, the illusion did not last. Webb, himself, had no idea of entering active politics, although just at this time a strong plea was put up to him to do so. T. B. Potter, a relation of Mrs. Webb's, had represented Rochdale for thirty years. It was a safe Liberal seat; just the seat for an Independent. Would Mr. Webb consent to succeed Mr. Potter? Proposals came through the “ordinary channels,” only to be politely rejected. Then, one morning, the secretary, on his way downstairs, discerned, through the glass door of 41, the figure of someone standing on the mat. When he opened the door, although he at once recognised the visitor, he enquired his name.

"Mr. Primrose, to see Mr. Webb."

Even Lord Rosebery's personal efforts did not, however, avail. To him, quite frankly, Webb stated his view—the Liberals were going to be in Opposition for twenty years; he could do much more good outside the House of Commons than inside. Anyhow, that he could ever have been a Liberal member, however independent, seems unlikely. Deep as his alienation from the pro-Boer attitude, as from every attitude based merely on sentiment, however exalted, there was no change whatever in his general Collectivist outlook. The difference between him and the I.L.P. was a difference about method, and arose out of his passion for getting things done. The "condition of England" question seemed to him, as to Mrs. Webb, of first concern. They must always have fundamentally agreed with Carlyle's irritation against persons who fly into a passion about the "green and yellow and black slaves," while the actual sufferings of millions of white slaves so much nearer at hand leave them practically unconcerned. Their optimism as well as their realism came into play here. Rather than the desperate and showy romance of storming impregnable battlements with flying flags, doomed to go down in defeat, they have always chosen the slow and steady path round and ultimately up the citadel. As they were to put it much later

"We are not pessimists, because we believe that, sooner or later, good feeling and reason will prevail."

Never in the darkest hour did they doubt of progress. Never did they give up working for it, whoever disagreed with them.

If they have always believed in reason, their practical good feeling has been not less striking. As a very young woman, she says "I love my friends—have never yet lost one." This remained true of both. Deep differences of opinion on the Education Act made only the briefest sus-

pension in friendship with Mr. and Mrs. Graham Wallas. They forgave Lord Rosebery his educational back-slidings. The more bitter alienations of the South African War did not last. 1901 did produce alienation but left no lasting breach. So far as MacDonald was concerned, the severance of frequent association continued for some time; as a member of the School Board, he attacked Webb, bitterly; but Webb did not retort in kind, and before very many years had passed they were working together, in a manner that does honour to both. Friendship was, here, never in question; that, between minds and tempers fundamentally antithetical, could not have existed, in any circumstances. To what she has called MacDonald's "artistic quality," to his personal magnetism and sheer mental power, Mrs. Webb has paid specific tribute; but neither of them ever liked him, nor he them.

The early years of the new century found them mainly out of politics. He was of course inveterately busy on the London County Council: the opposition, there, to the new Education Acts was protracted and ingenious; to overcome it, make the Acts work, called for all his skill and tact and all his sheer obliviousness to merely emotional motives. They were busy on their new book: they were busy on countless committees: they were busy moulding and directing opinion. In 1903 they dropped out an admirable little work on *The History of Liquor Licensing*—a sort of side-line in their vast Local Government enquiry: in that same year, he was made a member of the Committee on Trade Union Law which the Balfour Government set up, just before it fell. By then, even the Tories had begun to realise that something absolutely must be done about the Taff Vale Decision of 1901. This decision, in fact, was to be a major element in the immense swing of opinion against the Balfour Government when the election came. But there is no indication that the Webbs, on this or any other line, foresaw

the great revulsion of 1906. The emotional tides that culminated in 1906 in the return of a vast Liberal majority, and of a Labour Party of over forty members, to the House of Commons, were of a kind to leave them cold. Although in the 1920 edition of their *History of Trade Unionism* will be found the best account existing both of the rise of the Labour Party and of the forces and circumstances out of which it arose, they did not anticipate or share in its emergence. Oddly enough, the one individual, of those with whom they were closely concerned about this time, who did smell the coming political change, was H. G. Wells.

H. G. Wells had joined the Fabian Society in 1903, by which time he had already won himself a bright reputation as one of the most thought-provoking social novelists of the day. His immense vitality as well as his intellectual "background in science" interested and attracted the Webbs; they took him up, talked about him to everybody, and had the greatest hopes of the new and vivid drive that he could bring into good causes generally. He was then an ardent Socialist: ardour was altogether in his line. By 1906 he was all for expanding and reforming the Fabian Society: making it over into something quite different and much more Wellsian. His paper on *The Faults of the Fabian* was quite in the best early mutual fun-poking tradition, and nobody enjoyed it more at the time than the so-called "Junta," of which of course Shaw and Webb were the dominating figures. Actually read in February 1906, after the General Election, it had been prepared before it. Sketchy and quite unreal in its practical proposals (Had Mr. Wells ever been on a Committee before?), it was securely grounded on the assumption that Socialism, at the close of 1905, was in the air, and had only got to be intelligently condensed to become a mighty force. Why should the Society not exploit this superb opportunity? Why should it not come out into the open: cease to be

Fabian, and, instead, launch out on a great propaganda campaign—hundreds of centres, thousands, nay millions, of members? This trumpet blast reverberated thrillingly enough in the ears of many Fabian members who found Mr. Wells' personality and his reputation very exciting, and were struck by his prophetic flair. When it came to translating the fine ideas of his plan into action, it proved, tiresomely enough, that the campaign required funds, which did not exist: a membership, which did not exist: and a detailed scheme of work, which did not exist. Strong in phrases, Mr. Wells was weak in facts.

The details of the controversy within the Society are not, now, of interest to anybody: in the upshot, the struggle became one of personalities, and, in effect, a duel between Shaw and Wells. Shaw rather than Webb was the protagonist of the official view, the exponent of the practical against the purely theoretical. When, at the final decisive meeting, Shaw declared that H. G. Wells' motion amounted, as he had himself stated, to a vote of want of confidence, the result was certain. Defeated on his general reform plan, Wells then took up a new line. The Suffrage agitation was surging round them: New Morals and New Women were filling columns of the press, daily: the Socialists ought, he urged, to take a stand about it all: above all about the Family, and about Motherhood. The trouble was that "exactly what he proposed," says Mr. Pease, "was never clear." It was on his vagueness that the "old gang" disagreed with him. So soon as he pressed for something concrete, he got his way. Thus when he proclaimed that the equality of women ought to go into the Basis, he found powerful allies. Mrs. Pember Reeves got on to the war-path: she was supported by no less a person than Mrs. Webb, who took this opportunity of announcing her conversion to the views she had once opposed. Equality was therefore carried. What Mr. Wells wanted, however, was

something more than this; he talked loosely of "the substitution of public for private authority in the education and support of the young." No one, however, could gather precisely what he meant. Then, while the Committee, set up, at his instance, on the revision of the Basis, on his lines, was still at work, with himself and various allies as members, he suddenly resigned in the autumn of 1908. In his letter of resignation, he expressed disagreement with the Basis; since it did not include some sort of endowment of motherhood, it was a "miserable perversion of Socialism": and went on to state that the opportunity for propaganda among the British middle-class was "now over." His original stand had been for close co-operation by the Society with the Labour Party, and the running and exclusive support of Socialist candidates everywhere, to which end he got the Society to adopt a scheme in January 1908. Yet, in May of that same year, he supported a Liberal candidate against a Socialist in N.-W. Manchester, and declared that he should resign if the Society did not accept his view that "it is not a political society, and its membership involves no allegiance to any political party." As a matter of fact, on this May letter he had been hauled over the coals, to be defended by Sidney Webb on general grounds of the desirability of tolerance, and the fact that the Fabian Society was not a political society.

The incident of course, was complicated by personal action on the part of Mr. Wells, which, with his remarkable sense of taste, he has set out, from his own point of view, in *The New Machiavelli* (published in 1911) and in *Ann Veronica*. In the first of these widely-read novels, he did his best not only to pillory the associates and friends with whom the episode had brought him into contact, but, inferentially, to cast a slur over the causes for which, at the time, they had thought he and they were working in common. So far as the exceedingly spiteful picture of themselves was con-

cerned, the Webbs read it, when it came out in the pages of *The English Review*, with Spartan fortitude and a measure of perfectly genuine entertainment—hardly shared by others, who having laughed heartily at the picture of them, found their own successive portraits notably less funny. The affair made a great dust at the time: they refused to be put out. When, nearly ten years later, Mr. Wells sent them an early copy of *The Outline of History*, they at once wrote an acknowledgment full of warm praise of his work, which they have never ceased to think highly important.

If, between 1900 and 1909 they took no active part in politics, they were very busy indeed socially. 41, Grosvenor Road was, in these years, a veritable focus of opinion. There were some people who did not enjoy their parties. There were some people who did not enjoy Mrs. Webb. She could, and at times did, look her vivid expressive contempt at the merely social: and this meant that there were a number of wives, at any given time, who did not greatly care for her. Men sometimes, but less often, heartily disliked Beatrice: the men for whom her brains were too good, or her way of using them oppressive; they resented the way in which she "bore down" upon them. Something was lost, no doubt through the fact that some, of either sex, were definitely afraid of her. Those who got easily bored with discussion and preferred mere talk also found Grosvenor Road a bit of a strain: the conversation was apt to be on one note, and to be terribly well-informed: it was also constantly tending to degenerate into the useful. None of this, however, could offset the influence of a pair of persons whose knowledge of things and acquaintance with people was literally, in either case, immense: and who never let go.

In this sense they affected not opinion only but conduct. Few of those who came in contact with them escaped being influenced, to some degree, by the immense devotion, the athletic, almost ascetic, discipline of their regulated life;

by the standard of work they set before themselves and maintained, or by the unwearying steadiness of their cheerful faith in the views they held. Even those whom they exasperated had to pay a tribute of admiration when they stopped to reflect. They annoyed some of their acquaintances: annoyed them the more that good grounds for that feeling could rarely be given—which only made it worse. To drink they may, who knows, have driven one or two: to work they had inspired far more.

Not the smallest part of their contribution has been the visual fact of two Socialists for whom Socialism is not a vague, occasional aspiration towards a hazy, distant ideal, but a robustly practical rule of present existence, and of happy existence. Their action helped—the simplicity, nay austerity of their personal lives and habits. For years, Mrs. Webb on 'best' occasions wore the same crimson velvet dress—and very becoming it was. In it, with her tall slender darkness, her vivid flashing eyes, and her agitated dark hair, in which two wings of grey were beginning to appear, she could look very handsome, although she had an inveterate habit of tying herself into knots as she sat on her favourite low stool. Sidney was, invariably, in neat blue serge. They eschewed evening dress, as they did the sort of parties at which it was obligatory. Their complete abstention from large Society had its effect, as had their plainly genuine and genuinely humorous contempt for, and bright exposure of, the follies and foibles of social and other climbers. For some they talked too much: he softly, she shrilly: but their talk helped, notably in their constant habit of presenting the Socialist point of view as the one that really had got to be taken by any rational, informed intelligence. This enraged some people; enraged them the more that they saw them making Socialism respectable—intellectually and also economically and morally respectable. Not by toning it down, but by treating it as obvious, once

you began to use your head. The combination of tolerance with serene conviction, based on knowledge and on an experience incapable of knowing the taint of envy or jealousy, made them very hard people indeed to argue against. No captain of industry, no banker, no economist, no representative of that governing order which derives its easy authority from command over, and indubitable familiarity with, the world as it is, could "down" them. They always, he from one angle, she from another, knew more about it; the interlocutor could never get across his sense that their views were odd; they suggested to him that his were: that he in fact, could not defend them. Grosvenor Road, at this period was a formidable force—the more formidable that even the most hostile, unless, like Mr. Wells, blinded by personal spleen, had to see it as disinterested.

CHAPTER VIII

FROM OWEN AND MARX TO WEBB

IN 1890, Alfred Marshall's *Principles of Economics* was sent by H. W. Massingham to Sidney Webb, to review for *The Star*. He read its seven hundred and fifty pages through at a single sitting, "got up staggering under it," and wrote to Beatrice Potter:

"It is a great book, nothing new—showing the way, not following it. For all that, it is a great book, it will supersede Mill. But it will not make an epoch in Economics. Economics has still to be re-made. Who is to do it? Either you must help me to do it; or I must help you."

Impossible to say what the final order proved, in the work of re-making economics to which they set their hands. Mr. Beer, the learned historian of British Socialism, from whom the title of this chapter is borrowed, expresses, in that title, his sense of the achievement of the Webbs: their work for him constitutes a landmark as significant, and as constructive, as that of Owen or of Marx, the two preceding giants. He also gives it as his own view that, in that achievement, the master-mind was that of Sidney. Him he characterises as "an essentially constructive mind." He had, as Beer agrees, great allies.

"He has been greatly assisted by the analytical powers and dialectical skill of G. B. Shaw, and to a higher degree by the social knowledge, ethical fervour, and great literary gifts of Mrs. Sidney Webb":

but while their help and their contributions are not to be ignored, Sidney, in his judgment, is the veritable pioneer in the economic field.

With this judgment, whether right or wrong, his life-partner would assuredly agree. Always does she speak of him as "the senior partner in the firm." Always do their names appear in non-alphabetical order, as Sidney and Beatrice. And it is probably accurate, this order. So far as the economic substratum of their sociological thinking goes, he had worked it out, in its main and solid outline, before he met her. Again, on the purely economic side, the stronger strand in the texture they were to weave together was of his provision. Here as elsewhere, however, the effort to make any rigid separation between the contribution of one and that of the other is self-defeating. The interweaving of the strands is complete. The re-making of economics was a joint effort, in all its stages.

They have in effect, for this largely re-made economics. But what they have done has not been to create or expound any new economic doctrine of the abstract or theoretical kind. True, in the development of the law of Rent, from the simple application to land alone of J. S. Mill, and through the modifications imported into it by Jevons, into a law of general applicability to all the forms and phases of economic activity throughout Capitalist society, they make a contribution, and a highly important one, to economic theory in the strictest sense. Vital as is this contribution, it is not in it that their most distinctive achievement consists. They are, pre-eminently, the Einsteins of economics. Their major work is their demonstration of its essential Relativity.

That economics is a series of statements of tendencies, had, of course, been stated, before they set to work upon it. It is so described, for instance, by Professor Marshall, in *The Principles* which Webb reviewed in 1890. But, having made that statement, the theoretic economist was apt to leave it there, and forget about it; apt to proceed,

with increasing apparent authority as he relied more and more on mathematical formulae, to enunciate laws of seemingly immutable cogency, and existing independent of the circumstances or the form of general social dispensation that surrounded them. It is this assumption that, by their practice as much as by any specific precept, the Webbs expose and destroy. They show, in work after work, that the great mass of the supposed "laws" are laws only in the conventional and not in any scientific sense; that they are, that is to say, associated strictly with Capitalism, and are unrealised deductions from it. Assume, if you can, another background; another general system; and your laws will assume a different shape. For themselves, not only did they reject the "iron law of wages": they rejected all the "iron laws," and the whole apparatus of fatalism and inexorability by which the orthodox economists had sought to under-join their structure. Bit by bit, they brought about a great change, not fully recognised, and not credited to them. Their own practice was not to posit some other, and equally rigid background or system of their own. Far from that. They insisted on, and themselves loyally undertook, an interrogation, sustained, careful and disinterested, of all the facts they could lay hands on, of all sorts. They insisted on the admission of, and themselves loyally admitted, varying 'background' hypotheses. By this practice they not only demonstrated, beyond future oblivion or obliteration, that economic science can no more be detached from the human beings who are at once its instruments and its ends than can medical science. They rendered another service to truth, equally significant. Economic writers, in the nineteen-thirties, are, on the whole, less dogmatic than those of the nineties, enunciate their 'laws' in much more provisional form, remember *ceteris paribus*, and accept, in a word, the view that theirs is a relative and not an

absolute science. For this result, thanks are mainly due to the Webbs. The steady pressure of their practice, even more than their intellectual modesty, has brought it about.

It is not by accident but by intention that their description of themselves is always that they are sociologists. The very latest of their published works—the fascinating volume in which “after forty-five years of investigation into social institutions the authors publish, for the assistance of other students, a detailed account of the methods they have found successful”—is called *Methods of Social Study*. Of Social, not of Economic Study. Moreover, except for the series of volumes penned to advocate the proposals contained in the Minority Report of the Poor Law Commission, and *A Constitution for the Socialist Commonwealth* which are constructive Socialism: and *The Decay of the Capitalist System*, which is destructive Socialism (and unique, in being thus minatory and negative) the books which comprise the great body of their work are descriptive, rather than, in any sense, doctrinal. They are doctrinal only in so far as they are grounded in, and interpenetrated by, a rejection of commonly accepted doctrine: so commonly accepted, indeed so universally taken for granted, when they began their work, that nobody noticed that it was doctrine at all. Of this common acceptance of Capitalist assumptions, their books have been profoundly subversive. Here were two students, equipped as were few, armed at every point with knowledge both of fact and of theory, trained and disciplined to the highest point, whose works, looking, to the casual eye, just like any other solid sociological treatises, ready to pass, on approval, into text-books, proved, when their content was reflected upon, to challenge orthodoxy at every point on the line; and to challenge it by no crude frontal assault but by an insistence on enquiring whether the things it took

for granted really were things; whether its facts actually were facts, or mere notions, taken as given because never objectively and dispassionately scrutinised. They do scrutinise them, both objectively and dispassionately. Their originality consists in their complete power of divesting their eyes of the glass of habit which colours the vision of nearly everyone, without his being aware of it. They take nothing for granted. The great argument for Capitalism, that it exists, is to them, quite simply, no argument at all.

This sapping and mining of the foundations of Capitalist economics, like this revelation that economics was, in fact, Capitalist economics, was the more effective because, until they wrote their two books on Socialism, in the period after the War, they promulgated no large-scale dispensation of their own. They implied Socialism, in every word they wrote, and no one who read their words was in any doubt as to what they meant by it; but they never waved any banners. They criticised current presumptions, from a definite and clear point of view, which interpenetrates their historical descriptions and directs the logic of the subsequent analysis; but that point of view invariably appears as a deduction from facts.

Rejection of the inspired or dialectical method, was as has already been noted, a natural impulse in the mental processes of both, before they met: collaboration sharpened this native aversion from large schematic generalisations, and the entire superstructure of Hegelian-Marxian ideology. They are not ideologists; nor are they doctrinaire. If they ever seem so, the reason is that their passion for order makes them prone to identifications and classifications. They never forget that economics is a human science; at the same time, they are apt to over-simplify these same humans, and to get them too easily into expressive categories. When it is a question of facts, and the ordering of those

facts in syntheses, they are patient, painstaking, and entirely ready to face, interrogate, and admit any new fact that comes along. To opinions, they extend the same hospitality; they have always done so. Socialist opinions, like Capitalist opinions, have to defend themselves on their merits, and on the basis of their correspondence with the facts, included in those facts being their human reference. This alert accessibility, this persistent relativity, has been there from the start. They have never, for example, heresy-hunted. This is not only due to their tolerance; it is part and parcel of the genuinely scientific spirit, which can and does wait.

The background of their economics, therefore, is an unusually comprehensive and constantly growing army of facts, of all sorts. For facts, both are temperamentally greedy. By the time they came together, he was armed with an unequalled knowledge of history, and an unequalled familiarity with economic and sociological literature in English, French and German. He also knew a vast amount about the working of public institutions, from the Civil Service to the town council. He knew the mind of the urban worker; he knew the mind of the *bourgeoisie*. She complemented his experience, amazingly. She knew the personnel of the governing hierarchy, both in Government, opinion, and industry, intimately. She knew Trade Unionists and Co-operators, middlemen, artisans, and the captains of enterprise. He knew theoretically, she knew practically, the complicated world of modern finance: the intricate ramifications of the credit system, the technique of investment and of speculation. Their dense familiarity with "social and economic tissue" constituted an unique equipment. Economics, of all branches of human study, is the least detachable from actual circumstances, the most dependent on authentic familiarity with the concrete content of the phrase "other things being equal." Their

economics, thanks to this firm grounding in the incessantly changing actual, has almost no axioms, and few "fundamental" propositions, outside of the law of rent.

Their basis was the work of the Utilitarians, and above all, of John Stuart Mill. Mill was his hero, in his youth. They have gone far beyond Mill, without ever wholly dispossessing themselves of his potent influence. Above all, they have gone beyond him in the interpretation and exposition of the law of rent itself. Webb perceived, well ahead of any other modern economist, the relevance of rent, as a phenomenon running through all the forms of the application of mind to matter, of human labour of any kind, to material things, of any kind. He saw, of course, that rent appears in the processes of distribution as well as in the processes of what we call production, since there is no valid economic distinction between these two; man can move matter but not create it. He saw, that, throughout Capitalist society, there is, in every department, an appropriation and retention by individuals or groups of that surplus above the marginal return which is in no sense created by the efforts or the abstinence of the individual capitalists who thus appropriate it. Their appropriation of surplus product is, economically, theft. They have not made and could not make it: it is, essentially, the result of co-operative effort: it depends for its coming into being on that, and on the artificial prescription permitting an exclusive hold on certain parcels of the indispensable natural substratum which belongs, in its nature, to the community. This appropriation involves, in its turn, a gross maldistribution, vulgarising the few by excessive possession, and degrading the many by dispossession. It involves vast waste—economic waste, as well as social waste. Their Collectivism, their programme for the holding and control by organs representative of the community of the indispensable material substratum,

and the running, by them, of the indispensable common services, was no theorem: it was part and parcel of the war against waste. They foresaw that the application of science, plus the use of intelligent, i.e. co-ordinated, organisation, promised, in the economic sphere, a vast increase in productivity. They wrote, for instance, in 1920, that

“There is good ground for expecting discovery in physical science to go forward by leaps and bounds, in a way that may presently transform all our dealings with forms of force and kinds of substance.”

They also saw that this, under Capitalism, promised no necessary raising of the common level of comfort.

Such raising of the common level is only possible in so far as rents, created in the last analysis by social effort, are socially owned. In this central view they have never varied: it is the kernel of their sociological conviction. As to the methods and forms of social ownership, however, their thought developed, as time went on, and as they took in the new facts of contemporary development, saw the relevance of the Trust and Combine on the one hand, and the march of voluntary associations on the other. So, while originally set in a bureaucratic mould, it became thoroughly democratic. This development is characteristic: they have, on methods, always been ready to use a “working hypothesis” and never, as happens so often, become so attached to that hypothesis as to be blinded to changes it may require if it is to achieve the purpose that lies behind. For them, the major purpose is always clear; the world must be made into a place in which people—not some people but all—can live in freedom and in happiness. Any economic arrangement is but an instrument to that end: the waste on which they wage incessant war, is the waste of human life. The full transformation of society from an individualist-capitalist to a co-operative Socialist form must take time.

Its complete achievement demands a moral as well as an economic change: a state of mind in which men will reject for themselves a standard of luxury purchased at the expense of the destitution of their fellows. In the steady development of this conscience, they believe: "We are not pessimists, since we hold that reason and good will will prevail." At the same time, they hold—and have held, throughout their active career—that the establishment of a National Minimum, below which the standard of life of no citizen should be allowed to fall, could and should be brought about by ordinary constitutional means, and would, if so brought about, hasten the movement towards collective ownership and control, demanded on purely economic grounds.

In their Socialism, the characteristic notes are their firm belief in evolution as against revolution—in other words, what was later to be called their "gradualism"; their reliance on collective action; and their steady faith in democracy. In so far as they are in the line of development suggested by Mr. Beer, they stand, of course, with Owen in so far as he, for working purposes, and they, for working purposes, regard men as creatures of their environment; they, on the other hand, have, as they set out plainly in their *History of Trade Unionism*, no use for the Owenite, idyllic view of the State as the enemy to be attacked, captured, overthrown and superseded by the onset of the people, led, for the purpose, by some inspired Redeemer. Owen looked to a Redeemer: we call him a Dictator. They believe no more in the Redeemer-Dictator than they do in the Marxian theory of the class struggle; they believe in "reason and good will," and see some form or other of democracy as its most convenient instrument. Starting from the fact of political democracy, they realised, at once, that political freedom must carry with it first, some degree of economic freedom if it is not a mere sham; and second,

social arrangements that give not the merely formal but the conscious consent of citizens to what is being done in their name by their representatives.

Actually nearly thirty years of work were to lie behind them before their sociological studies assumed a directly political reference, although, during the whole time, they were concerned with the working out of democratic institutions. Instead, they were predominantly concerned with those voluntary associations of consumers and producers whose part in the life of the State was already important, and destined to become even more so; the Trade Unions and the Co-operative Societies; and with the activity—or inactivity—of the citizen in regard not to the governance of the nation as a whole, but to those intimate aspects of daily life which are controlled by local institutions. They in fact filled in the thick background of the world as it is, before they attempted to build it up as it might become.

From this point of view, as well as from the other standpoint that interested them—that of practical sociology—very great significance attaches to the enormous enterprise on which they were constantly engaged, although with serious and important interruptions, from 1898 to 1929. This is *The History of Local Government in England* which, when completed, fills ten stout tomes. Here, they were pioneers, in more senses than one. In recognising what he called “local collective activity” as a “notable element” in that “ever growing elaboration of organised common action” which is “the dominant characteristic of the social movements of the past three quarters of a century,”¹ Sidney Webb, even in 1909, when he wrote these words, was not pointing out something that everyone already knew. Far from that. To-day, it is true, everybody accepts the view—although sometimes with a groan—that “local government matters.” But it was not so, when the Webbs

¹ *Towards Social Democracy?* (Cambridge Modern History, 1909).

began their work, either as sociologists or as administrators.

When, returned from their travels in 1898, they settled down to the heroic task of writing the history and anatomising the functions, of "local collective activity" in England, they were preparing, as they knew, to chart a jungle. Their plan was as original in approach as it proved laborious and exacting in execution. About what was beginning to be called "Gas and Water Socialism," something was being learned, in practice, through the exploits of the London County Council and other local authorities; but in 1898 and even much later, its relevance was very far from being seized, even by politicians, even by professional economists. About the origins and history of English local government, next to nothing was known, by the ordinary student of history; it played no part in his text books. They say, with their usual modesty, in the Preface to the final pair of volumes which round off their monumental work on this subject, that they "have done their best in an almost untilled field." As a matter of fact, of course, they not only tilled the field: they showed what tilling means. The investigation and research, to say nothing of the immense intellectual effort of planning, that lie behind these volumes, are almost terrifying to contemplate. The work was begun in 1898; it was not until 1906 that the first, and not until 1929 that the last, volume appeared. Prodigious as the toil of research, it was accomplished with a scholarly thoroughness and an accuracy that have only been challenged on small points by the experts; while those who know most have paid the warmest tributes to the manner in which the entire vast and intractable material has been moulded and shaped.

Roughly, the scheme of this gigantic work involves a two-fold division. Four volumes are dedicated to the structure of Local Government in England—*The Parish and*

the County, published in 1906; *The Manor and the Borough*, in two volumes, published in 1908; and *Statutory Authorities for Special Purposes*, published in 1922. Five bulky volumes describe the functions of local government. A small but illuminating study of *Liquor Licensing in England*, already referred to, was issued in 1907; in 1913 came *The Story of the King's Highway*, and in 1920, *English Prisons under Local Government*, with a lengthy preface by Bernard Shaw. The gap between 1908 and 1913 is explained by the absorption of the authors in the Poor Law, and the writing of the series of volumes covering the various sections of the famous Minority Report, and setting out their plans not only for the break-up of the Poor Law but for the constructive provision of a National Minimum. Between 1922 and 1927, again, they were busy with political matters, and their works on Capitalism and the alternative thereto. In 1927, however, there appeared the first of the three masterly volumes in which the story of the functioning of local government is completed by the narrative covering the entire history and working of the *English Poor Law*. The first of these volumes deals with the *Old Poor Law*: then *English Poor Law History—The Last Hundred Years*, in its first part carries the tale down to 1834: in its second, issued in 1929, tells the story of the Royal Commission of 1905-9, and of the subsequent agitation: of the effect of the war on the whole situation: and of the practical "break-up" accomplished by the Local Government Act of 1928. The general shape of the entire survey—of which one contemporary reviewer truly said that it would necessitate the re-writing of English history, and another that it was more than worthy to be placed beside the work of the great continental writers—is clearly indicated in a paragraph in *Statutory Authorities for Special Purposes*, in which the authors sum up their conclusions as regards structure:

“When we turned to the subject of local government, nearly a quarter of a century ago, our object was to describe the organisation and working of a century ago, our object was to describe the organisation and working of the existing local government authorities, with a view to discovering how they could be improved. We realised from the outset that a merely statistical investigation of what was going on would tell us little or nothing of the standing conditions of disease or health in the social organisations that we were considering. We knew that in order to find the causes of their imperfections and the direction in which they could be improved, we had to study not only their present but their past; not merely what they were doing but how they had come to be doing it. Somewhat naïvely, we accepted as our starting point the beginning of the nineteenth century. But after a year’s work on the records, it became apparent to us that the local institutions of the first quarter of that century were either in the last stages of decay or in the earliest years of infancy. We saw that it was impossible to appreciate the drastic innovations of 1832–36, and their subsequent developments, without going much further back. After some reconnoitring in the seventeenth century, we decided that the Revolution of 1689 ranked in the evolution of English local government, as the beginning of a distinct era, which continued until the Reform Bill of 1832.”

At the time of the “Glorious Revolution” of 1689, and arising out of it, there appeared, they discern, a new policy: in fact, one of the most important results of the dismissal of the Stuart dynasty was a “summary end to arbitrary interference with local liberties.” Any interference, in fact, became “arbitrary”; and for more than a hundred years, the steady practice of Kings and parliaments, nay, their settled policy, was one of knowing nothing of what the local authorities were doing. There was an “anarchy of local autonomy,” and no system of local government whatsoever; indeed, the term “local government” does not come into existence until the nineteenth century. Such organisation as there was, was vocational in basis; but broadly it was true to say that,

“throughout the seventeenth and eighteenth, and right into the nineteenth century, the greatest county personage or the humblest parishioner stood on his personal status, whatever that status was.”

What lived on through this anarchy, were certain ancient principles, inherited from centuries before the 1689 Revolution, and embodied in certain local institutions. Of these the most significant was a relic of feudalism, the “obligation to serve,” together with the system of vocational organisation, which carried with it the principle of self-election or co-option. Property—and this in the main, of course, meant landed property—was further held to be the indispensable qualification for the exercise of authority, and often as carrying a title to such exercise. The whole scene was dominated by property, by local customs, and by the common law. It was on this that there swept down the Industrial Revolution. They would, one guesses, have small patience with that modern view which seeks to prove that this revolution was not one.

Hard to find, among the countless descriptions of the introduction of steam-power penned in one and a half centuries, a more illuminating picture of what it meant to the ordinary man and woman than that contained in the pages of *Statutory Authorities for Special Purposes*. Here is a book whose truly repulsive title ought never to have been tolerated, since it serves to lock away from many students a volume which, at any rate in its second half, is of revealing interest. Remarkable as is the swift and sure delineation of the “massing of men” that the New Power brought with it, still more impressive and more vivid is the terrifying account that follows of “the devastating torrent of Public Nuisances.” Those, indeed, with acute noses will find these pages hard to read, so violent is the assault upon the sense of smell delivered in them! After showing how the sum of changes effected in a quarter of a century

shattered the old securities, and, for the working people, brought new dangers and new sufferings, they present the picture of the New Capitalists laying the foundations of Democracy, and breaking up the old static vocational basis of society. There follows a passage such as they often drop, which is a veritable searchlight on the

“incompatibility between complete political democracy and the unrestrained exercise of property rights in everything that could possibly be made subject to private ownership.”

This incompatibility was grasped by Cromwell and by Ireton in the debates in the Council of War at Reading in 1647: but it was not so much as glimpsed by the framers of the Constitution of the United States of America; or by those French Revolutionists who

“unhesitatingly assumed that an absolute right of private property without limits or qualifications, was actually implicit in the ‘Rights of Man’ and in political citizenship.”

In the general sketch that follows, they are scrupulously fair to the Benthamites, who

“sought, as would now be said by the business man, to introduce into Government Departments the motives and methods of profit-making enterprise.”

The Benthamites tended to over-intellectualise, but

“No one who realises the state of things in 1833, when under the Reformed Parliament the Benthamites, for a few brief years, came into their own, can doubt the great public benefit, even with all their short-comings and defects, effected by the Commissioners who enquired into the Poor Law, the Municipal Corporations, and the sanitary condition of the population; or the imperative necessity of some such central departments as they wished to see established to inspect, guide and control the local administration of Poor relief, public health, and municipal government generally.”

The Municipal Corporations Act of 1835, with all its defects, was, they say, more truly judged by Francis Place,

who saw, as its outcome, "the whole country becoming eventually municipalised," than by Tom Taylor. "A popular dramatist turned bureaucrat" (he was secretary to the Central Board of Health)

"grappling with the Early Victorian stupidities of local officials, and the prejudices of the average sensual man, could hardly be expected to take an optimistic view of Local Government."

The Act, in truth, produced a "sweeping revolution, little noticed at the time." Local Government was, by it, cut off from vocational organisation, with its industrial, political and religious exclusiveness, and its ruinous view that "the direction of any service should be vested in those who performed it:" and vested in elected bodies, so that the consumers of public services, who paid for them out of local taxes, were given the right to control those services through their representatives. Many evils remained. System was not yet to be. Democracy was woefully incomplete, so long as the property qualification was retained intact. But

"With the one significant exception of the red thread of property qualification running through all forms of authority, which was retained intact, and, in some ways, even strengthened by the Reformed House of Commons, the barriers which had divided the English people into mutually exclusive groups were, in 1834-1836, so far as Local Government was concerned, almost wholly broken down. In the government of his parish, his Poor Law Union, and his Borough, the undifferentiated citizen-consumer, electing whatever representative he chose, became, in effect, supreme. The vocational qualification, once the very basis of Manor and Borough, finds no place in the reorganised municipality. Less complete, but scarcely less significant, was the tacit abandonment of the barrier of sex."

On this they do not dwell, although it would be highly interesting to have them do so. He, of course, was, from the very first, a complete equalitarian, so far as women were concerned; her conversion was recent; but it was

definite. This, anyhow, is one of the hundreds of significant points which they interweave into their survey.

In the great range of ten volumes dedicated to the history and interpretation of our local government, the "peaks" are the second half of the volume entitled *Statutory Authorities for Special Purposes*, and the volumes devoted to the history of the *Poor Law*. Here, the last two volumes have the distinctness and the actuality that belong to a record of events in which the writers were personally engaged; moreover, the material, inasmuch as they are here dealing with a single and separable branch of local government and one that is of immediate, even of political, relevance, is less unmanageable, more compact, much more easily shaped, than that of many of the companion volumes. As a piece of sustained analysis, the *Poor Law* books are masterly.

In 1921, the *Local Government* series was broken by the appearance of one of the most significant of their books, *The Consumers' Co-operative Movement*. Its Preface so clearly sets out both the great importance the authors attach to this study, and the place it occupies in their work, that it is simplest to quote its words—

"The reader will find in this book, not a history of the Co-operative Movement in Great Britain, but a descriptive analysis of its present position, with a survey of its relation to other manifestations of Democracy and of its possibilities for the future.

"We have now been for thirty years investigating and describing democratic institutions, and only in the twenty-ninth year¹ did we publish any volume dealing with national government or the Political State. We started at the opposite end, not only because the other manifestations of Democracy—in Trade Unionism and consumers' Co-operation, and in the various developments of Local Government—had been relatively neglected by other writers on Political Science; but also because, to us as Socialists, these other manifestations seemed actually of greater importance than the Political State itself. For we have

¹ 1920. *A Constitution for the British Socialist Commonwealth.*

always held that it is in this spontaneous undergrowth of social tissue, rather than in a further hypertrophy of the national government, that will be found, for the most part, the institutions destined to replace the Capitalist system."

The book does for the consumers' associations what *Industrial Democracy* had done for those of the producers. Beatrice Potter had already written the history of the Co-operative movement, in a small book that has not been superseded, has been translated into every known language, and sells as though new. No need to do that work again. Here, in the first instance, they are engaged in describing, analysing, and at times, faithfully and frankly criticising, the achievements of the voluntary association of consumers that, in 1923, "supplied to one seventh of the population half of their food stuffs and one tenth of their other household purchases." Significant of their general approach, as of a quality in their minds allying them to Jeremy Bentham, is the passage of almost lyrical lift in which they set out the various functions of the Co-operative Wholesale Society, which, "like the Vatican itself is—at least relatively to the resources of the average local co-operative society—omniscient and omnipresent." They describe the "Buyers' Mart" held every Tuesday, in Manchester:

"The spectacle, hitherto ignored both by the economists and the magnates of Capitalist business, is one of the most remarkable in the world of commerce, because it is a gathering, not of profit-seekers trying to get the better of each other, but of business men who are, and feel themselves to be, officials engaged in different branches of a common public service, having only the common purpose of the maximum satisfaction of the consumer's wants. The handsome sale room at Balloon Street is set with broad tables on which are displayed attractive exhibits of the wares likely to be in request, and of the novelties to be brought forward. The expert officers of each branch and section of the department are in attendance. To this weekly exhibition there resort the managers and buyers, and sometimes the

committee men, of the hundreds of Co-operative societies within reach of Manchester. At each recurring 'season' there are similar displays in the Drapery and other departments. Here societies can obtain all the 'information' that they need with regard to replenishing their stocks. Extraordinary as it may seem to the profit-making world, there is here no chaffering as to prices, no 'beating-down,' no attempt to make a clever bargain. There is, in fact, a genuine community of interest. The buyers can make their criticisms and complaints about past supplies. They find freely brought to their notice all possible alternatives. They are encouraged to offer their own suggestions as to what they understand their members to desire. The substantial meal to which, in company with the C.W.S. departmental chief officials, they are invited in the excellently organised dining-room on the premises affords a further opportunity of the highest value for mutual consultation on an informal basis."

Everything here, up to the culmination in the substantial meal, is characteristic. For that meal the writers themselves probably did not care: but they see its place in the scheme of things.

Both in the emphasis they place on Co-operation, as a method for the organisation of consumers, and in the importance of the place which they assign to it, in co-ordination with the organisation of producers through the Unions, in the Socialist Commonwealth, they are here developing a point central in their constructive thinking ever since it was, with brilliant insight, set out in her *History of the Co-operative Movement*, and amplified in the address she gave to the Co-operative Congress in 1892. Neither Trade Unionism nor Co-operation, she then stated,

"can achieve its full development without the loyal co-operation of the other. The proper relationship between Trade Unionism and Co-operation is, as it seems to me, that of an ideal marriage, in which each partner respects the individuality and assists the work of the other, whilst both cordially join forces to secure their common end—the Co-operative State."

This conception they now expand and work out in detail; expressing anew their opposition to control by the pro-

ducers on Gild Socialist or any other lines, not only because the self-governing workshop has, in Britain, always failed, and must always fail: but on larger, philosophical grounds. To make the "processes of production of useful commodities and services the basis of our social organisation" is, really, to allow the mind to be perverted by Capitalist error: subdued to what it works in. Work is not the end of life, but the means to it.

"Equity demands that every adult without exception should put into the common stock of commodities and services at least the equivalent of what he consumes, in order that the world may not be the poorer for his presence."

But,

"In any rationally organised community, this price should progressively diminish."

As for the part of time and effort devoted to "paying the price,"

"this must be determined not by what the producer chooses, but by what the consumers desire."

Consumption is the pivot, the originating force, whether what is consumed is bread and butter or the higher pleasures. From this point of view, then, they look at the Co-operative Movement, and take it very seriously as "one of the principal elements in the State of Tomorrow." In general indeed, their sense of the broad social significance of consumption is one of the keynotes of their work; it is from this point of view, as an exposition of this, that *The Consumers' Co-operative Movement* occupies so important a place in the great series of their published books. It is one that must be read and, in its latter part, will be read, with real mental stimulation.

Easy reading they are not, however, any of them; much less easy, for instance, than the Trade Union books. The art of helping the student by establishing a compulsive

grip on his attention is one they seem to lose, here, except in flashes in the Co-operative book: and never again fully achieve. True, the theme with which they grapple, in local government, is dry in itself and of an awkward shape; neither local government nor Co-operation is a topic that, of itself, attracts the average reader. The difficulty, nevertheless, is not due wholly to the topic nor to the reader. After all, to him, few topics could be less attractive, at the first blush, than an exploration into the obscure ramifications of Trade Union practice, which, in *Industrial Democracy*, are handled in chapters no one finds dull; on which the attention is held securely riveted, once it is captured. With their later works, the difficulty is not so much to read them, but to read them with sustained attention. The eye goes on, tranquilly perusing line after line, page after page, of regularly spaced print; suddenly, one realises that the mind has taken nothing in, one does not know for how long. It is not that one has sailed off into a dream; it is rather that, somehow, the words have passed over one like water, leaving no definite impress behind. As words, one has been aware of them, as they passed: but that is all. The experience is disquieting. One stops, to ask oneself what is wrong?

This difficulty of attentive reading is genuine, and general. It applies, moreover, to the controversial books on Capitalism and Socialism that were to come later, as well as to the Local Government books, if not quite to the same degree. The explanation cannot lie, therefore, in the subject matter of either set of books; it is rather a function of the form in which they are presented; of the style developed by their authors. This style, as met with in *Statutory Authorities* and the others of that series, is in fact, the characteristic style which they were ever afterwards to use. In it, too, one finds the explanation of the otherwise strange fact that their later works have,

to a large extent, failed of their full effect: failed, above all, in their full effect upon opinion. The stuff is there, but, for the majority of readers, it is not what the Americans call "available"; they just don't get it: something has happened to the medium of presentation which makes it a non-conductor. There is a muffling and blurring of the edge of speech; the narrative is fluent, yet somehow viscous. One is reminded of that curiously blunted language in which the Reports of Commissions and Committees, and of Government Departments, are composed. It would be more accurate, historically, to put this comparison the other end up: among other things they have impressed upon a world which, even at this date, does not fully recognise what it owes to them, is a certain form of architecture as applied to political and economic science; an architecture of expression, as well as an architecture of thinking. So thoroughly has this impression taken place that it would be, to-day, more accurate to say that Reports, etc., tend to be "written in Webb," than to say that their style recalls that of an official document. The result, anyhow, is not wholly a fortunate one. "Webb," at its most distinctive, is not really a good language.

When one attempts to analyse it, one finds that the trouble is with the sentences, not with the words. Their words are excellent. An immense vocabulary waits upon their commands. They coin phrases with the most admirable facility. For the particular noun and adjective, each of them, in single-handed writing, shows a keen sense; this they retain, for conjoint effectiveness. She has a special talent for psychological, he for institutional phrasing. One can never forget her "genteel surreptitiousness" or "discriminating penuriousness"; or his "sectarian and unsectarian intolerance" and "administrative nihilism." True, these examples, which could

be multiplied indefinitely, register accurately the general pattern of their phrasing, which runs into longish words, and has a marked generalising tinge. But they can always find the words and phrases to express just what they want.

While their words and phrases have colour and individuality, however, their sentences suffer from a uniformity of shape and structure. While they are cunning with nouns and adjectives, they treat the verb with marked unkindness. Take almost any sentence at random, and the verb will be found well-nigh buried under the other parts of speech: compelled to carry far too much in the way of dependent and explanatory clauses. It is always there; the grammar is above reproach; but it is overworked, and nearly always in the same way. Sometimes the long roll of the sentences achieves a sort of heavy eloquence; more often one feels crushed by the remorseless regularity of that roll. The pattern repeats itself; one sees yard after yard, coming off the loom, imposing in sheer weight and mass, but uninteresting in its sameness. The heavy sentences, then, eat up the lively phrases and the apt words; they are lost in the muffled texture of the whole.

The partners tend to speak, and they always write naturally and inevitably in the editorial "we." This is a habit that lends a definite authority to their pronouncements. The ample phraseology in which these pronouncements are clothed further tends to suggest that the *corpus* of opinion of persons of good sound sense is, in fact, being set out. The impact of their joint utterance has a formidable weight. But the advantage, like others, carries drawbacks with it. The dual mind is stronger than any single one. Its logical processes are more rigorously tested, and its judgments presented with less of individualistic angularity. On the other hand, the point of the dual pen is less sharp, the idiosyncrasy of the dual

voice is less challenging. Character, that mysterious element in style, suffers a blurring. The inclination must always be, in joint writing, to press as much into a given sentence as it can be made to hold; to make of it a portmanteau, accommodating and providing for points that have occurred to either, views seen from a slightly different angle by one or the other. So the sentences get longer and longer, and have the tired fall of something submitted to repeated drafting, emended and extended, with a qualifying adjective tucked in here, an adverb there. This heavy reinforcement by adjectives and adverbs, and, very often, by clauses and parentheses, causes a clotting of the flow of living blood which is the essence of a vital style. The practice of dictation, like the extensive employment of secretaries, must increase every inherent difficulty of doing, together, something like writing, whose very essence is personal.

Whatever be the causes, the result is indubitable. Many readers lose sight of the logic of the argument, and fail to realise how masterly is the marshalling of the material into an ordered, moving stream, because the style, the medium of communication, is unattractive. Readers, at best, are frail and *difficile*; the authors have not deigned to assist them by any concessions. Their prefaces are often tougher than the books that follow them; their titles are unprepossessing; their volumes are formidable to look at and uncomfortable to handle. Although they have lived, and written, into a period which has witnessed transforming innovations and improvements in the entire technique of the printing, presentation and production of the written word, they have remained unaffected by this change in format, and to all appearance, serenely unaware of it. The uniform edition of their works is an eyesore in the shelves that contain it; and Mrs. Webb's *My Apprenticeship* is perhaps the worst sinner in a row of

sinner, since it is too large to stand by the side of its companions. All are both ungracious to the eye and displeasing to the touch, and when opened they disclose pages on which good, though not attractive, type is set with the smallest concession to any visual sensibility.

This has to be said, since it explains why readers find the Webbs hard to read; and why, therefore, the net effect of their writings has been less than it would have been, had they been more easily accessible. Unhappily, they were not able to repeat, from this point of view, what is the veritable triumph of the Trade Union books: that, in them, economic writing is easy and agreeable reading. There are passages, in their later works, of a sombre eloquence: but these passages hardly offset the general impression above described. It is an immense pity, for there is no one of these "unreadable" books that does not contain matter, both of fact and of argument, of insight and interpretation, worth a far greater effort than reading entails. They have given, generously, so many gifts through their writing—a fresh angle of approach, a method of study, a real illumination of subject matter, a new standard of disinterested thoroughness—that the greedy recipients want one more: the gift of easy enjoyment. They have to do without.

CHAPTER IX

THE CRUSADE

THE history of the Poor Law in England is divided into two well-marked epochs, so far as the nineteenth and the twentieth century are concerned, by two famous Royal Commissions. The Webbs have written the story of both, in terms that are likely to be definitive, in the last two volumes of their Local Government series. The second volume opens with the following paragraphs:

“The Poor Law Enquiry Commission of 1832-1834 arose out of the intolerable scandals of the then existing state of things; and its revolutionary proposals were the outcome of a whole generation of abstract reasoning upon the misdeeds of local administrators. The active members of the Commission and their staff of investigators all belonged to the then dominant school of thought; and the evidence was collected and arranged so as to bring into overwhelming prominence certain prejudged conclusions. The Report was immediately accepted by enlightened opinion; and, within a few months of publication its recommendations were substantially embodied in an Act of Parliament.

“The Royal Commission on the Poor Law and the Unemployed which the Conservative Government appointed in December 1905, was in every one of these features the exact antithesis to its famous predecessor. It was not the outcome of any widespread or long-continued agitation against the existing system of Poor Relief. There

had been no breakdown in the administration of the Boards of Guardians, which had become, on the contrary, under the continued supervision of the Local Government Board, steadily more efficient and more humane. The 'Principles of 1834' were assumed to be in operation; and they were professedly endorsed by the dominant philosophy and administrative experience of the time. Criticism there was, but it came from conflicting schools of thought; and, owing to the consequent 'cancelling out,' it had produced little effect upon public opinion. The personnel of the new Commission differed radically from that of its predecessor. For good or evil, the score of persons appointed to be Royal Commissioners in 1905 were far from homogeneous in opinion. Although the majority of them represented the views of those who approved of the existing order, they found themselves faced by able critics of the very basis of the Poor Law Amendment Act of 1834. Thus the evidence collected by the Commissioners themselves, and by the staff of expert investigators whom they appointed, however accurate and comprehensive it might be, was used to support conclusions based on conflicting views of social expediency. The Majority and the Minority Reports were both elaborate documents, alike more comprehensive in their scope and in their recommendations than the unanimous Report of 1834; they had a record sale, and attracted wide-spread attention; but in spite of a large measure of agreement in their proposals they ranged those who were interested in social reconstruction in two opposing camps. After many promises on the part of successive Cabinets, in the course of a couple of decades, neither the one Report nor the other has been embodied in legislation: and even the changes which the Majority and Minority alike advocated long failed to pass into law. The Royal Commission of 1905-9 was, in fact, from a constructive standpoint, as

big a failure as the Royal Commission of 1832-34 was a success. What it achieved was a couple of discoveries which, like many other new truths, discredited and disintegrated existing institutions, without providing any alternative that the nation, at the moment found practicable. The two discoveries were (1) that the 'Principles of 1834' had been, almost unawares, gradually abandoned in practice, by the administration of successive Governments, whether Conservative or Liberal; and (2) that there had grown up, during the preceding half century, an array of competing public services which were aiming, not at the prevention of pauperism, but at the prevention of the various types of destitution out of which pauperism arose."

This account gives, with incomparable clearness, and distinguished impartiality, a bird's eye view of the effort that not only occupied the Webbs between 1905 and 1909, but carried them, in 1909, into an entirely new arena of work. From 1905 to the middle of 1912, they were occupied, primarily, with what, for convenience, one may call the Poor Law. They were doing all sorts of other things, as well; their Local Government books were under way: he was still until 1910 an active member of the London County Council. In 1903 he had been made a member of the Royal Commission set up, at the eleventh hour, by Mr. Balfour's Government, to review Trade Union law in the light of the Taff Vale Judgment. In that year, too, as in the years that followed it, he served on a Departmental Committee on Technical Education, on another on Agricultural Settlement and Emigration, and on yet another on the Territorial Army. In 1907, again, he was a member of the Committee which devised the plans for the Census of Production. All this, however was secondary; their major interest was in the Poor Law.

The Commission of 1905-9, of which Mrs. Webb was a member—indeed, *the* member, both so far as the Commission, at the time, and the public, then, and later, were concerned—was set up by Mr. Balfour on the eve of the General Election of 1906, which swept his Party out of power for the next sixteen years. The reason for its appointment, as its historians point out, was certainly not any general interest in, or even dissatisfaction with, the Poor Laws. There was no such general interest, at the time. On the other hand, that great social problem had begun to take menacing forms which we recognise as the characteristic challenging question-mark to our existing economic order. Unemployment was not, in 1905, as serious as it was to become, by the time that the Commission reported, but it was serious enough to have forced the Balfour Government to pass the Unemployed Workman Act of 1905, enabling local authorities to set up relief works. This policy alarmed the orthodox, and not least those who sensed the Webb mind behind Labour pressure in the House of Commons.

There were not a few, inside parliament and out, who believed that that same mind had had no small share in bringing about the appointment of the Royal Commission. Arthur Balfour was an intimate in Grosvenor Road: Gerald Balfour, his brother, was in the key position, as President of the Local Government Board: and he, too had had long talks there. Those who knew, or guessed, the history of the origins of the Education Acts of 1902-3, now saw the same tactic at work. It was no secret that the partners, on any great social question, desired nothing so much as a "grand inquisition" into "the facts." If it could be public, so much the better. If the enemy could be made to do it, better still. No enquiry could reveal so many facts of the kind which, as Charles Booth's famous Enquiry proved, create and mould opinion, as

an enquiry into the Poor Laws and Unemployment. Such an enquiry must, inevitably, become an enquiry into the immense progress of collective social provision, through the new Health, Education and other services, on the one hand; and into poverty and its causation, on the other. Inevitability was, anyhow, provided for, no matter how strong the efforts to avert it, when one of the partners was put on the Commission.

The opportunity made, they knew how to use it, and did use it to the full. Mrs. Webb, on the Commission, Sidney behind the scenes, threw all their formidable powers and talents into a congenial task. She was, at this stage, at the very height of her powers. There were very able persons on the Commission, which included among its members Sir Samuel Provis, of the Local Government Board: Mr. F. H. Bentham, an exceedingly experienced Poor Law Guardian; Charles Booth; Professor L. R. Phelps of Oxford; and C. S. Loch, Secretary of the Charity Organisation Society: but not one who could compare with her in swiftness of mind, resourcefulness, imagination and that higher kind of unscrupulousness which belongs to nearly every effective, driving personality. In range and scope of knowledge: in intellectual grasp and pounce: above all, in drive of will, she surpassed every one of them. She was, moreover, the one member of the Commission who, knowing exactly what she wanted to get out of it, made it her first concern, and never relaxed for an instant. Tirelessly, she was on the watch, ready to spring, to take an inch if given an ell. With consummate skill, she led witnesses on to giving her the answers she wanted either to support her case or to discredit their own. Nor was she content with witnesses: she successfully insisted that the Commission must organise special investigations. On any point on which she could not convince, coax, or bully the Commission to act, she set research

officers of her own to work. The Chairman—Lord George Hamilton—was snowed under by her Memoranda. Members and witnesses were “nobbled.” They were taken to lunch or dine at Grosvenor Road, where points they had not thought of were put to them.

Most illuminating, on her methods of work and of persuasion, or where persuasion failed, of stampede, are the notes from her Diary at the time, quoted in *English Poor Law History*, volume II. (The notes which are not there quoted would make still more exhilarating reading, no doubt.) From the first she says, it was clear to her that a head-on collision with their old friend John Burns, whom Campbell-Bannerman had made President of the Local Government Board, had got to be faced. He was in the hands of his officials. Four of the biggest of those officials were on the Commission. J. S. Davy, the arch-enemy, was not; but his evidence, taken early and occupying several days, was a forthright re-assertion of the “principles of 1834.” The first sitting of the Commission took place in December 1905; by February, she is noting that

“Charles Booth blames me for having raised the hostility of the L.G.B. He may be right. . . . On the other hand, if one begins by being disagreeable, one may come in the end to a better bargain.”

At this point, she had just had a fracas with Sir Samuel Provis. A month later, she had, “a most friendly chat, and he comes to dine to meet a carefully selected party on Wednesday.” She goes on, in the same entry, to say, “I no longer find intercourse with my fellow Commissioners disagreeable.”

In May, she is annoyed again; the Commission is

“lumbering along. . . . There is lack of method and discipline, with which some of us get impatient; and I sometimes offend by my easy-going ways—intervening when I ought to hold my

peace. 'You did not behave nicely to-day,' said Lord George Hamilton, in kindly reproof. 'You should not have referred to current politics.' So I thanked him warmly for the hint, and I promised to be 'seen and not heard' in future. I find it so difficult to be 'official' in manner. However, I really will try. Dignified silence I will set before me, except when the public good requires me to come forward. Ah! how hard it is for a quick-witted and somewhat vain woman to be discreet and accurate. One can manage to be both in the written word—but the 'clash of tongues' drives both discretion and accuracy away."

This was particularly apt to happen between her and C. S. Loch; and there were some lively passages. By June, after recording an instance, one among many, in which her cross-examination caused one or more of her colleagues to lose their tempers, she commends her own action on the ground that "Those Commissioners who have been sufficiently pertinacious have run away with the Commission." In July, she describes a field-day, on future procedure, at which she

"confined my effort to keeping open for further consideration questions which he (Lord George) or the Commission as a whole wished closed: Old Age Pensions; the condition of the 200,000 children who are receiving Out Door Relief; the administration of relief by Boards of Guardians; and, more important than all, the relation of Poor Law Medical Treatment to Public Health."

On this there follows an entry (July 1906) at once so interesting and so typical that it must be quoted, as it stands—

"This is a new hare that I have recently started. In listening to the evidence brought by the C.O.S. members in favour of restricting medical relief to the technically destitute, it suddenly flashed across my mind that what we had to do was to adopt the exactly contrary attitude, and make medical inspection and medical treatment compulsory on all sick persons—to treat illness, in fact, as a Public Nuisance to be suppressed in the interests of the community. At once I began to cross-examine on this assumption, bringing out the existing conflict between the Poor

Law and Public Health authorities, and making the unfortunate Poor Law witnesses say that they were in favour of the Public Health attitude! Of course Sidney supplied me with some instances, and I hurried off to consult M.O.H.'s, Dr. X, Dr. Y (Infant Mortality expert). As luck would have it, Dr. Z had to give evidence, and was puzzled to know what to talk about. He dined here, and I brought out my instances of conflict. In the witness-box, he made this conflict part of his thesis, though taking the Poor Law attitude, and complaining of the P.H. authorities' pauperising tendencies. With S's help, I drew up a memorandum emphasising all my points. . . . I am elaborating an enquiry of my own—with funds supplied by Charlotte Shaw (Mrs. Bernard Shaw): so I merely said I should, in the course of the next six months, present the Commission with a further memorandum. 'You might elaborate with a few more details the one you have already presented,' said Lord George, in a frightened way. And so it was left. At present I am engaged in finding a medical woman to undertake the enquiry, and on rousing the interest of M.O.H.'s throughout the country.

"Meanwhile, despairing of any action on the part of the Commission, I have undertaken, unknown to them, an investigation into the administration of the Boards of Guardians. I shall put Mrs. Spencer on to analyse the documents that are pouring in to me by every post; and Miss Bulkeley shall go through minutes. I therefore look forward to at least three memos. handed in by me—(1) Central Policy, (2) The Relation of Poor Law Medical Relief to Public Health, (3) Administration of Relief by Boards of Guardians, as well as the Report of the Special Investigators on the Relation of Bad Conditions of Employment to Pauperism.

"On these documents I shall base my report."

While busy in thus setting out lines of her own, independent of the Commission, and expecting, as she says later, to get into "hot water" over the means she was taking to get facts, one of the most valuable services she performed as a member was her insistence on the appointment of Special Investigators. Their Reports constitute, in fact, the most permanently valuable part of the bulky volumes containing the Reports, the Evidence and the Appendices to the Royal Commission of 1905-9. The Local Government Board Officials strove hard to prevent the appointment

of any of these "roving commissions:" she beat them. The investigators sent out by the Commission were men and women selected "for a task of genuine investigation, independent of their social and political opinions." They were most of them young, exceedingly keen, and highly competent: their reports had extensive personal observation as well as statistics and documents behind them. These reports proved in many cases, revolutionary; for the individuals who made them, the work, in nearly every case, gave a decisive turn both to their opinions and to their careers. Among them were Tom Jones, Cyril Jackson, Ethel Williams, Rose Squire, Constance Williams, Marion Phillips, Arthur Steel-Maitland, and Dr. J. McVail. The subject of the first enquiry was suggested by the Charity Organisation Society members, (C. S. Loch, Mrs. Bosanquet, Octavia Hill and Hancock Nunn): the effect of Out-Door Relief on Wages and the Conditions of Employment. This enquiry lasted two years, and covered the whole country. Its result surprised those who had pressed for the investigation, since it was to the effect that since there was practically no systematic Out-Door Relief to men, the notion of a "rate in aid of wages," stressed by J. S. Davy, and the C.O.S., fell to the ground. The section on women's wages in London was particularly impressive.

"Our investigation . . . has convinced us that, whilst Out-Relief aggravates most evils, it is, in itself, a relatively unimportant influence in comparison with other forces at work; and that its withdrawal would hardly raise the level of women's wages in London."

Later, the investigators drive their conclusion home—

"The primary causes of 'sweating' are the poverty, domestic afflictions, and physical infirmities of the workers, leading to industrial inefficiency, and an incapacity to earn a normal wage. Low wages in turn perpetuate low earning power, and a vicious circle is established. The rates paid are of secondary importance, compared with these primary disabilities."

The Enquiry into the environmental causes of destitution, like that by Dr. John McVail into medical relief, drives the same lesson home. In January 1907, Mrs. Webb notes in her Diary that

“The reports of the Special Investigators are all pointing away from bad administration as *the* cause of pauperism, and towards bad conditions among large classes of the population as the overwhelmingly important factor: conditions which, if we are to check destitution, must be changed. If we do not see to it that destitution is checked, it is, thanks to Democracy, too late in the day to check pauperism. That is the little lesson the C.O.S. will have to learn by this Commission.”

By July 1906, Mrs. Webb was already balancing the question whether she should contemplate writing a separate Report, or try to leaven the lump. She notes then—

“My relations with my fellow Commissioners are now quite pleasant. I am completely detached from them, and yet on most agreeable terms. I just take my own line, attending for just as long as it suits me, cross-examining witnesses to bring out points and conducting the enquiries that I think important independent of the Commission’s work. The lines of reform, both in constitution and policy, are gradually unfolding themselves to me. Whether I shall embody them in a Report of my own, or give up part of my way in order to bring the whole Commission along, will be a question of expediency and delicate negotiation, about which nothing can at present be foreseen.”

Early in 1908, Charles Booth was, very unfortunately, compelled, by reasons of health, to retire from the work of the Commission. His influence might have been, otherwise, very effective in bringing the “doubtfuls” among the Commissioners over to his side.

In the battle of principles on the Report Mrs. Webb succeeded in detaching to wholehearted support of her own line only three of her colleagues. Indeed since George Lansbury and F. H. Chandler were with her from the start, her one genuine convert was Prebendary Russell Wakefield, later Dean of Norwich, and now Bishop of

Birmingham. It was over the names of these four that, in 1909, the Minority Report was presented: a Report so famous that for two decades after its presentation, the term "Minority Report" was always taken to mean this particular document.

Majority and Minority Reports alike demanded the abolition of Boards of Guardians, Union areas, and General Mixed Workhouses: in fact, the abolition of the entire structure erected by the Poor Law Commissioners of 1834 for the purpose of deterrence. Deterrence both Reports rejected. While they agreed in demolition, however, they differed in construction. The cardinal point of separation lay in the fact that whereas the Majority, in order to maintain "unity in relief," proposed to set up *ad hoc* Public Assistance Committees for that purpose, the Minority said, in effect, that since destitution is a symptom of social disease, which ought to be prevented at its root, what is required is a break-up of the Poor Law, not its substitution. Its signatories called for the transference of various categories of non-able-bodied persons in need to the modern, specialised authorities already in existence. Thus, the sick should go to the Public Health Committee, the children to the Education Committee, the mentally deficient to the Asylums Committee, and the aged to the Pensions Committee of the various local authorities. At the same time, a Registrar of Public Assistance was to be set up for the purpose of financial co-ordination as between the different committees and any voluntary agencies.

Drastic divergence appears in the treatment of the able-bodied. There the Minority Report boldly stated that only the National Government could effect the far-reaching schemes of prevention and of curative treatment that were required. The unemployed belonged to very differing categories, requiring different treatment. Insurance; decasualisation; dovetailing of seasonal employ-

great propaganda campaign in favour of the proposals the Minority. In his younger days, as has been describe Sidney had been a highly effective propagandist; sin marriage, the field, if not the aim, for the influencing opinion had changed; they worked on committees, in th study, and behind the scenes. Now, they came right o into the open and conducted, on a grand scale, and with a the limelight possible turned on to them, a campaign o publicity, advertisement and pressure, at once splendidl organised, and highly spectacular. They personally ad dressed hundreds of meetings, large and small, and mos of them very large, up and down the country. They organ ised Conferences, national and regional. They ran Summe: Schools. They set up branches and committees. They gathered up an army of highly enthusiastic volunteers, as well as an expert paid staff. They ran a newspaper and a large office. They used their unrivalled social and political connexions to the full, to rope in influential support, and get hold of resounding names. They did in fact rope in some very noteworthy people, from Winston Churchill to Rupert Brooke. Winston presided over a great meeting in the St. James's Hall; Rupert Brooke and Ashley Dukes were among those who delivered leaflets from bicycles in rural areas. Other equally surprising people did other kinds of propaganda. While Sidney talked to bankers and to business men, Beatrice, equipped with new clothes, had society ladies to luncheon. They were ubiquitous and untiring. They spoke more and more eloquently. They wrote more and more assiduously.

An imposing National Committee for the Break-up of the Poor Laws was brought into existence, with Russell Wakefield (who had become Dean of Norwich) as Chairman, Mrs. Webb as Secretary, and a most impressive array of celebrities—what are called by propagandists “national figures”—among its members. According to the classifica-

tion used in campaign literature, they were set out in groups. Thus, "Literature" was represented by G. K. Chesterton, Beatrice Harraden, Sidney Low, John Masefield, Graham Wallas, Sarah Grand, Hugh de Selincourt, Richard Whiteing and Maurice Hewlett; "Learning" by Sir Oliver Lodge, Professor L. T. Hobhouse, Professor James Seth, Sir Frederick Pollock, Professor A. F. Pollard, G. Lowes Dickinson and Professor Gilbert Murray. "The Drama" sent Beerbohm Tree, Forbes-Robertson and Granville Barker; "Economics" Professors D. H. Macgregor, H. Stanley Jevons and A. L. Bowley, J. A. Hobson, L. G. Chiozza-Money, W. Pember Reeves and Sidney Webb. "Religion" sent the Deans of Norwich, Durham and Worcester, Canon Scott Holland, Archdeacon Sinclair, Monsignor Brown, Monsignor Parkinson, the Rev. R. J. Campbell and the Rev. Silvester Horne, M.P. Nearly every Trade Union was there; nearly every Labour M.P. was a member of the organisation, while G. H. Roberts, J. A. Seddon, George Barnes and Philip Snowden figured on the National Committee, as did Conservative M.P.'s like J. W. Hills, J. Henniker-Heaton, and Gilbert Parker, and Liberals like Rufus Isaacs, John Simon and Alfred Mond. The organisation, from the start and to the end, was strictly non-party, and by January 1911, the registered membership was over twenty thousand.

Not all, of course, but, in fact, a surprising number of the stars thick-set in the firmament of the National Committee were made to work by the Secretary, and work hard. A great many of them either spoke themselves, or presided over meetings. Thus, at the meetings, held in the spring of 1910 in the St. James's Hall, in London, at which Mr. and Mrs. Webb spoke alternately, they had, as Chairmen, Gilbert Murray, Sir Frederick Pollock, Philip Snowden, Winston Churchill, Bernard Shaw and Oliver Lodge. The hall was packed; in the overcrowded audi-

ences were "a large number of well-known people, highly placed officials, and even members of the Government." The members of the National Committee, great and small wrote articles and letters to the Press; they agitated, they talked, they worried candidates and M.P.'s; they lobbied assiduously, and with a holy zeal. George Lansbury and the Dean of Norwich, together with C. M. Lloyd, appointed as chief organiser, and Clifford Sharp, editor of the monthly paper founded in 1910, travelled, as did the Webbs themselves, incessantly from one end of the country to the other, addressing large meetings: meetings soon numbered between thirty and forty a week. Ranged behind the big names was an army of lesser folk, who worked very hard indeed, with a joyous enthusiasm and, often, a passion of hero or heroine worship. The heavy drudgery of the Central Office—at first housed austere in a basement in Clement's Inn, later on a grand scale at 37 Norfolk Street, Strand—as well as of the local offices in the provinces, was done by eager volunteers. Young women and young men from the Universities would spend hour after hour, day after day, in folding and addressing circulars, or acting as stewards and collectors at meetings, to be amply rewarded by a brilliant if rather vague smile from the General Secretary when she looked in, in the course of the day.

Destitution in fact, became "the thing" in 1910; talk about it penetrated even into the most fashionable circles. The Webbs became popular figures. With immense energy and unflinching enthusiasm, they threw themselves into a veritable furnace of work of a kind that to her at anyrate was congenial. A certain flame-like quality in her here had play, and she knew how to communicate something of it to others. Once again, too, the combination was ideal. If she lit the torch and waved it with thrilled and thrilling gestures, his quiet and much more factual presentation lent a rare authority to the case, which had

all the advantages of strong contrast. He moreover, suggested, when he spoke, a degree of lucid and objective impartiality about which she, often, did not bother. On the organisation side, again, he was supremely useful: a mine of suggestions, and a living principle of order. Anyhow, the thing "went."

The Webbs showed great skill in keeping their members up to the mark by giving them something to do. The columns of *The Crusade*, their monthly paper, bristle with suggestions. Members can push *The Crusade*: they can sell literature ("the difference between the trade terms and sale prices is quite sufficient or rather more than sufficient to cover the personal expenses incidental to such work"); they can collect facts.

"The Minority Report is full from cover to cover of instances of the failure of the Poor Law to cope with destitution on modern and scientific lines. But in order to keep our propaganda up-to-date, we want to know what is happening not in 1907 and 1908 but in 1910."

To help in this, a Research Department was set up and staffed at 37 Norfolk Street. Here the Head Office was a constant buzz of activity; lines were out in all directions. A genuine National Movement seemed to be under way. Mrs. Webb's Diary gives a picture:

"As I sat in my office this morning—three rooms crowded with volunteers—Bentham (a member of the Majority of the Commission) was announced. I gave him the warmest welcome, introduced Colegate (the secretary) to him, and asked him 'What we could do for him?' He seemed almost dazed with the bustle of the office. 'I wanted to see your literature,' he said. 'You seem busy here as if it were a General Election.' 'Perhaps it is' I laughingly replied. 'I wish we had somebody to organise our side, like you; no member of the Majority cares enough about it.'"

This was in July 1910. Perhaps stimulated by Bentham's visit, the Majority did get an organisation for the promotion of their views into being. After that, the fun became more

fast and furious than ever, since now debates and a real fight could be staged.

At the first Annual Meeting of the National Committee, it was decided to change its name; instead of being dedicated to the Break-up of the Poor Law, it was to become an organ for "The Prevention of Destitution." In fact

"within half a year, at the beginning of 1910, it became clear to the propagandists of the Minority Report that the frontal attack on the existence of the Boards of Guardians, bound up with so ancient an institution as the "relief" of destitution, was, in view of the prepossessions of the Liberal Cabinet of the time, unlikely to achieve any success in the political field. More effective results might be obtained, in the long run, by promoting, through an unsectarian organisation, the growth of development of the various parts of the Framework of Prevention."¹

If these reasons for the change of name were clear enough in the minds of its authors, the change in itself registered the fact that the more ardent of the supporters of the proposals of the Minority Report were claiming for them, more and more insistently, the efficacy of a complete scheme of social reconstruction, through which poverty could be wiped out. Nor, on the platform, was this panacea attitude always avoided by Mrs. Webb, although it was never taken by him. She has a great platform personality. Her picturesque appearance, her penetrating voice, her vivid manner, her rich flow of words, her ardent conviction—all contributed to give her a real sway over large audiences; and she was not immune from the exaggerations into which successful speakers are apt to fall.

Anyhow, during 1910, and into 1911, the tide of work and of apparent success rolled on. The capture of the Union, both at Cambridge and at Oxford, was typical of what was happening. They got the young, to a very large extent. The membership of the National Committee mounted: Scottish and Welsh National Committees were

¹ *English Poor Law History*. p. 721.

ranged behind the parent body; the number of lectures and meetings, conferences and schools, rose: meetings were going on at the rate of ten to twelve a day. Between October 1910 and February 1911, Mr. and Mrs. Webb addressed more than a hundred meetings, including special courses of lectures in Manchester, Liverpool, Birmingham, Edinburgh, Glasgow, Dundee and London; the London meetings being at the Caxton Hall, with C. F. G. Masterman, Sydney Holland, Granville Barker, and Maurice Hewlett as chairmen. Their personal heroism may be gauged by a note in *The Crusade* recording that

“A special feature was the half-hour receptions before the meetings, which enabled Mr. and Mrs. Webb to meet and converse with a number of members and of members’ friends.”

In the summer of 1911, a four-day National Conference on the Prevention of Destitution was held in London, under the presidency of the Lord Mayor, and attended by over a thousand delegates. There were too many delegates for their comfort, since London happened to be in the middle of a heat-wave! Nevertheless, they sat, packed in the various rooms of the Caxton Hall, listening to expert papers and more or less expert discussion on specific aspects of the problem. The proceedings were enlivened by a great public meeting at the Albert Hall, which again was packed, with speeches by Arthur Balfour, Sir John Simon (Attorney-General at the time) and Mr. Ramsay MacDonald, the leader of the Labour Party. The Conference was thoroughly non-party in character, nor did either Mr. or Mrs. Webb appear among the speakers at it.

After this, in the middle of June, they sailed from Liverpool for Canada, whence they crossed to Japan, travelling home via China, Singapore and India. Of their experiences, which included an escape from Peking in the last train to leave that city: an escape rendered possible by the fact

that the engine-driver was an Englishman, and recognised them: they wrote long descriptive accounts for *The Crusade*.

In determining to go on this journey, they expressed, plainly enough, their recognition of what, under all the apparent glow of success and achievement, was really happening. They knew, despite the great publicity they had organised, and the imposing public sentiment they had got ranged behind them, that the agitation was, in fact, at a dead-end. It still looked very powerful: but it had come up against forces too strong for it. Political forces. They were not tilting at one specific grievance, such as could be removed, if public opinion demanded it, by a simple act. Their programme was essentially a large scale constructive one; it could only be realised through legislation, and legislation of a comprehensive and far reaching character. Such legislation could only issue from a Government.

True, they had, within the first six months of the campaign, not only got a parliamentary Bill drafted by a rising young Socialist barrister, Mr. H. H. Slessor, but had secured its Second Reading debate. That debate, however, although *The Crusade* did its best to be cheerful about it, was of a profoundly discouraging character, from the point of view of Governmental action. True, the Prime Minister, Mr. Asquith, and the Leader of the Opposition, Mr. Balfour, both spoke: and Mr. Balfour, in the freedom of Opposition, showed "a real comprehension of the essential features of the problem." More significant is the comment on Mr. Asquith's remarks. "Mr. Asquith was hampered by the fact that he had the President of the Local Government Board (Mr. John Burns) seated beside him." In the Liberal Government, the key man, from their point of view, was John Burns: and John Burns' hostility had never been concealed. Had not Mrs. Webb, on the Commission, faced a "head-on collision" with him, from the start? She had had her fun: he, now, was having

his. If, for a time, they "collared" Winston Churchill, he was no "stayer": on Lloyd George, who was, by now, visibly, and very rapidly rising to be the dominant figure in the Cabinet, above all over the entire range of domestic issues, they never had any influence. His mind was moving in quite other directions: directions that cut right across their plans. From the start, knowing that the existence of John Burns, one-time friend, now, politically, open enemy, made any really effective "capture" of the Liberal party, as such, impossible, they strove to organise the campaign on a non-party basis. Unfamiliar as they inevitably were with the potency of party affiliations, and the ineffectiveness, in national politics, of non-party action, they believed that they could cut across party lines, and get a goodwill consensus strong enough to force action on a Government.

The success achieved in the capture of the Progressives for a programme of far-reaching Municipalisation misled them, here. Yet it was to that end that they strove to keep rather in the background the fact that their most whole-hearted support came from the ranks of the Labour Party. They did not present the Minority proposals as Socialism, at this stage; on the contrary. This very subterfuge, in so far as it was one, confused the issue, and certainly gave a further excuse for inaction by the dominant parties. They never really got any considerable body of Conservative support: yet, for its sake, they were forced to sacrifice the opportunity of getting a genuine working class drive behind their proposals.

They saw this, before they left England; they saw it even more clearly when they got back. Somehow, the high tide was receding. The enthusiastic meetings went on: the Webbs continued to be national figures of vivid prominence; but the thing began to have a stale, unreal, and repetitive feel. Quietly, the Local Government Board was putting its house in order; but nothing was going to be done, beyond that. Both the trend of industrial events, and the

swing of political forces, was against them. The trade depression of 1907-10 was ending: in 1911, the curve of business and of employment was beginning to rise. Prices too were going up, and the minds of the Unions were set to wages questions, rather than to the problems of destitution. More important still, Mr. Lloyd George was launching his Social Reform programme, on lines far removed from theirs, and detaching the support of the volatile Mr. Churchill for them. The establishment of a network of Labour Exchanges, and in 1911, of Contributory Insurance against Unemployment, on a limited scale, seemed to take the sting out of their proposals, under this head. Later in the same year, came his National Health Insurance legislation, again, on a contributory basis. This, after acute divisions, the Labour Party, in the House of Commons, decided to support. As the Webbs put it succinctly, much later,

“Although these schemes of social insurance left untouched both the evils and the cost of the Poor Law, and thus gave the go-by to the proposals of the Commission, they presently absorbed the whole attention not only of the Cabinet and the legislature, but of the public. All the steam went out of the movement for extinguishing the Boards of Guardians.”¹

It is not without significance, that in this comment they speak as though what they had been aiming at was simply the “abolition of the Boards of Guardians.” As a matter of fact, had that been their simple, single proposition, they might have got it through. It never was; and, as an item, it fell more and more into the background. The very widening of the issue; the expansion of the campaign into a war against Destitution, all along the line, and for the establishment of a “Framework of Prevention,” militated against the achievement of the more limited objective.

Anyhow, the battle was lost: the field of fighting had been transferred. Indeed, even *The Crusade*, throughout

¹ *English Poor Law History*, p. 723.

1912, has to devote as many pages to the new Insurance Bill as to the Campaign. These pages are highly critical. The Webbs in effect had to accept a most difficult kind of defeat. Some of the things they wanted done were being done, in what they thought a fatally wrong way: a way that blocked future advance on the right line. Yet at the same time the public mind had been completely deflected from attention to their alternative proposals. They saw this. They knew that they were beaten.

In the summer of 1912, accordingly, Mrs. Webb tells the readers of *The Crusade* that

“The general acceptance of our policy puts us in a difficulty. We have almost, it seems, reached ‘saturation point’ as regards public opinion. We cannot go on forever expounding the Minority Report to audiences already converted to it.”

In 1912, a second great National Conference was held, and most successfully; but, long before that year was out, the decision had been taken, and was being put into effect. While volunteers were to continue to meet the demand for lectures, and the Press Committee was to go on, and the work of replying to enquirers; while “We shall not let slip any opportunity of doing useful work,” and “shall maintain a watchful eye in order to note (and promptly take means to circumvent and oppose) any reactionary proposal,” no further subscriptions are to be asked for. The office was to be kept on at half strength; but, as Mrs. Webb puts it,

“My husband and I feel that we must ourselves now take up new ground, and turn our main energies in other directions.”

The Crusade appeared for the last time in that form in March 1913; in April 1913, the editor transferred himself to *The New Statesman*, a sixpenny weekly, which then started a useful career that was to last for the next sixteen years, until in 1930, it absorbed the *Liberal Nation*.

Although not formally connected, at its foundation, with the National Committee, the *Statesman's* directors, and practically all its shareholders were members. Mrs. Webb was herself a director, while Sidney was Chairman. The editor was given all freedom. At the same time, as she puts it in her Valedictory to *The Crusade*,

"We shall both write a great deal, probably every week; and we shall have the assistance of a brilliant staff—is not Mr. Bernard Shaw himself one of us?—and quite special correspondents from all parts of the world."

Those who took out subscriptions before April 12th were to get their *Statesman* for a guinea a year: a plan then new in journalism, and highly successful.

Nowhere do the qualities that make the Webbs great shine out more clearly than in the two volumes they were later to devote to the history of the English Poor Law in two centuries, and incidentally, of the Crusade for the Minority Report. They shine above all, in the passage, where, after a brief account of the great campaign, they record its failure, as such, and then pass on to a survey of Poor Law development, and the development of Prevention, since 1910, which is absolutely detached in its appraisals and in its analysis.

They knew what had happened. The politicians had beaten them. John Burns, from his stronghold in the Local Government Board, had proved stouter to resist than they to attack. It was a major defeat, such as they were far too shrewd and far too able as strategists not to recognise and understand. Unforgettably they had learned the vital importance of the political side of social effort, and the relative inefficacy of non-party action.

CHAPTER X

THE WAR YEARS

For reasons which they were far too intelligent not to see, and far too candid not to admit, the great agitation of 1909-12 was a failure. The intense activity of those years gave them, it is true, a kind of visible prominence and recognised potency as public figures. For this, they cared little; he, indeed, positively disliked it. Anyhow, it was no offset to the realisation, as part cause of that failure, of a strong tide of feeling obviously setting in, derived from emotions and ideas in which they disbelieved and of which they disapproved, and leading to a kind of action they regarded, at best, as irrelevant, and, at worst, as pernicious.

As, in 1899, they returned from the New World to find the Old in the grips of all the tumultuous passions of the South African War, so, very soon after their return from China, Japan and India in the winter of 1911, they became aware of a ferment brewing. Its full outcome they could not foresee: but they could and did see that it threatened to undermine nearly everything they believed in. It is the major advantage of any extended absence from one's own land that, on return, an outline looms up at one such as can rarely be perceived by the immersed inhabitant. An outline loomed up at them in 1911; it disquieted them, profoundly.

It is become habitual to-day to look back upon the pre-war decade, and above all, the two or three years immediately preceding the fatal "stumble into catastrophe,"

as a sort of Golden Era of peace, progress and prosperity. How short are memories! Anyone alive then who now makes the effort to reconstruct that period in its detail will discover that there comes back to him an atmosphere cumulatively hectic, uneasy, and so little happy that even the least sensitive were aware of some deep disorder in the frame of things. The externals of prosperity were there, inasmuch as between 1912 and 1914 trade was good and business flourishing; but, politically and industrially, there was a far-reaching sense of insecurity and unrest, while the colour of thought and feeling was shot with angry hues of violence and the belief in force. The current philosophy of the day was re-acting strongly against reason, and installing instinct in its place: instinct which must not be thwarted or even controlled. Action was extolled above thought. Bergson and Coué were preparing the way for Freud and Sorel.

The political scene was dominated by militancy, both in the women's struggle for emancipation, and in the armed resistance to Home Rule preparing in North-East Ulster; and while the Asquith Government did carry out a savage, if ineffective, repression of the women's efforts, leading statesmen, high Army chiefs, and all the best drawing-rooms in London applauded the appeal to the sword in Ireland. Industrially, 1911 to 1914 was an epoch of strikes, actual and threatened, such as had not been known for decades: and of an apparent conversion of the British Trade Union movement to the technique of "direct action." There were strikes, between 1911 and 1913, of railwaymen, miners, transport workers, building trades workers, engineers, and shipbuilders: labour disputes, which totalled under four hundred in 1908, rose to over nine hundred in 1913: and in the first half of 1914 were declared at the rate of something like one hundred and fifty a month: in the late summer of that

year, industrial upheaval very much on the scale of 1926 would have been experienced but for the outbreak of war. The Webbs, in the 1920 edition of their *History of Trade Unionism*, say bluntly: "British Trade Unionism was, in fact, in the summer of 1914, working up for an almost revolutionary outburst of gigantic industrial disputes." Tom Mann had come back from Australia to preach Syndicalism, the control over industry by the workers engaged in it, and to rouse them, if he could, to seize power through a vigorous declaration and practice of the Class War. At the same time, orderly Collectivism was being vigorously attacked. The revulsion against it, and against the Webbs, was harsh. Their non-party attitude during the Minority campaign had alienated many Labour people and groups: they stood, moreover for a kind of outlook which ran entirely counter to the new mood. The swing against them was violent. In 1913 and 1914 the very word, Collectivism, was enough to produce a jeer at Labour meetings. The unofficial *Daily Herald*, founded about this time, was a purely militant organ, both on Suffrage and on Strikes. It treated the Webbs with hostile derision. Its regular term for St. Stephen's was "The House of Pretense": its attitude to the Labour Party there purely hostile. It voiced, with angry acrimony, a pretty general disappointment, born of too sanguine hopes of what a small Labour Opposition could actually accomplish. It inveighed against parliamentarism and even against democracy on lines not very different from those of its colleague on the other side, *The Morning Post*. And it saw the Webbs as epitomising everything it hated.

Here, then, were the "other directions" to which, so Mrs. Webb wrote in March 1913, she and her husband felt that they must turn their energies. Here was a threat to all that they cared for and had worked for: a threat

that was the more formidable because, being mainly psychological, it was hard to measure, harder to get hold of and rebut. That, inside the Labour and Trade Union movement, a definite phase of the new agitation was an attack on them, personally, and as the High Priests of Bureaucratic Collectivism, they took with *sang froid*. Just as they read *The New Machiavelli* without rancour and with real amusement, so they read Hilaire Belloc's *Servile State*. They argued, on public platforms, and in their own drawing-room, with Mr. Belloc and his friends, and with the new, young school of prophets of *The New Age*, with perfect good temper: a serene affability that their opponents found intensely hard to bear.

The "barrage" of hostile criticism, to which they were exposed was, of course, disagreeable. They are human. They did not enjoy it. They enjoyed it the less, from the suddenness of its contrast. But if it distressed them, the reason was because such attack appealed to, and derived its effectiveness from, dangerous elements of sheer irrationality and class bitterness. They did fullest justice to the facts that lay behind the "disappointment with democracy" that was being exploited—the lag of wages behind prices: the long failure to redress the blank injustice of the Osborne Judgment of 1909 (which made the political levy of the Trade Unions illegal—a position redressed in 1913, but put back by the Act of 1927); the particular hardships of many great groups of workers, of which miners and railwaymen were the outstanding cases; and the general atmosphere of uncertainty and restlessness. It perturbed them, however, gravely, because it was affecting, in first line, the two groups in the community to which they had, in first line, devoted their most constant efforts—the organised workers and the intelligent young. These mattered infinitely more to them than the politicians, from whom they still held more or less aloof.

The case of the young was serious. Always, they had gathered the upcoming generation to them at Grosvenor Road; young politicians, of any party: young Trade Unionists: young journalists and literary and scientific workers of keen mind: young lecturers at the London School of Economics. Rows of young men who were to achieve distinction of some kind—W. H. Beveridge, R. H. Tawney, Arthur Salter, Walter Layton, Arthur Steel-Maitland, Walter Elliot, Leonard Woolf, Maynard Keynes—these, and dozens more, had been habitués, and even sat at their feet at one time or another. With young men, and, to a slightly less degree, with young women, Mrs. Webb, in particular, had a very happy touch. Her “young men,” indeed, had been something of a friendly joke in the hey-day of the Minority Report agitation. Now, the breakaway was serious among the young, both in the Trade Union ranks, where Tom Mann was leading it: and among the intellectuals, where, even inside the Fabian Society, G. D. H. Cole and Clifford Allen were heading a new “reform” movement, within the citadel.

Mrs. Webb's own connexion with the Fabian Society had, during the years between 1892 and 1912, been largely passive. She was, of course, a member; in 1907, she had suddenly leapt into action on the question of the equal status of women. But it was not until their return from the 1911 travels that she expressed a readiness to stand for the Executive. She was at once elected, with a vote very nearly as large as that practically unanimous one given to her husband year after year, ever since his entry into the Society. Once on, she immediately began to function. The first fruit of her activity was the establishment of a Research Department, of a semi-independent kind, specially financed, and designed to substitute organised, expert, collective research for the more or less individual research such as had given birth to nearly all the Fabian

Tracts. The results were to be, and actually were, published in the first instance in the form of Supplements to *The New Statesman*. The first two lines of enquiry opened up, through special Committees appointed for the purpose, were "Land Problems and Rural Development," and "The Control of Industry." On the first, no controversy arose. A Report was prepared and published, first in the *Statesman*, and later in book form. The Second, however, was another matter. Here, under the standing Webb formula, "First know the Facts," the very core of the industrial ferment was being attacked. William Mellor, who had been appointed secretary of the new Research Department, was with G. D. H. Cole, among the most ardent and effective prophets of a school of interpretation of the facts bearing on the control of industry which was in sharp and expressed antagonism to the Webbs. Mellor and Cole not only held the view that the *History of Trade Unionism* and even more urgently, *Industrial Democracy*, required to be re-written; they were ready to do it, and viewed the Research Department as their instrument for that useful purpose.

To this view, with facts fully on their side, the Webbs were able, politely but firmly, to say "Nonsense," when in 1920 they penned new Prefaces to both works. In 1933, it is even clearer than it was in 1920, that Gild Socialism, as the positive doctrine of Cole, Mellor and their associates, came to be called, was only one of those sporadic off-shoots from the main line of development which grow lustily for a time, and then wither for lack of organic sap. But the position appeared very different, in 1913-14.

Syndicalism—the doctrine of "all power to the producer"—swept over the French Labour movement, with M. Georges Sorel's *Reflexions sur la Violence* as its sympathetic textbook for the intelligentsia. Crossing the Channel, it was, by the same intelligentsia, subjected to a sea change. In

South Wales, Tom Mann preached Syndicalism, neat: but in *The New Age*, A. R. Orage, A. J. Penty in the earlier phase, G. D. H. Cole and W. Mellor in the later, gave it a romantic gloss of Medievalism and William Morris. Actually, the text books on Gild ideas, together with the lion's share of organising what was at one stage a quite impressive movement, belong to G. D. H. Cole. He, after an unsuccessful effort, from a position on its Executive, to convert the Fabian Society resigned his membership in 1915, to found his National Gilds League. Owing to his drive and energy, the close connexion he established with the Engineers, and the circumstances of the war itself, notably in Munitions establishments, the National Gilds League was, for a stage, a factor in industrial life of genuine importance. Its underlying ideas, as set out by him in *The World of Labour* (published in 1913) and in other subsequent books, represent a thorough-going attack on the whole Webb position. The frontispiece to *The World of Labour*, drawn by Will Dyson, shows the hapless and emaciated form of British Labour extended on the operating table, with Sidney and Beatrice preparing to make the vital incision, while MacDonald, in a graceful, languid pose, leans over the end of the table as anæsthetist, the chloroform he is administering being drawn from St. Stephen's. Behind the Webbs are Sydney Olivier, E. R. Pease, Will Crooks, Lloyd George, Masterman and Snowden: round the arena, in the middle distance, are Hyndman and G. B. Shaw in one group, Belloc, G. K. Chesterton and George Lansbury in another. In his opening chapter, Mr. Cole draws a distinction between the British and Continental Labour movements, gravely to the disadvantage of the former:

“It is the most striking contrast between the British and the Continental Labour movements that here the intellectuals seem to have so little influence as to be almost negligible. . . . In reality, we have been saved from important divergencies within

the Labour Movement not because our intellectuals have had no influence, but because a single and very practical-minded body of them long ago carried the day. The first leaders of the Fabian Society, and in particular Mr. and Mrs. Sidney Webb, were able so completely, through the Independent Labour Party, to impose their conception of society on the Labour Movement that it seemed unnecessary for anyone to do any further thinking. On such a view, the intellectual problem of Labour was solved, and the practical problems remained; the Labour Movement therefore, became intensely 'practical,' and so far as the end in view was concerned as fantastically fatalistic as the worst of the later followers of Marx. The progress of Labour was beautifully resolved into the gradual evolution of a harmony divinely pre-established by the Fabian Society in the early nineties. The history of the recent intellectual unrest is, in great measure, the sign that Labour has at last used up the inspiration of the early Fabian and is turning elsewhere for light—to what is vaguely called Syndicalism from what Mr. Punch has named 'Sidney Webbicalism.'"

He goes on to attack "Sidney Webbicalism" as being mainly a theory of Distribution, and to dispose of political action since "the present Labour Party can never become a majority, and would be sadly at a loss to know what to do if it did become one."

Positing group psychology as the "new" fact, the class struggle as the "awful" fact, he sees the organisation of government by the producers as the only way out of the dilemma.

To the attacks upon them which the Gild Socialists made constantly, and, at times, savagely, both in public and in private, the Webbs paid no heed. So far as they were concerned, these attacks had no influence either on their personal relations with the attackers, or on their controversial tone. She may, occasionally, have spoken with asperity: not so he. They bore the reaction against them with fortitude; they fought on every inch of the front in defence of the central Collectivist position, of Democracy, and of the political State. If the reader of the nineteen-

thirties finds rather surprising the very large amount of space in their later works devoted to the refutation of so-called "Functionalism" and "Functional Democracy," the reason is that, from 1913 until the great post-war slump set in, this movement appeared to be carrying everything before it. The organisation of Shop Stewards' Committees in munitions and engineering and ship-building establishments, together with the foundation of the National Building Guild, seemed, at the time, to indicate the beginning of a radical transformation both of Trade Union structure and function. Lenin, in 1919, not only thought that England was on the eve of revolution, on account of the spread of this movement: he regarded Sidney Webb's opposition to it as a sign that he was "working in the interests of the Capitalists." But the very comments Lenin then made, as recorded by Arthur Ransome, in his *Six Weeks in Russia*, show that he was under a natural enough misapprehension both as to the scale and the ideology of Guild Socialism. He thought that the Shop Stewards' Committees represented a form of Soviet; he did not know that Cole himself, in the interest of "all power to the producers" was, from 1918 on, as a matter of fact, hot against Sovietism, and busily fighting against it inside the I.L.P., where he found himself, about 1919-20, in an odd, temporary alliance with MacDonald. Sovietism had but a brief "run" in Britain; for it, as for Guild Socialism, the Webbs on one line, MacDonald on another, proved too strong. Neither the I.L.P. nor the Fabian Society was "converted" to either. At any time, and on any issue, an alliance between the Webb-MacDonald forces was almost irresistible.

By 1920, the Webbs could write that Syndicalism was "a ferment rather than a statistically important element in the Trade Union world"; five years later, they would hardly have assigned even so much significance to Guild Socialism. Yet it had its importance, both at the time, and

as contributing to the shift in Socialist thinking generally, and that of the Webbs in particular, away from anything that could be called "bureaucratic" Collectivism, to a more various and flexible form, in which the organisations of producers and of consumers each have their vital parts to play in a general plan more decentralised, and more thoroughly and consciously democratic, than they had thought of in their early analysis. Gild Socialism, for instance, affected, directly and lastingly, the view taken of Nationalisation. Once, State ownership and control over distribution, production and exchange, had been conceived, even by the Webbs, as concentrated in Departments of Government, national and municipal, rather on the Post Office model. Sidney Webb always realised the part to be played by municipal action much more clearly than most "arm-chair" Socialists; but even there, he had been, before Gild Socialism, a more strict Collectivist than he was after it. The importance attached to vocational associations, of all kinds, in their later works is, in part, a residuum of the Gild Socialist controversies; in part, however, a development of one of their own earlier lines of thinking. A major effect of the whole thing was that it served to compel the non-political Webbs to come, with all their battalions of argument, and ultimately, all their resources for action, to the defence of the political State.

If these controversies, and the years in which they are set, present, to-day, a somewhat bleached and unreal appearance, that is due to the fact that, in August 1914, the war swept them, like the great strikes then on the point of exploding, and the tense political issues that absorbed English minds to the practical exclusion of what, in July, was happening in Europe, into the limbo of forgotten things. For four grim years, the Webbs, like everyone else, were whirled out of the world they had known, on the wings of a blast that withered and dispersed all old argu-

ments, and made most old activities look insubstantial and remote. On August 4th, 1914, a hand closed over the throats of industrial strikers, political fighters, and rational thinkers, whose iron clamp was hardly relaxed for the next four years. A vast darkness swallowed up the past. There seemed to be no future. The present, instant, terrifying, was the scene of mighty forces that appeared to have sprung up out of the nether earth, and to partake of a character awful, elemental, and incomprehensible. Under the red glow of the war sky, molten with passion and destructive of thought, the Webbs look rather forlorn and strangely small, as do any individual humans, in that period of inhuman waste and sustained dread and horror. It is hard to see them, moving under its dark and terrible effulgence. No two people in the world, perhaps, found in themselves less of instinctive response to the primitive emotions war released; to none was it more appalling in its revelation of the black, imprisoned recesses of the mind of man, in which dwell cruelty, falsity and perverted idealism in a ghastly mingle. To ask whether they understood it, fully, is unnecessary; who did? who does? They certainly suffered under it.

Not in their biography is the place in which to attempt to make living that fearsome tale of years, which, nevertheless, represents the major element in the experience, and the great governing factor of the reactions, of two generations. For them, as for others, it was a time of simple personal pain, as well as a time in which everything in which they believed appeared to be going under, lost beneath a black and tortured tide of senseless suffering.

Of affectionate distress, she had the heavier burden to carry. Her own family, through its younger generation, was deeply and intimately involved in the contrasted phases of war agony. Many of her nephews were officers at the front; another nephew, Stephen Hobhouse, was a leading

conscientious objector. Outside the family circle, too, countless young men in whom they were interested were caught up and perished in the fiery whirlpool. Nor, in the wider sphere of social relations, could they fail to feel the whole thing as a threat, alarming, nay terrifying, on the part of the non-rational elements in life which they would have liked to be able to leave out. They saw emotion, senseless and shattering, sweep up and over order and reason and progress and good sense; over good-will and even over decency. The orgy of sheer sentiment was nauseating to them; the disclosure of subterranean forces such as they had not allowed for, and from which they shrank back in horror, sped arrows of destroying doubt to the very centre of their thinking. It is significant that they have nowhere, in direct terms, tried to measure or place this appalling phenomenon. True, in their great manifesto against Capitalism, *The Decay of Capitalist Civilisation*, published in 1923, there are a couple of trenchant pages, entitled "How Wars Occur"; but this passage has only to be re-read, to-day, to puzzle the reader by its inadequacy, in every respect, to the fearsome thing with which it purports to deal. Never has any great event been treated by them in a manner so nearly perfunctory. Is one wrong in feeling, behind this rare perfunctoriness, something like an emotional, even an intellectual, fear?

Their public attitude to the war was conventional. Without sharing any of its ugly exaggerations, they took, in broad outline, the patriotic view. As late as December 1918, in his election address to the electors of London University, to whom he offered himself as a Labour candidate, he says—

"World calamity as I hold the war to be, I have never wavered, from Lord Grey's exposition of the case on August 3rd, 1914, in my conviction that this nation had no alternative, either in honour or in safety, but to take up the challenge . . . and pursue the struggle resolutely to the end, until aggressive militarism was overthrown."

In this attitude, of course, he was in agreement with the majority of the Labour Party, as well as with the majority of the nation. Mrs. Webb, one gathers, moved towards a definitely Pacifist position earlier than he did; on reconstruction, as on the terms of an international settlement, they were both entirely with the Pacifists, while disagreeing with them both as to the action that could have been taken by a British Government in August 1914, and on the possibility of what was then called "peace without victory."

In some respects, the circumstances and grouping of persons about them, resembled what they had been at the time of the Boer War. Once again, the I.L.P. was ranged against the war, while the Fabian attitude in the main was one of acceptance of the inevitable. Once again, Webb and MacDonald were on different sides. They were together, however, in another effort, and one that absorbed a good deal of the time and energy of both, and thereby brought them to a respectful mutual understanding, during the dread years of the war's course. If, at the end of them, the Labour movement in Great Britain, in this respect most happily unlike those of France, Germany or Italy, emerged stronger, more coherent in policy and purpose than it was at the beginning; and if, during their passage, it was able to do certain valuable practical work, the measure of recognition, under both heads, due to Sidney Webb is a very large one. He, in fact, must be seen, during these years, as largely occupied in the effort—and the successful effort—to keep the party so hard at work on concrete, practical matters that even the deep fissure of disagreement on the war itself never widened to become a lasting split. His work, here, was inevitably anonymous, and he desired to have it so; but, on this vital point he counts with Ramsay MacDonald and Arthur Henderson among the architects of unity.

In the last days of July 1914, when the "stumble into war" was still a dark menace only, which men of good will

still hoped to see averted, MacDonald and Henderson, from the offices of the Labour Party, took the initiative in summoning a Conference of all sections of the movement, in all its branches. This Conference was designed to bring into being a Workers' Peace Emergency Committee, to take concerted action to keep the peace. So swiftly did events move, however, that when the Conference actually met, on August 5th, war had already been declared. MacDonald, after making, in the House of Commons, a speech on lines agreed to by the parliamentary party as a whole, found the majority gone from behind him. He resigned his leadership and was replaced by Arthur Henderson.

It was Arthur Henderson, therefore, who presided over a Conference to which came representatives of the Trade Union Congress, the Labour Party, the General Federation of Trade Unions, the Miners' Federation, the Railwaymen, the Textile Workers, the Transport Workers, the Co-operative Movement, the Teachers, and the Socialist Societies. Among notable individual members of the Executive body set up by this Conference—a body called, in view of the altered circumstances, the War Emergency Workers' National Committee—were Robert Smillie, Mary Macarthur, W. C. Anderson, Arthur Henderson, J. Ramsay MacDonald, J. A. Seddon, William Brace, H. M. Hyndman and Sidney Webb, with J. S. Middleton as secretary. This Committee—the most representative body set up in the history of the Labour Movement, including as it did the largest possible range of diverse personalities and points of view—actually met two and even three times a week during the early months of the war, and, throughout its course, normally once a week. Its minutes provided local labour parties and trade councils throughout the country with guidance: and the Conferences it organised exercised a most important influence in guiding opinion and even in affecting Government policy.

The immediate response of organised labour to the declaration of war was to suspend all strikes, and proclaim an industrial truce "for the duration." There was a rush of volunteers to the colours: an equally impressive rush of volunteers from all classes and both sexes, for any and every kind of "war work." The first problem to be faced was that of unemployment. This was severe at first, notably among women, and accompanied by widespread distress; although it was soon to pass off, and be replaced by the very different problem of an inexhaustible demand for labour for munitions, and for the substitution of the men who continued to pour into the army. Early on, indeed, war, under modern conditions, proved not to correspond to anybody's expectations, either as to its scale or scope; nor were there any lines for meeting it, set down "in the books." When the War Workers' Committee first met, few of its members had any very clear notion of how it was to function, or what it was to do. Feelings ran high; tempers were brittle; there was dangerous and inflammable material about, which might easily have exploded, in a void. Fortunately there was one member who had clear notions as to what the Committee was for, and how it was to work.

The Secretary has recorded that, within the first week of the Committee's existence, Sidney Webb had drafted a thirty-two page pamphlet. This not only demanded that the workers should be represented on the Distress Committees by then beginning to be set up, all over the country, but gave to those representatives a clear and concrete lead as to the questions that would meet them, the sort of action they ought to press for, and the line generally, that they should take. When the MS. was handed over to the Secretary, he remarked that it bore no author's name. The author nodded. "It will have far more influence without my name than with it." This, as Mr. Middleton observes, was true. Few men, however, would have thought as much; fewer still would

have said so. It was eminently characteristic of this author, that he did both think so and say so—and meant what he said to be acted upon. His interest wholly concentrated, as ever, on getting things done, he pursued this same line, throughout the years of the Committee's work. A very large proportion of its publications actually emanated from his pen, but only the Secretary and he knew just how much he was doing, either in regard to actual drafting or in influencing the course which the work took. Much later, he did put his name to one or two pamphlets; but the bulk of his writing passed anonymously into circulation, and he preferred that it should be so.

This first draft of his was not only full of practical utility: it was designed to give the Committee, at its first meeting, something to "get its teeth into." Busy, and busy on work of which every member could see the direct practical bearing, minds were kept off such perilous stuff as 'Who is responsible?' 'Was the war inevitable?' 'Could Britain have kept out?'; and men who differed passionately on the burning issue of the hour, left their differences behind while they coped with immediate problems affecting the daily lives of the workers in the country. So, week after week, during the long, strenuous, and often agitated life of the Committee, men on the extreme Pacifist Left met those on the extreme Patriotic Right and temporarily sank their differences, nay, forgot them, in a common constructive task.

This was rendered possible by the endless fertility and resourcefulness of Webb; his inexhaustible energy in providing week after week, a really "meat-y" Agenda. Thanks in the main to him, there were always so many matters of immediate practical concern, and patent urgency, to discuss and plan for, that there was literally no time for mere sword-crossing on views. He was resourceful, he was tireless, he knew his job from A to Z. Many a man can bring up a string of points when a committee starts its work; most however run dry after the first few meetings. His ingenuity

never ran dry. And it was not mere ingenuity. Always he was practical, realist, on the spot, concerned with some authentic matter of day to day hardship or approaching seriousness; never merely ingenious.

The Committee did substantial work. While loyally leaving purely Trade Union matters to the Trade Unions, it covered the whole range of domestic experiences during the war, from rents and prices to pensions and allowances. Very early, for example, it got on to the glaring scandal of Government contracts, and demanded their public, not private allocation. Its exposure of the appalling profiteering connected with the erection of Kitchener Army Huts—where the Government was being charged at the rate of between £130-£150 for wretched, insanitary and waterlogged structures that cost something between £10 and £14 to erect—was only one instance among many of the way in which it looked after the general interest as no other group was able to do, owing to the combined operation of the Suspension of Trade Union conditions and the political truce.

The Committee was useful to the workers, Unionist and non-Unionist alike, since it was an effective watchdog for their protection, as of that of the citizen generally. Its Minutes, circulated to local Labour Parties and Trade Councils, were always rich in practical sense and shrewd foresight to meet issues as, or before, they arose. Webb was tireless, in this: nothing escaped him. Quite early in 1915, the Committee was pressing for Government action on the following suggestive list of points—

Labour representation of all committees, national or local.

Adequate provision for soldiers and sailors and their dependents including unmarried wives and mothers—through State and not voluntary machinery.

Their pressure for a decent scale for the families of the men at the front was incessant; and though they never succeeded

in getting the scales they demanded it was thanks to them that the miserable original scales were reformed, as that the unmarried wife and mother was treated with common humanity.

Co-operative canteens for soldiers in camps and barracks.

Productive work for the unemployed.

Encouragement of home-grown food supplies.

Protection of the consumer against excessive prices, through the legal establishment of maxima, and the commandeering of supplies of essential commodities and raw materials.

A Municipal Housing programme.

The establishment of Maternity and Infant Welfare centres.

The provision of meals and clothes for school children.

The establishment and continuance of control over railways, docks, coal and food supplies, freights etc.

As a matter of fact, if the actual standard of life of the British worker was, by the later stages of the war, in many cases higher than it had been before, that result was very largely due to what the Webbs describe, without suggesting that they had any part in it, as

“The valuable, though often unwelcome assistance, which this Committee gave to the Government by insisting on the redress of grievances, which officialdom would have ignored, and by its working out of policy and persistence in agitation¹.”

Of the war on the Home Front, the records of the Committee give a most vivid picture; its human actualities were certainly far more swiftly apprehended by this body of men and women in close touch with the common facts of daily life than they were by the Cabinet.

H. M. Hyndman was one of the members of the Committee. His wife, in her biography of him, tells a story of his, about its working, which is certainly tinged with his

¹ *History of Trade Unionism*, 1920 Ed., p. 691.

own peculiar outlook. He describes what he calls "an unholy little compact, which I believe was never actually put into words" between himself and Sidney Webb.

"When anything important comes up, I bring out a root-and-branch revolutionary proposal, and set it well before them. That puts them in a fright; and then Webb comes in with his proposal, only a few degrees milder than mine; and they are so relieved that they pass Webb's motion unanimously—although if that had been proposed to them first, they would have found it much too strong, and perhaps refused to handle it at all."

Hyndman here, one fancies, is speaking with the authentic voice of the Social Democratic Party he represented, and with their conception of what is "revolutionary." It is apt, with them, to be a question of what Sidney Webb, in opposing an amendment brought forward at a later Conference, was to call "bringing in the old shibboleths again." On that, he remarked gently, "We have heard the same speech over and over again: I am not against it: but it gets a bit monotonous."

That "they" did "pass Webb's motion" is credible enough: certainly he was mainly responsible for the Committee's admirable work on the entire complex of issues known as "Food Prices," where, had its advice been taken, at the time at which it was first given, much trouble, and much real distress might have been avoided. On an allied problem, that of rents, his work was also notably effective. The rise in rent charges, at a time when to find alternative accommodation was absolutely impossible, was a very real grievance, and with no group more real than with the wives of soldiers. With great skill, he got a working alliance into being between a sub-committee of the W.E.W.N.C. and bodies representing the property owners. To the conference arranged with the latter body, he took H. M. Hyndman along with him: the latter protesting loudly, as he waved his silk hat, against being involved in such "bourgeois

contact." When they got there, Webb had a Memorandum ready. In return for an acceptance, on the part of his Committee, of a restriction in the rate of mortgage interest, he got the property owners' representatives to agree to the principle of the legal limitation of rents. Thereupon, a joint Deputation to the Minister took place, which resulted in the prompt introduction and passage of the Rent Restriction Act,—which could never have been got through without this 'bourgeois' co-operation.

This is not the place in which to record the full history of the work of the Committee, important as it was. A dramatic instance of the power they, at times, wielded was the dropping by the Government of the project, formed at the time of a critical shortage of munitions, of introducing Chinese labourers into Great Britain. The Government was not grateful, at the time; though they realised later how stupid such a defiance of popular feeling would have been.

Through his work on the War Emergency Committee, Webb, in his turn, became personally known to, and grew to appreciate, many leading members of the Labour Party, with whom his contacts before had only been superficial. Arthur Henderson, on joining the Coalition Government in 1915, was succeeded as Chairman (after a brief interval in which J. A. Seddon held the position, and then resigned from the Committee altogether) by Robert Smillie. Always he expresses the warmest admiration for the great mining leader's quality: his mental grasp as well as that loveableness everyone felt who got beneath his somewhat gnarled surface. With Smillie, on this Committee, and with MacDonald here, and also on the War Aims Special Committee set up in 1917, he worked in very close harmony. There was a complete burying of hatchets. Further, in 1915, he became, for the first time, a member of the National Executive of the Labour Party itself. The Fabian nominee had for some years previously been W. Stephen Sanders:

when Sanders took up war service in 1915, his place on the National Executive was taken by Webb. Here, of course, he had to co-operate in discussion and decision over the entire range of policy, international as well as domestic. It is no longer any secret, though it was so at the time, that his was the hand that drafted that broad and generous statement of party policy, *Labour and The New Social Order*, which Arnold Bennett described, in *The Daily News* (January 23rd, 1918) as

“A publication of first-rate interest and first-rate social importance, which everybody can afford to buy, which everybody ought to read, and which almost everybody of average intelligence would read with pleasure. It is serious but not dull, short but not scrappy, broad but not superficial.”

The war years were thus occupied with constant practical activity. They were not years in which the partners published much. One or two smallish volumes however, must have a word of notice. In 1916, over his name, there appeared *How to Pay for the War*. In this, he anticipates the later Labour Party demand for a Capital Levy, in the form, here, of a demand that money should be conscripted when lives were being so treated. In another chapter in the same volume, he sets out the detailed practical scheme for the Nationalisation of the Mines which he was, three years later, to advocate in his evidence before the Sankey Commission. A year later, in 1917, appeared *The Works Manager*: a peculiarly bright example of his uncanny power of getting up, and getting inside of, any subject to which his prehensile mind addresses itself. At first hand, he knew little or nothing of works, or of works managers: yet here is the best text book on the latter topic, and one used, as such, by many employers, in the war years and after. In the same year, there was issued a revised edition of the remarkable chapter of nineteenth century history he had contributed, in 1909, to the *Cambridge Modern History*. In this, the

influence of the war appears in the question mark affixed to the title, *Towards Social Democracy?*

A war-time product, again, and, at the same time, a permanent contribution to the theory of wages, as well as to the argument for sex-equality, is the small book, published in 1919, by Mrs. Webb. It is called *The Wages of Men and Women—Should they be Equal?*¹ Few are the works that make the whole of their point with such force, clarity and genuine freedom from ancient prepossessions, of every sort, as this. It is, in its origin, another "Minority Report."

In the summer of 1918, the Cabinet set up a Committee of six persons, to discover what principles, if any, should underlie the payment of wages to the millions of women then doing war work in substitution for men. The Treasury Agreement of March 1915 had been read by everyone, at the time, as giving a pledge on the part of the Government that such women should receive the same pay as the men whose work they undertook. The Ministry of Munitions in 1918 was claiming that this would cost too much. The Trade Unions asserted that, in fact, the women were not being paid the men's rates, and that they ought to be so paid. The Committee was therefore instructed not only to lay down a general guiding principle, but to say whether, in fact, the 1915 pledge, was a pledge, and, if so, whether it had been carried out by Government Departments. On this latter point, Mrs. Webb found that a pledge had been given, and that it was being broken: the other members (Sir J. R. Atkin, in the chair: Dr. Janet Campbell: Sir Lynden Macassey: Sir William Mackenzie and Sir Matthew Nathan) said that the agreement of March 1915 was not a pledge. On the more general issue, she was, again, unable to agree: on the main ground that the

"Majority assume, perhaps inadvertently, that industry is normally a function of the male, and that women, like non-

¹ Fabian Society. One Shilling.

adults, are only to be permitted to work for wages at special hours, for special rates of wages, under special supervision, and subject to special restrictions by the Legislature. I cannot accept this assumption. It seems to me that the Committee is called upon, in its consideration of the relation which should be maintained between the wages of women and those of men, to deal equally with both sexes."

In fact, she who had been, in the 'nineties, opposed to the extension of the franchise to women, and quite lukewarm on the point till much later, here appears in her general analysis of the wages problem as a more thorough-going equalitarian than most of the Feminists of her day or ours.

Her stand on war wages was, of course, hailed with enthusiasm, but not all those who were grateful to her have incorporated into their thinking her lucid reasoning on the broad question of the determination of wage-rates. Her conclusions may be summarised: at the same time it should be said that anyone who misses reading this small book makes a great mistake. She begins by positing that the "existing relation between the conditions of employment of men and women," throughout the entire range of occupations,

"is detrimental to the personal character and professional efficiency of both sexes, and inimical alike to the maximum productivity of the nation, and to the advancement of the several crafts and professions."

They are excluded or penalised on the ground that they are a class apart, but for the production of commodities and services, "Women no more constitute a class apart than do persons of a particular creed or race." The time has come for the removal of all sex exclusions, and the opening of all posts and vocations to any qualified individuals, irrespective of sex, creed or race. The popular formula, "Equal Pay for Equal Work" is too ambiguous and too easily evaded

to serve as a principle on which to base women's wages. On the contrary,

"The essential principle which should govern all systems of remuneration, whether in private industry or in public employment, in manual working as well as brain working occupations, is that of clearly defined Occupational or Standard Rates, to be prescribed for all persons of like industrial grade; and, whether computed by time or by output, to be settled by collective agreement between representative organisations of the employers and the employed; and enforced, but as minima only, on the whole grade or vocation. There is no more reason for such Occupational or Standard Rates being made to differ according to the workers' sex than according to their race, creed, height or weight. A National Minimum of rest-time, education, sanitation and subsistence should be imposed by law, in which there should be no sex inequality."

Her Report—since here, as elsewhere, the Webbs are nothing if not comprehensive—includes a plan of taxation by means of which the National Minimum proposals could be financed. Her plan for the regulation and maintenance of wages is as thorough, and as realistic, as the plan for the State control of the supply of coal which he sets out in *How to Pay for the War*. In regard to both, they are moving wholly in the region of the practical, and of the political.

To try to sum the effect on them of the war-years is to attempt the impossible. Possible, however, is it to detach one very important effect. Their minds were, in a wholly new fashion, directed not only to political theory, but to political action; and to political action as a sphere of effort for the public good to which they must direct their energies. His standing for London University as a Labour candidate in 1918 was something more than a gesture. It was the first step on a path that was to compel them to break right away from the planned routine they had pursued together for nearly thirty years.

CHAPTER XI

POLITICAL

FROM every point of view, the years between 1919 and 1924 are of cardinal significance in the life of the partners. They were, of course, actively concerned in public affairs: he, in particular, more prominently so than at any time since the Education Act controversy: they also published a whole series of highly important books. The affairs and the books are alike political in reference: that is the first great change registered. They are not only political: they are, in a broad sense, party-political: they represent the fact that the Webbs, who had striven from 1909 to 1912, with a very large measure of success, to get a great non-party organisation into being, had by now definitely, publicly, and with all that the gesture could have of meaning, ranged themselves with the Labour party, as a party of action, and were prepared to take their share in its action.

The books of this period are *A Constitution for the British Socialist Commonwealth*, published in 1920: *The Consumers' Co-operative Movement*, published in 1922, and *The Decay of Capitalist Civilisation*, published in 1923. *Statutory Authorities for Special Purposes* was also published in 1922, as was another volume in their Local Government series, that dealing with Prisons; but in regard to these last two, publication had been held over owing to the war; the characteristic works of the period are the other three, and especially the *Constitution* and *The Decay*. Although *Consumers' Co-operation* also, formally, belongs to the Local Government series, both in its political reference—especially

in the latter half—and in its tone, it has close affiliations with the Socialist-political works.

That “tone” deserves a word. It is more authoritative, more dogmatic, slightly louder than of old. To some extent, the “unassuming expert” has, for the nonce, been replaced by the positive propagandist. The narrative method is brighter; particularly in *The Decay* there are resemblances in phrasing to the subsequently published *My Apprenticeship* (1926) that suggest that Mrs. Webb, rather more often than is elsewhere usual, has held as well as guided the pen. But the true reason may very well be no more than the shift from the heaped-up material that had to be coped with in the earlier books, to the freer stage of individual expression of opinion, and individual planning of action. Anyhow, it is to these three books that any would-be defender of democracy may go for the best and most cogent, as well as far the most complete, argument, for it that has been set out in our time.

Convinced democrats, they had believed, up to the outbreak of the war, that the large scale social and economic changes that had got to take place if formal were to be translated into social democracy, were progressively being brought about. The logic of efficiency dictated Collectivism: the forms of collective control were being forged by the Trade Unions and the Co-operative Societies, by the steady expansion of local government, and by the marked development of the Social services. They saw themselves as the Benthamites of a later epoch, permeating and converting: permeating and converting above all, the key people and the key positions. To this entire outlook, the war came as a deep and far-reaching shock. The very fact that they accepted the current views as to its inevitability, as to the necessity of fighting and fighting to the bitter end, compelled them to admit into their scheme of things forces and factors—irrational, dangerous, largely evil, horribly

mysterious, hard to fit into their categories—and such as they had, hitherto, tranquilly left out. Their admission involved unsuspected perils to the entire presumed plan of orderly development. On top of the blind mysticism of war-time exaltation came the shattering impact of Revolutions, accelerated by sheer misery and despair. When Friedrich Adler shot Count Stuerghk, in 1916, the propaganda of the deed took on a new and horrid aspect. Direct action, Sovietism, Russian and Italian dictatorships with semi-religious sanctions, woke strange echoes in the minds even of British working men. Plainly, if those who believed in democracy were to save it, they must exert themselves: they must interfere. No longer could a rational social order be trusted to emerge out of the mere play of social and economic forces.

As long ago as 1894, Sidney Webb, in a remarkable address to the Fabian Society (reprinted in *Problems of Modern Industry*) had said:

“Depend upon it, the first step to getting what we want is a very clear and precise knowledge of what it is that we want. . . . I do not urge the universal adoption by all Socialists of a rigid practical programme, complete in all its details. But our one hope of successful propaganda lies in the possession of exact knowledge and very clear ideas of what it is we want to teach.”

They certainly could claim that they had supplied that exact knowledge. In the Preface to their account of Consumers' Co-operation, they state that they have spent thirty years in “investigating and describing democratic institutions.” Again, in regard to the entire fabric of the social services, they had outlined a precise plan of re-organisation in their Minority Report books.

True, the whole of this, as they explained, could be accomplished within the frame-work of the existing Capitalist system. An early question with which they were faced in their Minority Report campaign, was,

of course,—Is the Minority Report Socialism? To that, in a very early number of *The Crusade*, they replied:

“The answer to this question depends upon what you mean by Socialism. If you mean the nationalisation of the means of production, then there is no Socialism, nor even any Socialistic tendency, in the Minority Report. But if you mean State action generally, then all the proposals are Socialistic. But so is the present Poor Law; so is the work of the Public Health authorities; so is the provision of Public Education: so, every bit as much, is the scheme of the Majority Report. In this sense, even a main drainage scheme is Socialism, in that it is provided gratuitously by the State for the use of all; but it is admittedly an indispensable piece of Socialism and commits no one to the State ownership of industry. So with the Minority scheme. It does not pre-judge the real issue between Socialists and Individualists, but it (or something like it) is indispensable if you wish to have a healthy foundation on which to build your super-structure, whether you intend it to be along Individualist lines or Socialist.”

A sufficiently ingenious piece of controversial dialectic, this; it is cited here to indicate that, up to the time of the war, the line or pattern of approach was that suggested in the highly characteristic remark, “In this sense, even a main drainage scheme is Socialism.”

In the broader sense, they never altered that approach; but the war, as a fact; the new experiences wartime conditions brought to both; the grave threat to democracy they shrewdly sensed, in many quarters; the infection of the Socialist mind itself by Communist, Syndicalist, and other ideas, all deriving their appeal from the belief in force—the combined effect of this was to impel them to take up, swiftly and resolutely, the other part of the task: the positive declaration both of Socialist plan and of Socialist method.

As a member of the Labour Party Executive, he had, in the years between 1915 and 1918, contributed potently to the two transforming changes that made Labour a

National party in a sense in which it had not, before, fully deserved that name. In 1918, at a Special Summer Conference, held in London in June, the Party adopted a new Constitution, and set out its policy in new terms. For press and public, at the time, the superficial picturesqueness of the appeal made by M. Kerensky, and his kiss to Arthur Henderson, were the outstanding incidents of this conference. Its real, and very far-reaching significance, however, lay in the new organisation of the party on the definite and explicit basis of a membership open to "workers by hand and brain"; coupled with the acceptance of a plan of campaign animated by a clear and large vision. No longer was it possible, with any accuracy, to say either that Labour was a 'class party,' or that its proposals were 'in the air.' These things of course, went on being said: that is politics: but there was no justification for them. The plan was set out in detail, in a pamphlet entitled *Labour and The New Social Order*. In his Election appeal to the graduates of London University in 1918, Professor Webb ingeniously refers to this document as one perusing it critically, from an economist's standpoint, and finding it sound, as well as appealing. With approval, he quotes the closing passage:

"The Labour Party is far from assuming that it possesses a key to open all locks; or that any policy which it can formulate will solve all the problems that beset us. But we deem it important to ourselves as well as to those who may, on the one hand, wish to join the Party, or, on the other, to take up arms against it, to make quite clear and definite our aim and purpose. The Labour Party wants that aim and purpose, as set forth in the preceding pages with all its might. It calls for more warmth in politics for much less apathetic acquiescence in the miseries that exist, for none of the cynicism that saps the life of leisure. On the other hand, the Labour Party has no belief in any of the problems of the world being solved by Good Will alone. Good Will without knowledge is Warmth without Light. Especially in all the complexities of politics, in the still undeveloped Science of Society, the Labour Party stands for increased study,

for the scientific investigation of each succeeding problem, for the deliberate organisation of research, and for a much more rapid dissemination among the whole people of all the science that exists. And it is perhaps specially the Labour Party that has the duty of placing this Advancement of Science in the forefront of its political programme. What the Labour Party stands for in all fields of life is, essentially, Democratic Co-operation; and Co-operation involves a common purpose which can be agreed to; a common plan which can be explained and discussed, and such a measure of success in the adaptation of means to ends as will ensure a common satisfaction. An autocratic Sultan may govern without science if his whim is law. A Plutocratic Party may choose to ignore science, if it is heedless whether its pretended solutions of social problems that may win political triumphs ultimately succeed or fail. But no Labour Party can hope to maintain its position unless its proposals are, in fact, the outcome of the best Political Science of its time; or to fulfil its purpose unless that science is continually wresting new fields from human ignorance. Hence, although the Purpose of the Labour Party must, by the law of its being, remain for all time unchanged, its Policy and its Programme will, we hope, undergo a perpetual development, as knowledge grows, and as new phases of the social problem present themselves, in a continually finer adjustment of our measures to our ends. If Law is the Mother of Freedom, Science, to the Labour Party, must be the Parent of Law."

To-day it is no secret that the whole eighteen-page document was his handiwork. In the turmoil and heat of the 1918 election, it had little effect. In the years between 1918 and 1922, however, this ample and noble statement of aims closely correlated to a well-knit programme of practicable action, was a powerful instrument of conversion, and helped greatly towards the "swing" of 1922, 1923 and 1924.

They did more than this however. In 1920, they published *A Constitution for the British Socialist Commonwealth*. Very shortly after the close of the war, M. Camille Huysmans, as Secretary of the International Socialist Bureau, invited the constituent parties in the different countries to submit reports upon "The socialisation of industries and services,

and upon the constitution that should be adopted by any nation desirous of organising its life upon Socialist principles." For the Fabian Society, as one of these constituent parties, the Webbs accordingly prepared what to them "seemed most likely to be useful"—i.e. not any "brief statement of abstract principles or vague generalisations," supposed to be of universal application, but "a definite and concrete proposal, worked out in some detail, for one country only." Their book is this proposal.

They begin by "briefly noting," as facts in advanced industrial countries, on the one hand, a great waste of productive power and gross inequality leading to penury and destitution: and, on the other

"The continued existence of the functionless rich—of persons who deliberately live by owning instead of by working, and whose futile occupations, often licentious pleasures, and inherently insolent manners undermine the intellectual and moral standards of the community."

These facts they were to amplify, with much well-directed harshness, in *The Decay of Capitalist Civilisation*, three years later; here, they merely touch upon them, and pass on, at once, to establish the premise from which they have consistently approached the problem—the premise of democracy.

"The central wrong of the Capitalist system is neither the poverty of the poor nor the riches of the rich; it is the power which the mere ownership of the instruments of production gives to a relatively small section of the community over the actions of their fellow-citizens, and over the mental and physical environment of successive generations."

At the close of a "survey of the ground" which occupies the first part of the book they say:

"It is abundantly clear that what is wrong with the world to-day is not too much Democracy but too little, not too many thoroughly Democractic institutions, but too few."

Nowhere has their fundamental article of faith been more straightly set out than in a book that is apt, nowadays, to be left on one side on the assumption that it is "out of date." It may be that in its constitution-sketching, more homage is paid than now seems relevant to the then fashionable doctrine of "Functionalism." But if their Constitution—retaining the Monarch but abolishing the House of Lords,—with its elaborate dual organisation of citizen and vocational representation, may be left, or revived only for interesting comparison with the five-fold organisation of the Russian State, the book must be read, for other things in it. Above all, for its argument on democracy, as a *positive* instrument for

"obtaining, for all the people . . . that development of personality, and that enlargement of faculty and desire dependent on the assumption of responsibility and the exercise of will."

Democracy, in their view, in so far as it involves the conscious consent of the many, has the "spiritual value" of substituting persuasion for force. It may be that personal self-determination remains the "supreme stimulus to self activity," but, in modern society, complete individualism is impracticable, politically and industrially. The actual problem is one of re-modelling existing institutions "in such a way as to evoke, in all men and women, and not merely in a favoured few, all their latent powers," and so setting free the individual "not of any favoured social class but from one end of the community to the other" for that full life towards which organisation, whether economic, social or political, is only a means. It is against the waste of life that their lances are here set. One feels how deeply the war really stirred them. It stirred their minds: it sent them back to fundamental issues, to an interrogation of values.

To a large extent, the reader, here, is in the moral atmosphere of *My Apprenticeship*: of its controversy between "the ego that affirms" and the "ego that denies." The

Webbs here face the two questions that, for ever, in differing forms, agitate the thinking and feeling mind of man: questions that may be crudely stated as—Has every human being a soul, or only a few?—and—Has the universe a meaning? Is it a blind chaos, or an order expressive of some pattern none of us as yet completely sees, none of us perhaps can ever see? They affirm, on both: souls are universal: the universe is an order and not a chaos. They may, indeed in their writing they often do, overstate the orderliness of the order: but the charmlessness of the presentation ought not to blind the reader to the fact that, for them, orderliness, while a good in itself, is also—and this is really more important—a means to a higher and wholly different kind of good. It may be that the freedom and fullness of life which they desire for others, as keenly as for themselves, leaves out certain elements: but the passion that keeps them going is a desire to extend to all those things that they themselves see as good. This passion speaks clearly in the latter half of *The Constitution*.

If the defence of Democracy is here their most important contribution and vital purpose, the book also contains a luminous exposition of the other highly characteristic element in their thought as political Socialists—Gradualism. “We do not foresee any sudden or simultaneous termination of the Capitalist system.” They are speaking here, of course, of Great Britain, where, historically,

“it took the Capitalist system several centuries to become the dominant form in . . . industry. The process of transition from profit-making industry to public service which has during the past quarter of a century made such great strides, and has been accelerated by the great war, will clearly continue for some time, and may at no one moment ever be completely accomplished.”

Our race “does not take to catastrophic changes.” Large sections of the British working class, and the whole of the

professional brain workers, hold, "rightly or wrongly, that they have a good deal more to lose than their chains."

A revolution, well-nigh unthinkable in Britain, would leave the real job still to be done. "The transformation of the social and industrial machinery of a whole country takes time. It cannot be improvised." There must, therefore, not only be a plan of socialisation, but also one for the control over those industries and services that, in the transitional period, long or short, are not "ripe" for that, and have to be left in private hands until they "ripen." The fulcrum of transforming change is the National Minimum: "its universal adoption will be the foundation of the Socialist Commonwealth." So wrote the "reactionary Webbs" in 1920, after, as they mildly recall, twenty years of propaganda for a proposal that was not yet included in the "Now for Socialism" policy of the I.L.P. That, again, cannot be enforced in the twinkling of an eye. The use of Factory Acts and Trade Boards Acts to secure that

"no worker, however defenceless, shall fall below the National Minimum of subsistence *and leisure* for the time being prescribed by the Social Parliament,"

should be reinforced by the Local Authorities in securing a similar National Minimum in housing and in public health; and by a National Minimum of Education, open to every boy and girl, irrespective of the means of their parents.

Local Authorities must care for Town planning and for the countryside; there might well be set up a Standing Committee of parliament on "Common Amenity and Public Beauty." As effective instruments for the execution of this programme, they suggest price control, publicity of accounts, limitation of profits, and a reformed tax system. "Measurement and Publicity" are the canons through whose application the "ripening" process may be speeded up. Where expropriation is feasible, compensation will be

paid, on the system actually employed when, for example, a Local authority takes over a Gas company or acquires property for street widening or other social purposes. When it takes place, the administration of the industries and services thus socialised will not be bureaucratic, but effected through *ad hoc* National Boards, decentralised in method, and providing for participation in control by the workers at every stage. Such socialisation of the main nerves on which common life depends carries with it not the abolition of private ownership in the articles of daily use, but the extension of private ownership to millions now excluded. To the Socialist, "the very demarcation of the boundaries of private property implies its maintenance and its endorsement," even its large increase, outside the area of what J. A. Hobson has called "im-property"—i.e. property in the instruments of production. Those instruments will be socialised; so, property in other things will, for the first time, be a possibility for the many; saving will go on, and capital thereby be provided.

The transition period, they frankly foresee, is dangerous and difficult.

"What is needed to avert the possible disasters of the transition period is a development of the spirit of social service, on the one hand, and of science on the other."

More science in the organisation of production—and production, they underline, not of material commodities only—is indispensable. Since they wrote, indeed, science has been applied exclusively and intensively to material productivity, with the result that "over-production" is bringing our world to starvation. They foresaw, in 1920, that the essential dilemma is not merely that distribution has not been correlated to the new productive efficiency, but that minds seem inadequate to the vast task of coping with the new control over matter that is at their disposal. So, they write:

"There is good ground for expecting discovery in physical science to go forwards by leaps and bounds, in a way that may presently transform all our dealings with forms of force and kinds of substance. But what is no less needed than this greater knowledge of things is greater knowledge of men: of the conditions of the successful workings of social institutions. That on which the world to-day most needs light is how to render more effective every form of social organisation: how to make more socially fertile the relationships between men. . . . There is no peril so dangerous as the failure to get community of education between classes."

Like many genuine prophets, they had to see their warnings go unheeded, and watch the facts realising their fears. But they stuck to their task. When, three years later, in 1923, the peril they apprehended seemed to them to have come dangerously nearer, they took up their pens again, and framed in *The Decay of Capitalist Civilisation* an indictment and a warning. It is a sombre and an eloquent warning: a prevision of that collapse of which we all chatter nowadays. A harsh indictment: yes; but a tremendously documented one. As they say of Marx, one can say of this book, that no one who reads it "can ever again fall under the illusion that capitalists, as such, are morally respectable." Both as denunciation and as warning, *The Decay* is impressive: in it, they "let themselves go," when, for the first time in all their long years of effort and study, they "tell Capitalism what they think of it." At the same time, they are hardly as much at home in this dark and negative region as they are in their more constructive works. *The Decay* is a great pamphlet; there is more of the stuff that lives in *The Consumers' Co-operative Movement*: a book, already discussed in its bearing on their general scheme of Socialism, which falls into place here, too, since its later chapters very clearly indicate the line of thought that was moving the minds of the authors to a great decision—the decision to enter political life: to go into Parliament.

It was an exceedingly difficult decision, above all in that it must involve a break of the close texture of their daily life. If one of them went into parliament, the other would, in a sense, be stranded. They were both, by now, over sixty: and sixty is late to make a complete change of habits, occupation, routine. They love their routine; to change it was a hardship in itself: a hardship rendered infinitely more severe by the certain cost in separation. That they ever contemplated the sort of "family membership" later almost fashionable, seems unlikely; or that there was ever any doubt as to which of them it was to be who was to be the member. The question was always one of his going in; following, to that extent, in the footsteps of his hero, John Stuart Mill. His work on the County Council, up to 1910, and his work with the Labour party, above all on its National Executive, since 1915, marked him out for the ordeal—for as an ordeal he felt it. He had stood for London University, in 1918; that however was little more than a gallant gesture; there never had been any serious question of his getting in. Yet, so far as it went, it was a significant gesture, and felt, by the partners themselves, to be such. Step by step, they got nearer to Westminster, in their minds, after that. With characteristic magnanimity, she pressed him. He still hesitated. His hesitations were finally routed by pressure from quite another quarter: from the Miners' Federation of Great Britain.

In the 1920 edition of *The History of Trade Unionism* they note the rise to predominant importance of the Miners as the "outstanding feature of the Trade Union world between 1890 and 1920." In the first decade of the nineteenth century, the Miners threw up a great national leader in Robert Smillie: under his leadership, the Miners' Federation of Great Britain came into being and made a series of tremendous efforts to redress the terrible hardships of the life of the miners and of the lives of the women and children

of the coalfields. 1912 saw the biggest national strike till then experienced in Great Britain: its purpose being to force the coal-owners to meet the gravest cases of hardship and injustice, those experienced by men working in "abnormal places." Its result was the 1912 Act, laying down, not a national minimum, as the miners had hoped, but district minima, adjusted by Joint Boards in the various areas. About the time of the outbreak of war, the miners had entered into an association with the Railwaymen and the Transport Workers—later generally known as the Triple Alliance,—with a view to making a new effort to break down the blank refusal of the fifteen hundred separate colliery owners and companies to consider any kind of national basis for the settlement of wage rates etc.

During the War, the miners thought of nothing but their country's need. Every kind of sectional claim was dropped; they flocked to the colours with such zeal that they had, later, to be forbidden to leave the mines, and were sent back, in large numbers, from the front. The War bonus granted in 1917 and 1918 by no means met the rise that had taken place in the cost of living, yet, until the war ended, the miners kept silence, out of sheer patriotism. Only then did the Federation, after going through all the elaborate provisions as to ballots, giving of notice etc., laid down in the Agreements, in February 1919, demand a 30 per cent rise in wages, a nominal six-hours day, and the Nationalisation of the mines, which were, like the railways, still under Government control.

Its position was strong. It had able leadership, with Frank Hodges, then the rising star of the Trade Union world, as full-time Secretary and Robert Smillie as full-time President. It had its superb war service record behind it, and, on elementary grievances, a powerful human case. Since the nation's stocks of coal were very low—London, for example, having no more than two days' supply—the strike threat

was serious. So strong, indeed, was the miners' case, that when the Government offered, under special Act of Parliament, to set up a Statutory Commission, presided over by a Judge of the High Court, and pledged itself to abide by and act upon its findings, the Conference called by the Miners' Federation of Great Britain was far from unanimous for acceptance. They did accept, finally, only on the specific understanding that strike notices should be suspended for but three weeks, within which time an Interim Report was to be presented by the Commission; and, further, that the Federation should nominate not only three of its own members, to balance three coal-owners, but three out of the six experts who were to be associated with them. The three experts whom the M.F.G.B. selected were Sidney Webb, R. H. Tawney, and Sir Leo Chiozza-Money.

The Act setting up the Royal Commission gave it very wide powers, and expressly instructed it to go into

“Any scheme that may be submitted to, or formulated by, the Commissioners for the future organisation of the Coal Industry, whether on the present basis, on the basis of joint control, nationalisation, or any other basis.”

Lord Sankey (at that time, Mr. Justice Sankey) was appointed to preside over this Grand Inquest into the Coal Industry. The Sankey Commission held its first meeting on March 3rd, 1919, and continued, with a short break, to sit in public several times a week, up to the beginning of June 1919. It not only sat in public; it was, from the point of view of the public, *the* show of the day: the focus of interest and of conversation. The newspapers “featured” it—as well they might. To hear the Duke of Northumberland cross-examined by Sidney Webb on “living by owning,” and on the intricate details of a vast business of which the questioner knew infinitely more than he did, was a dramatic as well as intellectual diversion. Alternating with great

colliery magnates like the Duke and the Marquesses of Bute and Lownderry, were miners' wives from various parts of the land, bankers like Mr. Walter Leaf, great administrators like Lord Haldane, and economists like Professor Pigou, Mr. J. A. Hobson and Mr. Arthur Bowley.

The early stages of the Commission's work were devoted to the miners' claim for an increase in wage rates and a reduction of hours. The impressive picture of the hardships endured by the miner and his family that emerged from the proceedings was then new to the great public. It was set, in startling contrast, against the thirteen million pounds of average annual profit flowing to the owners in 1909-14, and the fantastic war-time figures—thirty-seven and three-quarter millions of profit in 1916 and as much in 1918; there was no resisting the conclusion that some advance in pay and some reduction in hours must be conceded. Three Reports on this were presented; that of owners, that of the miners, and, as a middle way between the two, that signed by Mr. Justice Sankey, Sir Thomas Royden, Sir Arthur Duckham, and Mr. Arthur Balfour (of Sheffield). The proposals of this last group carried with them the significant addendum, that "the present system of ownership and of working stands condemned and some other, unified system must be substituted for it." Whereupon, on March 20th, 1919, Mr. Bonar Law (acting Premier) stated, in the House, and next day wrote to confirm, that the Government

"are prepared to carry out the spirit and in the letter the recommendations of Mr. Justice Sankey's Report."

On this clear understanding, the Federation withdrew the strike notices.

When the Commission resumed its work, its enquiries were directed to the larger issues of ownership and control. On these, two members of the Commission, Sidney Webb and Sir Leo Money, took the stand to give evidence—a procedure

somewhat unusual, although it had been done also by a member of the Royal Commission on the Poor Law, and criticised at the time by those who were beginning, more and more openly, to express their hostility to the Commission. The statement about nationalisation contained in the Sankey Report, a document which the Government had promised to honour in letter and in spirit, made the Commission look dangerous. From the point of view of those who were, in the press and elsewhere, at this stage, rallying opinion against re-organisation, to have Sidney Webb give evidence was, of course, a very serious mistake.

The basis of his evidence was a chapter in a work published by him in 1916, entitled *How to Pay for the War*, containing a scheme for the Nationalisation of the Coal Supply. It was a perfectly clear and coherent scheme for State ownership, financed by a Government issue of stock.

When he took the witness stand at the end of April 1919, he declared, bluntly, that "the root cause of the relative inefficiency of the British coal supply is its foundation on private profit making." The supply of coal ought to be a public service, run "with all due regard to economy." It could be run, when such a public service, so he believed, with a consequent greater efficiency. Some of the Commissioners tried, hard, to pin him down to saying what he had not in fact said: but without conspicuous success. Thus, Mr. R. W. Cooper asked:

"Do you suggest that persons who work are animated by a love of work rather than personal advantage to themselves?"

He replied:

"I do not say 'love of work.' Unfortunately, only a small proportion of the people who work in the world are able to work in a way which they can reasonably be expected to love; but I do suggest that the majority of the work in the world is done already out of a sense of duty. That may seem strange, but I hold to it."

When it was politely suggested to him that "he had evolved the plan of Nationalisation out of his head," he replied that he had seen—

"a very great substitution of public administration for private enterprise going on in the world for the last generation: probably greater than most people are aware."

The point which it seemed hardest to get the minds of his opponents to seize was that—

"The object of a nationalised industry is not to make, or lose money. The object of a nationalised coal industry is to supply coal, and supply it as required in the best possible way, and at as little cost as possible."

He refuted the notion that the servants of a public authority would control it, illicitly.

"My opinion is—I am speaking from experience in this matter—that when the persons employed by a Public Authority have public opinion upon their side, by which I mean public opinion very largely of their own class, and the Public Authority gives way, there is no harm; but directly a person employed by a Public Authority goes beyond the point at which they have public opinion on their side—the public opinion of their own class—then the Government, or the Public Authority, is very strong, even stronger than a private capitalist is, or might be."

Mr. Evan Williams, the leader of the owners, put it to him that he would not find anyone on the owners' side who had "any idea that Nationalisation would be an improvement in the management of the industry." "I am sorry," came the reply, in bland and courteous tones,

"to say that I did not find many of them who had any ideas at all; they were practical men."

"Without ideas?"

"Yes. . . . I should attach very great value to the opinion of practical men upon the subject, if I could get it, but they are so seldom willing to form an opinion."

At a later stage, he pointed out that the question the Commission was addressed to was one of statesmanship: and statesmanship required ideas: even theories.

"In the English language—especially on the lips of practical men—'theorist' is generally used as a term of abuse. It really ought to be the highest term of praise."

Later on another coal-owner, Mr. Forgie, took him on.

"Private ownership is, of course, impossible without profit?"

"Very likely. I should not necessarily have condemned it in that way, but it may be so."

"And you are absolutely against profit making?"

"No. I merely suggested that it was a rather low and corrupting motive and that there were better motives on which we might rely, increasingly; but, of course, we are all strangely mixed, and I do not say that we can entirely free ourselves from profit making."

What he did unsparingly condemn was the chaos in the industry. When asked whether there was "any system which was not chaotic?" he replied,

"Any system which is not unified is chaotic. The very basis of the private ownership of collieries is the competition and jostling of one with another."

"Is not all improvement brought about in that way?"

"No, or very little improvement, in my opinion."

This is not the place in which to re-tell, in any detail, the tragically familiar story of the miners' betrayal. The Sankey Commission, as everyone knows, on the second part of its task issued four reports. The four were, however, unanimous on two very important points.

First, the coal measures should be acquired by the State, to which should be transferred, therefore, all royalties, mineral rights, and wayleaves.

Second, for the distribution of coal, the machinery of local authorities and the Co-operative Societies ought to be further utilised.

No action on the first point has been attempted. The 1924 and 1929 Labour Government did a good deal on the second.

On the questions of the ownership and organisation of the mines, there was full agreement between the Chairman, Mr. Justice Sankey, and the six Labour members of the Commission; they recommended the establishment of national ownership, exercised through a National Mining Council, and the continuation of Government control until this was worked out. In the details of administration there were differences between the plan proposed by Mr. Justice Sankey and that put forward by the Miners: but on the main points they were in agreement, and that meant that these main points in a plan of Nationalisation, were advocated by a majority of the Commission. The Coal-owners with two experts, i.e. five in all, rejected unification altogether. Sir A. Duckham, in a separate Report, advocated a scheme of unified trustification.

By the time the Reports appeared, few politicians had any doubt that, despite the loud talk at the time of the Election of 1918 by Winston Churchill and others in favour of the nationalisation of railways, etc., Mr. Lloyd George and his colleagues were going to let the miners down. So it proved. The Government took no action on the Reports. An official strike in the Yorkshire coal field played into their hands. The M.F.G.B. made an effort at rousing some strong assertion of public feeling on their side, in their "Mines for the Nation" campaign. It failed. The miners were forced back on the purely wages issue. For a short time, the hard realities of the mining situation were masked by the Ruhr occupation, and a great coal strike in the U.S.A. which stimulated the export trade, sent up prices and wages. By 1921, however, this purely artificial prosperity collapsed; German Reparations coal began to pour into markets already overstocked and fed from new, home, sources of supply. At

last, the Government acted. Its action was disastrous. Suddenly, four months ahead of the date solemnly given again and again, they de-controlled the coal industry. This sudden bombshell broke up the negotiations, directed towards a national plan, then going on between miners and owners, precipitated the 1921 dispute, and led straight to the collapse of the Triple Alliance on the day known in Labour annals as Black Friday.

The failure of industrial effort was glaring; the economic outlook black as it could be. Once again, therefore, the miners looked to political action, as a way out of the cruel impasse in which they were suffering. They had already, a considerable number of M.P.'s: indeed a majority of the party membership; and among them were men, like the late Vernon Hartshorn, of absolutely outstanding ability. Too often, however, they were apt to select as candidates men whose long and honourable experience as Trade Union officials meant that they were tired, and not able to turn effectively to a wholly new type of effort. So, Sidney Webb, close to their counsels during the dark years both before and after the Sankey Commission, urged them, at this crisis in their fate, to select certain really able outside champions and experts whom they could trust, and send them to Westminster to state their case there. Frank Hodges had too big a job on hand; the Federation rule which barred the Secretary from other work was sound; but why, he urged, did they not find a really winnable seat for a man like R. H. Tawney, whose services to them had already been of incalculable worth? Well, came the reply, we'll think of that; but why not stand yourself? You are the ideal man, for us: if you will stand, we'll do it. This was no sudden impulse on the part of the Miners. Their votes in 1919 returned Webb top of the poll to the National Executive of the Party, although at that time his membership of that body was but four years old. They knew him. They meant, very

thoroughly, what they said. They wanted him in the House, as one of their M.P.'s. When they pressed and pressed hard, the ingenious advocate was caught. When they continued to press, and Mrs. Webb seconded their pressure, he gave way. He allowed himself to be adopted by Seaham Harbour, a mining constituency in Durham County.

The Miners assured them that Seaham, in spite of the temporary aberration of 1918, which had returned a Coupon-Tory representative to Westminster, was a safe seat for their nominee. Its history suggested that; adoption there was certainly a totally different proposition from adoption as Labour candidate for London University: it meant getting in. But, having made their decision, with all that it meant, the Webbs left nothing to chance. They addressed themselves to the organisation and capture of Seaham with their customary thoroughness. At nine elections for the London County Council, he had proved that there was little he did not know about electioneering, and no trouble that he was not prepared to take in order to make the utmost use of what he regarded as an educational opportunity. As such, therefore, somewhat to the amazement of the miners and their wives, he and Mrs. Webb proceeded to treat the business of "nursing" Seaham.

The constituency was organised, as it had never been organised before. I remember going to dine at 41 Grosvenor Road very shortly after his adoption, and finding them both, enthusiastically, "on the job." They had made up their minds, and were throwing themselves into the new task with gusto. They certainly made it uncommonly interesting. Already they had got the history of mining in general, and of mining in County Durham in particular, at their fingers' ends. Their next step was to map out the place, on the basis of the institutions and organisations, preferably the non-political ones—through which they were

going to get at the people who lived in it. Permeation was then to be applied, on the best Fabian lines. They were card-indexing the Clubs and Institutes, the religious and semi-religious bodies, the educational and semi-educational associations, the P.S.A.'s, the League of Nations Union branches, the Friendly Societies, the Welfare Leagues of multifarious kinds that they had already discovered, and were thirsty for suggestions as to other lines of approach. They were planning how to get into them all, not with political speeches, but with innocuous sounding lectures—lectures about the History of Mining, of Trade Unionism, of the Social Services and so on. The women, the co-operators, the Temperance people, the Mothers' Unions, the literary, debating, philosophical and scientific societies; they knew what they were, and where they were, and who they were, and were alert to cope with them. They had mapped out the pubs as well as the clubs. They were planning to go down a great deal; and they did.

1921 was not many months old before he had got out a *History of the Durham Miners*. In its Preface, he says, with his habitual modesty,

"I have merely put together in a convenient form the results of some researches among the Home Office papers in the Public Record Office, and other contemporary records and proceedings, with what I have gleaned from public sources."

With this admirable hand-book in their pockets, the partners spent week after week in Seaham, lecturing to the people, also getting to know them. The miners and their women-folk had never encountered politics quite in this form before; but they soon took to it with zest. They flocked to the lectures, and sat there, mostly silent, with bright eyes and tense attentiveness; no interruptions, no applause even, until the end, when a round of deafening cheers expressed their appreciation. For the Webbs, this new contact with

the miners and their wives: the teas in their homes, the talks with them round the fire, after the meetings; is really one of the romantic episodes in their lives. To the crude, external view, he was an absurd candidate for Seaham, and she was not much better. *The Times* was so impressed with this absurdity, indeed, that when the result came out in 1922, they misprinted figures in which they could not believe; his immense majority appeared in their early editions as a series of noughts. Actually, the forthright, intelligent, warmhearted men and women of Durham County were more than impressed by this, at first, strange candidate. As they got to know him personally—his record, of course, they already knew—they acquired a warm affection for him. They have an instinctive power of separating the real from the sham: here was something real. His utter and transparent disinterestedness was a fact they saw, almost at once, and never let go. Her, too, they liked; she did not frighten them, as she often frightens the shallow.

When the casting of votes took place, in the autumn of 1922, he not only got in: he achieved a record majority of over eleven thousand, 20,203 votes being given to him against 9,000 for his opponent. Nor, afterwards, did Seaham ever waver in its allegiance. His majority went up in 1923, and was steady in 1924 when the Red Letter undermined so many apparently solid majorities. For as long as he was willing to represent it, the constituency was his.

As M.P. for Seaham, he took his seat in 1922. With that, a new chapter in the life of the firm of Webb plainly opens.

CHAPTER XII

PASSFIELD

ENTERING Parliament in the autumn of 1922, Sidney Webb remained in active politics until the autumn of 1931—a period of nine years. After a twelve-month as a private member, he became in 1924, for nine months, President of the Board of Trade. From 1924 on, there followed a spell of four and a half years during which the Labour Party was in opposition; in 1928, seeing that an election could not be long delayed, and foreseeing that it would bring about a very close balance of parties, and, possibly, another period of Labour minority rule, he determined to withdraw. His view then was that having gone in “under compulsion” and served for six years, he was entitled to come out. He had, as he put it, “other things to do”; things really more congenial. Moreover he was on the eve of being seventy. He was not permitted to carry out this intention; instead, he stayed on, to be, for a second time, a Minister of the Crown, and to become what his wife called “the individual who goes under the fantastical name of Lord Passfield.”

His parliamentary experience covers, therefore, one of the most difficult and diversified periods of British political history, as of the history of the world. It was a period throughout overshadowed by the grim and threatening economic consequences of the war and of the Peace Treaties, haunted by the spectres of Militarism and Nationalism, and darkened by the instant presence in most countries of grave Unemployment and acute industrial dislocation and distress. If some people, early on in this period, began to talk of the

“collapse of Capitalism”: and, later, of an imminent international catastrophe such as might sweep modern civilisation as completely away as ever the barbarian hordes did that of Rome, he saw something worse. Not any visible dramatic event, but a slow bleeding to death was how he diagnosed the situation, in 1932.

To any democratic faith, these years represented a time of severe and cumulative strain. Democracy was, outside Great Britain, being challenged in action, as well as undermined in thought. The second Russian Revolution of 1917 installed one Dictatorship; 1922 saw another established in Fascist Italy. The stability of systems based on the denial of liberty spread corrosive doubts of free institutions, in ever-widening circles. Republican and semi-Socialist Germany, with superhuman efforts, pulled itself up out of the trough of defeat and blockade, and enjoyed a brief spell of apparent recovery with the cessation of the Ruhr occupation, only to be plunged again into despair through the pressure of Reparations and Versailles controls, and compelled to turn, desperately, to ideas of force which had, by its best minds, been abandoned. In the United States, stronghold of Capitalism, a bland conviction that all was well maintained itself up to the opening of 1930, only to be swept out of recollection by the impact of the delayed economic slump. Depression then made Americans arch disseminators of doubts about democratic institutions.

Such was the international and the economic background of nine years of close personal concern with political responsibility and close contact with representative democracy, unwillingly undertaken by an actor who gravely doubted his own competence in the role. True, he defended the House of Commons against the common charges of having “degenerated” and of now failing to command the public interest and respect it had once enjoyed. Those who made these charges, he said in 1928, in an interview with the

London *Observer*, simply did not know their history. There was neither any lack of public interest nor any "degeneration," whether in "capacity or integrity, in education or manners." His defence of parliament, however, was not the one that would be produced, spontaneously, by the M.P. who thinks greatly of himself, or of the institution with which he is connected.

"What the House of Commons secures for the people of Great Britain is the paramount advantage of being able, every few years, to change its Government, lawfully, peaceably, without loss of strength and without social disturbance."

This advantage was certainly secured, during the nine years in question, since it saw no fewer than five Elections—in 1922, 1923, 1924, 1929 and 1931: but it was not one that most of his colleagues appreciated. He was a member, so long as he wanted to be one; his associates came and went.

In this same interview he attacks the commonest defence of the institution:

"To my mind, the least important function of the House of Commons is that to which some people give most weight—namely, that of a debating society, in which every point of view can find expression."

For mere debate, he had never cared. He thought it futile, as indeed, it is apt to be, however entertaining, at St Stephen's. For life there, altogether, he did not care. As he said, "sixty-three is a little too late to alter one's habits," most of all when the new habits offered are of a kind that do not appeal. Some day, let us hope, he will tell us what he really thinks of the stifled and stifling existence of an M.P., compelled, if a Labour M.P., to be in attendance right round the clock, yet prevented, by the physical conditions of his environment, from doing anything for most of the hours of his incarceration. It is a life that has to be endured, to be appreciated; its enjoyment calls for traits he did not possess. Whether, with his passion for orderly concentrated work, his

very feebly developed enjoyment of gossip, and his lack of interest in debate for debate's sake, he would, ever, have found it really congenial may well be doubted.

Those who take hardest to what they feel its elaborately organised time-wasting, are the men who come there with the notion that they are going to be able to carry on, in a larger sphere, the usefulness and the general methods of their experience as members of local governing bodies. Such men, used, by reasonable compromise and mutual give-and-take, to getting things done find it difficult to adjust themselves to a scene drearily governed by the formula "The duty of an Opposition is to oppose." When they go upstairs, to committees, hope, already defeated so far as the Chamber itself is concerned, springs up anew, only to be, there, even more bitterly disappointed. All is ingenuity and obstruction. It bores them.

It undoubtedly bored him. If endurable so long as he could, still, spend his mornings in Grosvenor Road, on his own work, it became unendurable on the days—and they were many—on which he had to be at the House at eleven for a Committee, and was kept at it until midnight or later. His two periods in opposition—1922-23, and 1924-29—were strenuous years. The Labour Party was fighting every inch of the ground; its discipline was rigorously exercised, on the conscientious; members, even the most distinguished, were expected to be there. The time available for other work was small indeed. And yet since, on both occasions, and notably in the longer second period, the Opposition was small, what could be accomplished, inside the walls of Westminster was not great. The work of conversion, of preparing the electorate to take advantage of their opportunity for peaceably bringing about a change, was done more effectively by the inaction of the Government than by anything that could be accomplished by an Opposition. Or so it might well seem to the practical man. It is

not surprising that after four years of his second turn of this, he should, in 1928, have felt the strain: felt that he had endured the uncongenial and ineffective long enough. He determined—and rightly—that neither Westminster nor Whitehall was his sphere.

“The explanation is simply that I shall be seventy when the Election occurs. Being in Parliament is not my life; it has only been an episode. I only went in under compulsion six years ago. I am now feeling the strain of it. The hours are very long. You begin often at eleven o'clock on Committee work, and have to stay until eleven or eleven-thirty. It is too much for me, and in two years' time, it will be very much too much for me. I am giving notice to my constituents in good time.

Parliament is much more trying than it was years ago. The work was then left to perhaps a score of leaders on either side. Now, everybody takes a hand. I have other things to do. My wife and I have other books to write. You cannot do that, and do the House of Commons as well. I am not going to give up my work. I think that in the new parliament there will be a very narrow majority either way, and that will mean very much more incessant attendance. I cannot face that. There are only about six members of the House of Commons who are older than I am. Parliament has become too heavy a job for people who do not enter reasonably young and take it up as the work of their life. I went in at the age of sixty-three, and that is a little too late to alter one's habits.”

No need to quarrel with his own calm verdict. He was not an outstanding success, either as a Minister or as an M.P. He never fully “pulled his weight” in the corporate life which is the substantive opportunity of Westminster; nor, despite a few admirable dissertations on a few issues that keenly interested him, did he shine in the Chamber. He took up the new life too late. Had he entered the House of Commons when he went on to the London County Council, young, adaptable, full of vigour and resource, he might have proved as effective in national as in local government: as effective, above all, at the Cabinet table, and in the administrative sphere. As it was, a good, if uninspired, President of

the Board of Trade, and a much better Colonial Secretary than some people thought, in both offices he gave some colour to the *bon-mot* that went the rounds at the time, to the effect that he was the one Minister who thought of all the objections to any proposed course of action before his Permanent Departmental Heads had put them to him. This certainly could never have been said of him, when he was reorganising the government of London, and "painting the sky red with projects." As it was, he had sixty-three years of exceedingly strenuous life behind him when he began, and over seventy when he finished his parliamentary career, while the times in which he had to function were abnormal, and called for exceptional energies and adaptations.

1922 was not an easy year for the Party; and the Party itself was not too easy. It was drawn from very varying elements, and fed by very various strains of feeling. The first action that the new M.P. for Seaham had to take, on his arrival at Westminster, was to assist in electing a Leader for the party, now some one-hundred and forty strong; twice as strong, that is to say, as it had been through the thankless period of the Lloyd George Coalition Government which broke in 1922. The new Left wing, led by the I.L.P. men from the Clyde, was pressing to have Mr. J. R. Clynes, who had been leader in the last months of the old parliament, substituted by Mr. J. Ramsay MacDonald. They got their way, at the party meeting, although by a very narrow majority. Among those who voted against this change, there were some who felt that public manners demanded that Mr. Clynes, who had had very much the rough of it as leader of a handful, should now have a turn of the relatively smooth. Webb, with his naturally good manners, strong kindness, and keen sense of comradeship as a vital element in the life of any Socialist association, undoubtedly felt this. He felt, moreover, if he did not express the feeling at the time, or indeed, for many years, a radical

doubt as to MacDonald's being seriously on anything that could be called "the Left."

The juxtaposition of these two so different men, that occurs, again and again, throughout their careers, might have culminated in a moment of genuine drama had Webb, in 1931, been willing to contest Seaham against the National Government's Prime Minister; and the result might have been very different from what did occur in October 1931, had he done so. Hard to imagine his being willing; he has never, at any stage, permitted himself to be involved in any course of action that his own quick sensitiveness, or that of anyone else, could stigmatise as "not cricket." Certainly, in 1922, and from 1922 on till the "Crisis," his loyalty to the chosen leader of the Labour party was perfect. It continued unwavering through the years from 1922 to 1929, and, in 1929, was most strikingly demonstrated when, at MacDonald's personal appeal, he consented to carry on the burden of co-operation not only as a Minister, but as a peer.

With MacDonald, in the first year of his life as an M.P., his association was constant, if not close. He had himself been elected Chairman of the Labour Party's National Executive, with MacDonald as his Vice-Chairman; he presided over the Annual Conference which, in the summer of 1923, was held in London, in the Queen's Hall. A Conference which had its very difficult moments, he managed with success. The vital attributes of a chairman—mastery of procedure and of business, and a swift capacity to make up his mind—he possesses, fully. His voice, it is true, is not of a size, nor of a timbre, to prevail above noise, but, as he mildly pointed out, delegates, if quiet themselves, would find no difficulty in hearing him. The immense respect in which he is held largely prevailed in the main to keep them quiet. His Presidential address, noting the steady and surprisingly rapid rise of Labour to political power and

responsibility, contained a phrase of which he was never to hear the last, although it only repeated what he had constantly said before, and few of those who talked afterwards either in derision or in agreement, about "the inevitability of gradualness" did him the justice of reading it in its context. The Address, as a whole, is a remarkable document, worthy of study even at this date—which is more than can be said of nine-tenths of the Presidential addresses to any Conferences! Notable for instance, is the passage, early on, on the "immoral Treaties of Peace" and the resultant "state of warlike tension from one end of Europe to the other" which "lie at the root of all our present troubles." "The historian of the future" he goes on,

"cannot fail to record that Paris was a factory of international inefficiency on a quite calamitous scale."

The Treaties, failed, so the Labour Party holds, because they ignored both economics and morality; for,

"I confess to the simple faith that morality, like economics, is actually part of the nature of things, and, in great matters and in small, whenever we fail to take into account the nature of things, our calculations and arrangements are inevitably brought to naught."

The sentences immediately following this go to the root of the matter—

"Where the world itself went most wrong in 1919, and I think that all countries must share the blame, and the great majority of their citizens, was in the spirit with which the problem was approached. We can all see now that Europe could no more be rebuilt upon the passion of hate, the passion of greed, and the passion of fear, than upon anger and violence. And neither hate nor greed, neither fear nor violence, is brought more into accord with the requirements either of economics or of ethics merely by being national instead of individual."

In Foreign policy, therefore, we must come out of our Nationalist illusions, which are only the common profit

making illusions writ large. In the field of economics, he saw an intellectual challenge presenting itself in a three-fold form;

First, the free competition that had given to the consumer at least "some guarantee that prices would oscillate round the necessary cost of production" was being superseded;

Second, the overweening influence in politics and in the press, of the very rich;

and

Third, the fact of Unemployment, both in its magnitude at the time, and in its persistence and universality.

These are the problems with which Labour grapples in *Labour and The New Social Order*. There follow two passages which demand textual quotation: first, that on Gradualism:

"First let me insist on what our opponents habitually ignore, and indeed, what they seem intellectually incapable of understanding, namely the inevitable gradualness of our scheme of change. The very fact that Socialists have both principles and a programme appears to confuse nearly all their critics. If we state our principles, we are told 'That is not practicable.' When we recite our programme the objection is 'That is not Socialism.' But why, because we are idealists, should we be supposed to be idiots? For the Labour Party, it must be plain, Socialism is rooted in political Democracy; which necessarily compels us to recognise that every step towards our goal is dependent on gaining the assent and support of at least a numerical majority of the whole people. Thus even if we aimed at revolutionising everything at once, we should necessarily be compelled to make each particular change only at the time, and to the extent, and in the manner in which ten or fifteen million electors, in all sorts of conditions, of all sorts of temperaments, from Land's End to the Orkneys, could be brought to consent to it. How anyone can fear that the British electorate, whatever mistakes it may make or may condone can ever go too fast or too far is incomprehensible to me. That indeed, is the supremely valuable safeguard of any effective democracy.

But the Labour Party, when in due course it comes to be entrusted with power, will naturally not even want to do everything at once. Surely, it must be abundantly manifest to any

instructed person that, whilst it would be easy to draft proclamations of universal change, or even enact laws in a single sitting purporting to give a new Heaven and a new Earth, the result, the next morning, would be no change at all, unless indeed, the advent of widespread confusion. I remember Mr. Bernard Shaw saying, a whole generation ago, 'Don't forget that, whilst you may nationalise the railways in one afternoon, it will take a long time to transform all the third-class carriages and all the first-class carriages into second-class carriages.' Once we face the necessity of putting our principles first into bills, to be fought through Committee clause by clause; and then into the appropriate administrative machinery for carrying them into execution from one end of the Kingdom to the other—and this is what the Labour Party has done with its Socialism—the *inevitability of gradualness* cannot fail to be appreciated. This translation of Socialism into practicable projects, to be adopted one after another, is just the task in which we have been engaged for a whole generation, with the result that, on every side, fragments of our proposals have already been put successfully into operation by Town and County Councils, and the national Government itself, and have now become accepted as common-places by the average man. The whole nation has been imbibing Socialism without realising it! It is now time for the subconscious to rise into consciousness."

This is characteristic; it is the familiar Webb. Equally characteristic however, if less familiar, except to those in closer contact with his mind, is that with which he ends. After re-asserting that whatever the vices of existing authority, "the alternative to government is not freedom," and, going on to state that

"the world needs to-day not less but more of that deliberately arranged co-operation among citizens in social tasks, which we term government,"

he touches on what he himself calls "the spirit that giveth life":

"Finally, let me remind you that there is a higher need even than government, whether it be the government of a city or the government of our tempers, or the government of our tongues. It is not upon its plans or its programme,—not even upon its

principles or its ideals—that a political party is ultimately judged. It is not upon them or any of them that its measure of success in the continued appeal to the judgment of the average citizen finally depends. The success of the Labour Party in this country depends, more than anything else, upon the spirit in which we hold our faith, the spirit in which we present our proposals, the spirit in which we meet our opponents in debate, the spirit in which we fulfil our own obligations, the spirit in which, with inevitable back-slidings, we live our own lives. We shall not achieve much, what ever changes we can bring about, unless what we do is done in the spirit of fellowship. For we must always remember that the founder of British Socialism was not Karl Marx, but Robert Owen, and that Robert Owen preached not 'class war' but the ancient doctrine of human brotherhood—the hope, the faith, the living fact of human fellowship—a faith and hope re-affirmed in the words of that other great British Socialist, William Morris."

What he says here about fellowship was most seriously meant. Both he and Mrs. Webb, at this time, and indeed throughout his parliamentary period, were giving a great deal of their time to sociability, with a view to strengthening the internal cohesion of the party, and making it, if possible, into something like a real comradeship. There were difficult cross-currents to stem, of which those represented by Clydeside suspensions in the House, and attacks by the so-called Left wing on the leadership, out of it, were merely the most spectacular. Permeation, by the right kind of ideas, was as necessary as ever, if its field was somewhat changed. On this, Grosvenor Road was busy. If dinners were seldom possible, owing to parliamentary engagements, lunches could be, and were, organised. Much of this effort was thwarted by the fact that the party as a whole, and its leader in particular, showed a great aversion to being organised.

Bernard Shaw, in one of his letters to Ellen Terry, suggests that if she would come down and join the group in Surrey with which he was then holidaying, she could be "Rich, with Mrs. Webb to arrange you!" The "arrangement,"

however much of good feeling there was behind it, tended to be a trifle too obvious. Mr. MacDonald certainly proved entirely recalcitrant to any such "arrangement."

She, nothing daunted, attempted another enterprise, almost as precarious. Agreeing with her husband's diagnosis as to the swift approach of the party to responsibility and even to power, she saw all sorts of social duties as suddenly falling on the wives of members, and of ministers, for which most of them were not, in the nature of things, very well prepared. In order to prepare them, she founded the famous Half Circle Club, which, if not expressly, was nevertheless, in intention, a club of manners. Lady Warwick's generous action, in placing her country house, Easton Lodge, at the disposal of the party for social purposes, as well as for conferences, summer schools, and so on, gave a most agreeable background for the working out of this scheme. Not all the ladies of the party, it must be admitted welcomed the well-intentioned effort at improvement of their manners, or even the brightening of their minds. At the period when the Half Circle Club was at its most successful, opposition raised its head. The party was gathering in people of every sort, at this stage, and from every class. Its ladies were not all the wives of Trade Unionists; some of them thought they knew at least as much about manners and morals as Mrs. Webb. If one social government was being trained at Easton, not so many miles away, in Hertfordshire, another was preparing, sponsored by a "cave" of stalwarts, who called themselves the "anti-Beatrice Society." So hard is the way of fellowship!

As it proved, the testing time was very near at hand. The estimate of its approach made in his Presidential Address in June was laughed at by the London newspapers. Five months later, Mr. Baldwin's sudden plunge into Protectionism precipitated a General Election, as the result of which the Conservatives came back in a minority, while

Labour, with its strength increased from one hundred and forty to over one hundred and ninety, was the strongest Opposition party. The opportunity of responsibility had come, if in a most disagreeably questionable form. As to whether or not it ought to be taken, he, one may be sure, had no more doubts than had Mr. MacDonald. Opportunities must be used, in the form in which they are offered.

“Innovators and reformers, having great ideals and a high standard, sometimes make the mistake of thinking that, even from the outset, nothing less than the best is admissible.”

His way always was to do the useful work that could, in fact, in the circumstances, be done.

Mr. MacDonald formed the first Labour Government: in his Cabinet he made Sidney Webb President of the Board of Trade, with A. V. Alexander, a very able representative of the Co-operative Movement, as Parliamentary Secretary. In this Department, the new President was completely at home, and as departmental chief was an undoubted success. In the House, he had to deal with a large number of complicated but ungrateful matters, many left over by previous Governments. He was actively concerned with the 1924 London Traffic Bill, and busy on the Cabinet Committee on Unemployment. In view of the actual position in the House, major action in regard to trade and industry was, of course, impossible. There was a combined Conservative-Liberal majority against any interference with “free competition.” A mandate for that, however, might, he thought, be secured, if the facts were fully revealed; to that end, one of his first decisions was to set up a Committee to enquire and report on those facts. He therefore made his old colleague of the Sankey Commission days, Sir Arthur Balfour (of Sheffield), chairman of a body entrusted with the task of enquiring into and reporting upon the position and prospects of British Trade and Industry. Unfortunately for the success and efficiency of the Committee’s work, the Trade Union

Congress General Council in 1924 took the view that any Committees or Commissions set up by a Labour Government ought to be predominantly Labour in personnel: and further, that this Labour personnel should be nominated by it. Since this ordinance was not honoured in the composition of the Balfour Committee, the General Council refused to give evidence, and most, though not all, of the Unions, followed its lead—a fact that made the evidence taken inevitably somewhat one-sided. Further, its Reports were not received until the beginning of 1929, by which time the economic problem of Great Britain was, plainly, entering a far more serious phase than the Committee had recognised.

With the complicated issues that led to the fall of the first Labour Government in the autumn of 1924, after but nine months of office, the President of the Board of Trade had nothing to do. After the 1924 "Red Letter" Election, the Party came back to Westminster in reduced strength; but Seaham was faithful. So far as the House of Commons goes, between 1924 and 1929, his main contribution to the work of the Opposition was in his speeches on the De-Rating Bill of Mr. Neville Chamberlain. Here, he was absolutely on his own ground, and when he made his destructive attacks on the abolition of block-grants and the de-rating proposals generally, the House listened, and knew it listened, to the voice of a master. Such occasions however were rare; his own calm verdict was that he had entered parliament too late: a verdict so definite in his own mind that, during this period, he began to lay plans for retiring not only from the House of Commons, but from active politics altogether. In 1925, for instance, he went off the National Executive of the Labour Party and took no direct part, therefore, in the dark and difficult events of 1926, although as a miners' M.P. he was indirectly involved in the Miners' Lock-out, and the General Strike, and he and Mrs. Webb spent a

great deal of time in Durham County. About this time, too, plans for a change of residence took active shape.

In 1926, Mrs. Webb published that remarkable autobiographic volume, *My Apprenticeship*, which suddenly revolutionised the ideas of the younger generation about her, about him, and about what they were "really like"; and made vivid to those who had not thought about it before, how great a sacrifice both of them were making in the separation involved in his membership of the House. On her, that sacrifice was telling. She was beginning to weary of London, in the changed and discoloured form in which London now presented itself to her; and to hanker after the country, in which so much of her youth had been spent. Several years earlier, they had begun the search for a country home—one that should be really in the country, and, at the same time, not so far from London as to cut them off from their friends and their interests there. They knew what they wanted. They described what they required, and invited offers. Offers—mostly of course, quite unsuitable—poured in. Whenever they sounded at all possible, they were patiently investigated by her. At last, the right thing—or what could be made into the right thing—turned up: a cottage, in the midst of farm land, on the borders of Hampshire and Surrey. Liphook is the station, so they get good trains, but the tiny village of Passfield, which gave them the name, Passfield Corner, for their house, is off any beaten track, and on the edge of a vast stretch of common and woodland. It is Crown land, and therefore inalienably safe; the War Office uses part of the great extent of open territory for tank and shooting practice, while the Webbs use it for walks.

They modernised and extended, building on studies, guest-rooms and sun-terraces, thither about 1928, they finally transferred themselves, their books and their possessions generally. They acquired a dog—a long, low

yellowish-whitish terrier, which figures in William Nicholson's portrait of them: a portrait that shows them by the fireplace in the living-room at Passfield Corner, a very pleasant, book-lined room, whose one fault is that its ceiling is on the low side. 41 Grosvenor Road, home and workshop for so long, was, at first with the reservation of a couple of rooms, and then altogether, handed over to their friend and his intimate associate in many years of L.C.C. fighting, Susan Lawrence. Appropriately enough, 41 Grosvenor Road has now ceased to exist. The house is still there; but, in 1932, perhaps to avoid confusion with the other Grosvenors, round about Victoria Station, the road was rechristened Millbank.

In 1928 he told his constituents that he was going to leave them; for the approaching election—which he smelt in the air—they must choose another candidate. The spring of 1929 found him and his wife, their minds set to a prospect of some years of quiet work, of their own kind, in the country, with lots of people to come down and talk with them, and friends, too, not so far off, in the country itself, setting off on one more of their long journeys. This one took them, among other places, to the Near East, to the island of Prinkipo. There they paid a visit to an angry exile—Leon Trotsky, banished from Russia after his final defeat in the struggle for power with Stalin. They found him interesting, if impossible. Their views on the Russian experiment were, at this stage, not too friendly. They had kept closely in touch with Russian happenings, ever since 1917; they saw all the Russians, and all the visitors to Russia, there were to see; they discussed Communism and Sovietism, very thoroughly; they read a great deal about the U.S.S.R.; they grasped, long before most people, the fact that what kept it going was, mainly, its religious aspect: the existence of the Communist Party as a kind of Jesuit Order. But, at this stage, they did not much like it; still

less its reactions on opinion at home. Mrs. Webb made a practice of writing a monthly letter to his constituents in Seaham. In one of them in July 1927 she had stated, quite bluntly, that

“The Russian Revolution, and especially, the propaganda of it in Great Britain, has been the greatest misfortune in the history of the British Labour Movement. Just as the French Revolution in 1789-93 kept back the advent of political democracy in England for a hundred years, so the Russian Revolution of 1917 may, if we are not careful, prove to keep back the advent of economic democracy in England for half a century.”

So, if keenly interested in Russia, their interest was tinged with distaste. This distaste was, in either case, connected with the aversion they had both always felt from the Marxian dialectic and the entire doctrinaire approach. On top of this came the disgust of their orderly minds for the mess and horror of revolution. From the British angle, moreover, the whole thing was a bit of a nuisance.

Trotsky, of course, at once raised the question of his own admission to England. Much as he despised everyone in the Socialist movement there, he still thought it their duty to get him in. What he himself says is:

“Mr. and Mrs. Webb most courteously paid me a visit early in May 1929, when I was already on Prinkipo. We talked about the possible advent of a Labour Party to power. I remarked in passing that immediately after the formation of Mr. MacDonald's Government, I intended to demand a visa. Mr. Webb expressed the view that the Government might not find itself strong enough, and because of their dependence on Liberals, not free enough, either. I replied that a Party not strong enough to be able to answer for its actions had no right to power. Our irreconcilable differences needed no new test.”¹

They came home, as they thought, to the peace and quiet, the ordered work on their own lines, of Passfield Corner; to resume, after seven years' interruption, the congenial

¹ *My Life*, p. 492.

common task. Vain dream. What met them was a new and insistent appeal for co-operation, even for sacrifice.

The 1929 Election made Labour, with two hundred and fifty M.P.'s, the strongest single party, although the shrunken Liberal remnant still held the balance in the House of Commons, and, in the Lords, the Conservative preponderance was, of course, overwhelming. Mr. MacDonald, in forming his second Government, was faced afresh with the difficulty arising out of the constitutional practice according to which a certain number of Secretaries of State must be in the Upper House. He was unwilling to repeat the 1924 experiment of relying, in part, on outsiders. To Sidney Webb he put up a very strong appeal, on both personal and public grounds. He knew that he had in his mind withdrawn from politics, and had taken definite and decisive steps to that end; was not he himself now M.P. for Seaham, in his place? Webb, so he has said, is the only associate who has never at any stage asked him for a job of any kind. There was no question now, of his wanting one; the question was—Could he overcome his strong disinclination for any further political effort? It was put to him, and with force, that his help was required, both in the Cabinet and as a Minister. Would he, in fact, take on the onerous task of becoming Secretary of State for the Colonies, and, in addition, make the sacrifice of views he was known to hold about peerages, and go up to the Lords? There, the hours would be far less strenuous; the work itself would be mainly administrative.

Much against his inclinations, and simply and solely out of his strong sense of public duty, he finally agreed. He made perhaps the biggest sacrifice of his career. He became Baron Passfield. For the first time in their long association, his wife refused fully to share the burden with him. She did, nobly, do her part in the, to her, supremely distasteful social sphere. The social burden falling on the

Colonial Secretary is, as a matter of fact, exceptionally onerous; she took it on, without repining, and was often exceedingly amusing about it. But she refused, on her part, to alter the name by which she had been known for nearly forty years. She had changed her name once, in 1892: she was not going to do it again, in 1929. She did not see why the practice long used in Scotland, in the case of the Law Lords, should not be adopted. On this, she was immovable. She made the Prime Minister, and others, very wrath; but nothing shook her. Lady Passfield was a person whose existence she refused to countenance. Solemn officials were horrified at the notion of sending out invitations under the title "To meet the Secretary of State for the Colonies and Mrs. Webb"; ladies in the social hierarchy took her personally to task. In vain. She had been born into the social hierarchy, and was not to be browbeaten. Her husband had gone into an imprisonment whose duration was limited. He would escape: he has escaped. There was no reason in sense or logic why she should follow him. She remained, obstinately, Mrs. Webb. She did her social chores with a good grace; more than that, she kept up the practice, initiated in 1924, of having the members of the Parliamentary Labour Party to lunch, in batches, in order that she and Sidney might get to know them. There was no part of the duty attaching to the wife of the Colonial Secretary that she neglected; but she did not see becoming a Baroness as part of that duty. Had her views and her husband's prevailed in 1924, when the crucial decisions about etiquette, manners, Court dress and the relations of a Labour Party to the Court generally had to be taken, the advent of the first Labour Government would have been employed to make a definite but perfectly courteous break with tradition. Now, in a small matter that concerned only herself, she was adamant. "I am an old woman," she would say, "and I am not going to change."

That her view about the peerage, for those who happened to like to be in it, was if contemptuous not unduly harsh is made plain in an article contributed anonymously, about this time, to the *Political Quarterly*: an article which reproduced the substance of her talk at one of the lunches she gave to Labour members. It is called *The Disappearance of the Governing Class*, and is designed to test the assumption, so easily being made about that time, that

“a momentous transfer of political power, from the relatively small governing classes of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, to a body of men and women representing between them, in birth, training and occupation, all the classes of the community”

was in fact taking place. She finds in Mr. MacDonald's 1929 Cabinet, six genuine manual workers; five from the “Intellectual Proletariat,” including Lord Passfield: six from the nineteenth century governing class. Although the Cabinet contained no representatives of the old aristocracy of Great Britain, when the composition of the “second eleven”—Ministers outside the Cabinet and Under Secretaries—is analysed, it shows nine Trade Unionists, six of the Intellectual Proletariat, seven higher *bourgeoisie*, and four of the old aristocracy (Earls Russell and De la Warr, Sir Oswald Mosley and Mr. Arthur (now Lord) Ponsonby). Looking into the future, she holds that

“the firm anchorage of the Labour Party in the working class organisations may be deemed a guarantee that Labour Administrations will continue to represent adequately the four-fifths of the population.”

At the same time, she closes on a note of caution:

“The British governing class of the past hundred years has shown a marvellous capacity for assimilating all those persons, irrespective of their antecedents, who possess power.”

Her final word is an admonition to leaders that—

“If you really desire successive Labour Administrations, continuously devoted to the welfare of the common people, you will

need to maintain, by precept and by example, the modest personal expenditure and unpretentious ways of social intercourse implied by the ideal of equality between man and man—an ideal which is the very soul of the Labour Movement.”

So far as “modest personal expenditure and unpretentious ways of social intercourse” went, she and Lord Passfield certainly set an example: an example more important than her refusal to become a peeress.

He, as Secretary of State, did not find himself at all in the quiet administrative job which the Prime Minister had led him to expect there. On the contrary: he was for a period, in the centre of a veritable whirlwind. His term of office as Secretary of State for the Colonies covered a period during which problems emerged which roused strong feeling on the part of very vocal groups; not the sort of problems, either, with which he was always very familiar, or to which he was naturally attracted.

True, in going to the Colonial Office, he was, in a sense, re-treading the footprints of his youth. It was there, as a First Division clerk, that he had worked, between the ages of twenty and thirty. There he had, for a period, lived, as Resident clerk. In a desk, there, the Minutes of the Fabian Society had at one stage been housed. In the wellnigh forty intervening years, however, the scope and nature of the issues with which a British Colonial Secretary has to deal had become enormously extended and complicated. Simple Crown Colony Government, where Downing Street had the first and last word, had, in important parts of the Colonial Empire, been left behind, and, in Malta, Ceylon, the West Indies, Kenya, and elsewhere, the local Legislatures had now a large, if varying, share in the management of their own affairs. Further, the War had left Great Britain as Mandatory Power for difficult regions of the earth; regions that at least in one case, that of Palestine, presented wellnigh insoluble antagonisms. The Colonial Secretary

is the agent of British responsibility for some sixty millions of people, infinitely various in race, colour, religion, and relative stages in civilisation, scattered over the whole earth. They appear before him mainly in the form of papers; but these papers require to be translated into terms of human beings, by a process that demands imagination, sympathy, and an understanding of conditions not easy to realise in the atmosphere of Whitehall.

Neither temperament nor training in his case, were of a kind to make this "translation" process easy, and he could not be expected, at seventy, to change. He had an actual acquaintance with our "Colonial Empire" as extensive as most Colonial Secretaries have had, but he has not a very large measure of natural sympathy with what he calls, characteristically, the "non-adult" mind. His own is, pre-eminently, an adult mind. If people, at times, have thought him brusque, it is because he credits them with an understanding as rapid and a knowledge as full, as his own, and so does not bother to explain. Anyone who asks him to explain, will find him do so, with infinite patience. But he has to be asked to do it. His mind, again, is not only adult: it is institutional, and, between the institutional mind and the African native or the fanatical Jew or Arab, there is little enough to come and go upon. So, while extraordinarily effective, from one point of view, in handling papers or in dealing with business matters—conscientious, immensely diligent, swift to grasp essential points, impatient with irrelevancies, easily master of details, and quickly capable of setting them in proper perspective; he was less effective in seizing the intangible and unfamiliar human element underlying them. He has never been what is called "good at people." He examined every Colonial problem by standards of high intelligence and fair dealing, and dealt with it shrewdly, and, in most cases, very successfully; but, where human emotions and reactions were involved, he

was without inward guidance. His departmental heads—for whom he had the respect he always shows to a workman or professional man trained for a job—were unfortunately apt to underline rather than compensate this deficiency: and he and they were usually in substantial agreement.

In general, however, his period of office was marked by many useful and progressive Colonial administrative achievements. Thus, he was responsible for the long and tedious but successful negotiations in connection with the Iraq treaty and the preparation for Iraq's emergence from its Mandatory position. Although he, characteristically and rightly, gave the lion's share of the credit to Sir Francis Humphries, our High Commissioner in Iraq, and to the very able Colonial Office Official who chiefly managed the business at this end, he himself constantly supervised the proceedings and is entitled to a considerable measure of credit for the fact that Iraq is now a member of the League of Nations, and on the best of terms with Great Britain. Again, the White Paper on *Native Policy in East Africa* (cmd. 3573)—his own handiwork, as any student of its phrasing will discern—was an important and memorable document. In it he re-stated the British position on trusteeship, previously set out by the Duke of Devonshire in 1923 and by Mr. Amery in 1927. His statement aroused criticism by the Kenya settlers and others, who did not like the phrase "paramouncy of native interests."

General Hertzog, Prime Minister of South Africa, whose own native policy has been a deep disappointment to enlightened world opinion, rushed into the fray and made the surprising suggestion that South Africa should have been consulted before the White Paper was issued. This, despite the fact that no British Government had been consulted by the Union Government when important departures from traditional British policy in former British territories were taking place, and that Britain was respon-

sible for the welfare of 40,000,000 Africans as against the Union's 6,500,000. Anyhow, the White Paper with its clear assertion of the rights of the African peoples, was issued to every East African official as his "book of words"; and was endorsed in the Report of the Joint Committee on Closer Union in East Africa, which concluded its work as the Labour Government fell. This Committee, composed of representative members of the Lords and Commons and including the principal authorities on Colonial Affairs in all Parties in both Houses of Parliament, in a unanimous Report, included Lord Passfield's Paper with the previous two as "the broad basis upon which the co-ordination of native policy should proceed," and said that "steps should be taken to bring the administration into harmony with these principles." Further, that

"the principle underlying the Mandates is no less unassailable in Kenya and Uganda than in Tanganyika":

that

"to . . . peoples not yet able to stand by themselves under the strenuous conditions of the modern world, there should be applied the principle that the well-being and development of such peoples form a sacred trust of civilisation."

These authoritative declarations cannot now be lightly set aside by any future Government of any Party. His clear affirmation of a just and generous policy on the part of Britain towards our African fellow-subjects, came at a time when strong contrary influences were at work; on this ground alone, his tenure of office has historical importance.

He set on foot investigations into the methods of dealing with Juvenile delinquency in the Colonies, into Labour Conditions and Wages, Factory Acts, Workmen's Compensation, recruitment of native labour, the provision of medical services, and education. Dr. Drummond Shiels, his Parliamentary Undersecretary, presided over these investigating Committees, at which many disquieting facts

were disclosed. Steps were taken to deal with the most urgent matters, and a great deal more was in train for action when the Labour Government left office. Among other administrative actions, the effective part of an Ordinance to bring about the abolition of Mui Tsai in Hong-Kong, which had been kept suspended by previous Governments, was put into operation in spite of loud local governmental protests. Further, the new Constitution for Ceylon, based on the recommendations of the Donoughmore Commission (of which Dr. Drummond Shiels was a member) was drawn up and established.

To a country with most of India's problems on a smaller scale, it gives adult suffrage for the first time in any Eastern country. It abolishes communal representation entirely, and places the responsibility for the welfare of minorities on the good sense and tolerance of the general community, with, in the background, the right of intervention on their behalf by the Governor. It has executive Committees of members of the Legislature attached to the Departments of Government, and the State Council has both legislative and administrative functions. The new Constitution was established at a time of economic depression, which did not give it a good start, and there has been some friction over the use of the Governor's powers to protect the interests of British Civil Servants. It is certain, however, that, whatever changes there may be, the fundamental features of the Constitution will not be altered. They mark a notable advance in the application of democracy in the East, and were not without effect on the recommendations of Lord Lothian's Advisory Committee on the proposed franchise for India.

In these various directions, substantial good was accomplished, under his regime: not showy, but solid. The general public however, and even many members of his own party, were hardly aware of all this. The picture of Colonial

Office activity was blocked by the Palestine "row": the row that is to say arising out of the White Paper of 1930 (cmd. 3962). For the fact that there was a row, neither Lord Passfield, nor this particular White Paper, were really responsible. Any White Paper, any statement of British policy in Palestine, was bound to produce something of the kind, since it must re-state a position in which the British Government is attempting to satisfy conflicting claims that cannot, in the nature of the case, be satisfied. This was a fact that might have been more fully realised by the Prime Minister when, in 1930, he pressed the Colonial Secretary to issue a statement of British policy.

The Palestine Mandate, based as it is on the famous Balfour Declaration of 1917, is a compromise document; both are typical products of the Lloyd George regime. They try to combine the substance of incompatible promises made to the Jews and to the Arabs, during the War. The Jews expected Palestine as a National Home. What the Declaration and the Mandate gave them was a National Home *in* Palestine. The Arabs wanted full autonomy, or, at least, a Mandatory relation resembling that of Iraq, leading on to independence. What they got in the Mandate was a series of qualifications to each concession therein made to Jewish claims; a recurrent proviso to the effect that the rights and privileges of the Arabs were to be respected. Here was a dilemma incapable of solution by administrative action. The Jews, fortified by funds contributed largely from the United States, brought into Palestine numbers of their hapless unemployed nationals from Eastern European countries, as well as Zionist idealists, from all parts, eager to take part in the rebuilding of the ancient heritage of their faith. To settle these immigrants, the Jewish authorities bought up large tracts of land. The Arabs thereupon protested that opportunities for their natural expansion and development were being filched from them, and that the land which is

their natural and historic home was being alienated. Friction between the two races culminated, shortly after the Labour Government took office, in the tragic riots and massacres of August 1929. A commission of three Members of the House of Commons was at once sent out to enquire and report; when they did report, they laid particular stress on the dangers presented by the development of a class of landless Arabs; and advised an expert enquiry into land settlement. Sir John Hope-Simpson, an admitted expert, was at once sent out, for that purpose. Neither the Shaw Report nor the Hope-Simpson Report pleased the Jews; they brought immense pressure to bear, from all kinds of directions, to secure that, in any new statement of policy, an attitude more favourable to themselves should be declared. Powerfully represented as they are in governing circles at home and abroad, they had, and used, all kinds of pressures, and had, and used, all kinds of access, not so much to the Colonial Secretary, as to other members of the Government. There was a great deal more going on, outside the Colonial Office, than inside it, from this point of view: above all, after the appearance of the famous White Paper. Although Lord Passfield had long been giving earnest thought to the subject, it was not to him that the eminent visitors came, with their arguments and their complaints, their pressure and even their threats.

The White Paper, as issued in the early autumn of 1930, was, of course, a Cabinet document. Discussions as to whether, and, if so, at what stage, it was approved by the Cabinet are beside the point. In spite of the breaches recently made in the doctrine of collective responsibility, it remains the case that the Cabinet as a whole is responsible for every State Paper. As for any breach in the practice which imposes secrecy as regards what happens—or does not happen—at Cabinet meetings, as part of the oath taken by every Privy Councillor, neither Lord Passfield nor Sidney

Webb, had, or is capable of having, any part or lot in it. Thus, to what was intended to be a tactful query on the Palestine matter, his reply was "I do not feel free to tell you about any particular Cabinet matter." No light has therefore been thrown by him on any of the circumstances of the row that broke out, with resounding echoes, on the issue of this particular Paper. For its drafting, he was, of course, as Minister, responsible.

He made, as the core of his Paper, a Development scheme, based on the Report of Sir John Hope-Simpson; and dealt, first, with the position of the landless Arabs, and then with proposals for bringing more land into cultivatable condition by irrigation, etc., for the use of both Jews and Arabs, to permit of larger Jewish immigration, without injustice to the Arabs. A Loan Fund of £2,500,000, to be provided by the British Government, was an integral part of this scheme: indeed, its pivot. The way was prepared for the announcement of the Development scheme by a survey of the difficulties of the situation, and notably of the difficulty in the way of sanctioning additional Jewish immigration presented by the unemployment and land scarcity from which the Arabs suffered. At the last moment, the Treasury is said to have asked that the intimation of the financial support to be given by way of loan should be left out, as they did not wish to be finally committed to it. This erasure, however, left the Paper as a statement of facts, in themselves incontrovertible, which read disagreeably when, instead of being linked up with a largely conceived development plan, providing, on bold and statesmanlike lines, more land for both Jews and Arabs, it faded out into vague generalities. Instead of being a plan, the thing became a lecture. As such, it was hailed with a torrent of bitter abuse. Before many days had passed, agitation had developed into one of those recurrent "crises" that made up the hectic life of the second Labour Government. An unfortunate interview,

given by Lord Passfield to a representative of the American Jewish Press, added fuel to the flame. The Cabinet was alarmed; there was an awkward bye-election pending in Whitechapel. Palestine was, for the time being, taken out of the hands of the Colonial Secretary. In the House of Commons, there was an acrimonious debate. The Under Secretary, who only just returned from an official visit to Palestine, was put up to defend the White Paper in the House, and succeeded in doing so, with very considerable success, by filling in the gaps in it of the Development scheme. He was further able, some months later, to defend it with credit before the Permanent Mandates Commission in Geneva. The harm was done, however, and could not be undone.

In this, the part that most men would have minded most acutely, but Lord Passfield himself showed least sign of minding, was the blow to his own prestige and consideration. He had been superseded, and everybody knew it. After the Debate, a Cabinet sub-committee was set up to explain the White Paper. It included co-opted members from outside the Cabinet, and was presided over not by the Colonial Secretary, who was but an ordinary member of it, but by the Foreign Secretary. In the circumstances a man who thought first of himself, and of his own dignity, might well have resigned; so might a man who had a keen sense of the dignity of his office. The dignity of his office he felt perhaps rather too little; personal dignity he has never assumed. His native modesty, that genuine personal humility which is so admirable a part of his character as *homo sapiens*, militated against effective self-assertion, either in this matter or as a general member of the Cabinet. Nor could he extemporise it, in the form of a high sense of the status of his office as Colonial Secretary. He did not resign, in the upshot; nor has he ever said anything upon the matter. One of those who worked with him, in another

connexion, once observed, with an apologetic but affectionate smile, "The old man is almost too much of a gentleman."

With more than sufficient troubles in his own office—troubles, however, which he never allowed to perturb his serene equanimity or to prevent his spending the weekends at Passfield Corner—he had little time to devote to the more general tribulations and perplexities of the party and of the Government of which he was a member. He was outside the House of Commons, focus of those perplexities and tribulations; and, especially in the last two years of the Cabinet's life, out of contact with the Prime Minister. Yet so acute and experienced an observer was aware, both of the tides of feeling that were moving the mind of the party, and of what was going on, outside of it. Certain features of the events of August 1931 surprised him and his wife less than they did many others.

Mrs. Webb's article, already referred to, suggested part of the answer to some of the questions that the simpler souls in the Labour party were finding insoluble and acutely painful. Two months after the National Government had swept the country at a General Election, he wrote a paper in whose opening paragraph he takes the bull by the horns:

"Why did Mr. Ramsay MacDonald, after thirty years' up-building of the British Labour Party, decide to do his best to smash it, going over with a couple of his principal colleagues and a mere handful of his Party to a Coalition of Conservative and Liberals?"

He not only asks the question. He gives the answer. His diagnosis of the situation as it was during the opening months of 1931 is illuminating. After setting out the parliamentary awkwardness of a minority position, with

"The Government dependent every day on the support of one or other of the inveterately hostile Parties for obtaining the Closure (granted only to a majority vote) without which not

even the routine business of Parliament can be got through, let alone any Government measures embodying Party policy,"

he proceeds to sketch in the personality aspect:—

"The Labour Party itself grew more and more restive at its own parliamentary impotence, section after section breaking out in angry rebellion, with practically everybody discontented at the meagre achievements of an overworked Cabinet whose difficulties were very inadequately realised. The Prime Minister was not in the mood to find time or energy for that friendly social intercourse with the members of his own Party, or even with his Ministerial colleagues, which goes so far to avert friction and produce the 'team spirit.' More and more he tended to spend his scanty leisure in less disagreeable society. Thus the session of 1931 opened with the Parliamentary Labour Party seriously discontented with itself, the several Ministers out of touch with one another, struggling separately with their departmental difficulties, the Cabinet unable to find solutions for problems in the circumstances actually insoluble, and the back benchers at loggerheads with themselves and with the front bench. The Prime Minister—very much aware of the shortcomings of each one of his colleagues, and of the Party to which he belonged, as well as (may it be said?) perhaps incessantly rather too conscious of his own superiority—was not in a condition to withstand the temptation of flattering suggestions that began to be made from more than one quarter. Why not cut the Gordian Knot by getting rid of the perpetual nuisance of Parliamentary Opposition; especially if such a surgical operation involved also the elimination, or at least, the reduction to impotence, of those troublesome sections of the Labour Party whom the Prime Minister had come to loathe with a bitterness that could not be concealed?"¹

From the Conservative point of view, a National Government—first suggested, overtly, by Mr. J. L. Garvin—was attractive, as a means of getting a Tariff; to the Prime Minister, it began to appeal as a means at once of disentangling himself from the disappointments surrounding the second Labour Government, and of effecting reductions in expenditure on account of Unemployment.

¹ *Political Quarterly*, January 1932. Also *Current History* (New York).

In July, the German moratorium certainly produced a highly difficult and dangerous situation; but the crisis in Britain was created by the issue, on the last day of that month, half an hour after members of the House of Commons dispersed for the summer recess, of the famous Report of the May Committee. This document drew a picture intended to be terrifying of the budgetary position. It proved terrifying; not at home only, but abroad it created something like a panic; there was a serious drain on gold from London. The crisis arose. Its focus was made, by the May Report, the expenditure arising out of the Unemployment Insurance system—a matter on which (although most people chose to forget this at the time) the May Commissioners were not experts, and into which an expert body, in the shape of a Royal Commission, was enquiring at the time. In the May Report, the cost of State aid to Unemployment Insurance was presented as the leak that was sinking the ship of State.

The situation which, when it met in August, the Cabinet had to face was that the Bank of England required loans from abroad to stabilise its own Gold Reserve, and to that end, the Budget had got to be so balanced as to satisfy foreign lenders. Cuts in Unemployment Insurance, so the Cabinet was told by the Prime Minister, were “conditions of the borrowing.”

“At any rate, the Labour Cabinet, which had already unanimously determined to balance the Budget by immediately imposing the necessary additional taxation and by making any prudent economies, refused to accept any such ‘condition of the borrowing’ as Mr. MacDonald has described, and late on Sunday evening, 23rd August, in order not to render urgent public business impossible, empowered the Prime Minister to tender to the King his own resignation, which automatically includes the termination of office of the whole Ministry. It was taken for granted that the King would immediately send for Mr. Baldwin, the leader of the Conservative Party, and entrust him with the formation of a new Government. It is significant that Mr. Neville Chamberlain, who as Mr. Baldwin’s principal

colleague had been with him almost hourly in consultation with the Prime Minister, stated publicly in a speech a few days later that he had himself gone to bed that Sunday night with exactly that assumption.

The Prime Minister had in mind a different development of the drama that he himself had staged. What happened at Buckingham Palace on Monday morning, 24th August, can be known only to the actual participators. What is said is that the King—with whom the Prime Minister had been in constant communication but who never went outside his constitutional position, made a strong appeal to him to stand by the nation in this financial crisis, and to seek the support of leading members of the Conservative and Liberal Parties in forming, in conjunction with such members of his own Party as would come in, a united National Government. The King is believed to have made a correspondingly strong appeal to the Liberal and Conservative leaders. What is known is that Mr. MacDonald came at noon to the final Labour meeting, and at once informed his astonished colleagues that, whilst they were all out of office owing to his resignation, he had actually 'kissed hands' as Prime Minister of a National Government, which would confine itself to what was required to meet the actual financial crisis and would then promptly proceed to a General Election, at which the leaders of the three political parties, without anything in the nature of a coalition or a 'coupon,' would severally appeal to their respective followers."

The "Labour meeting" of which he here speaks is the meeting of the Cabinet; to that of the Labour party, the Prime Minister did not come. He had, by then, obtained the adhesion to the National Government of three of his late Labour colleagues—of whom Lord Passfield, needless to say, was not one; the party, with practical unanimity, rejected his action and went into Opposition, above all on the cuts in Unemployment, declaring that these sacrifices were unjust, economically harmful, and wholly ineffective to meet the situation. In so far as that situation centred in the drain of gold from the Bank, it went on, at an accelerating rate, after the formation of the National Government. Formed to protect gold, the National Government took Great Britain off the gold standard before it had been more than

three weeks in existence. Mr. MacDonald's pledge as to the brief duration of the new combination was more honoured in the breach than the observance. In the 1931 Election, he took the field at the head of mainly Tory cohorts to denounce Labour as out to "ruin the country."

In this nightmare phase, Lord Passfield had no share. If any member of the Cabinet of 1929-31 felt doubt as to the action he should take in the emergency, it was not he. His personal release from active political service he accepted, with relief; to his political faith or his political allegiance, nothing happened. For him, the

"whole episode is a manifestation, which the world will not fail to note, and which the British Labour Party must duly heed, of the extraordinary strength of the position of the British Capitalist system, and the British governing class."

This is the first point he makes. He goes on, characteristically, to accept this demonstration as a call to renewed work. Thus,

"The shock that the Labour Party has received by the magnitude of its defeat may be expected to do it good."

A Party only twenty five years old was "prematurely born into governmental life." Not only had it never come near to comprising a majority of the nation: "at no election, not even that of 1929, did it obtain the support at the polls of a majority of the wage-earning class." Back, then, to education, to thinking, to propaganda; back, above all, to the development of "much more of that friendly social intercourse among fellow-workers in a common cause which so effectually promotes its success."

This article is signed Sidney Webb. In fact, for all purposes, of writing and speaking, of work and of intercourse, the smash of 1931 not only released, it made an end of Lord Passfield. Sidney Webb resumes the name and habit native to him.

CHAPTER XIII

RUSSIA

RUSSIA is, of course, and above all for Socialists, the biggest question mark of the post-war world. As such, the Webbs fully recognised it. From 1917 on, they listened about Russia, read about Russia, learned about Russia, discussed Russia. There are enthusiastic pro-Russians in England who would deny their interest, and assert that up to 1932 when they suddenly discovered it, "they just left Russia out." But the enthusiastic British pro-Russian can do with nothing less than a wholehearted and uncritical absorption such as he could not get from them on this, or indeed, on any subject. As a matter of fact, they were deeply interested, if also highly critical, during the nine years from 1922-31 in which his immersion in active politics made it impossible for them to give it more than an attention that, while always alert, was naturally governed to a large extent by the reaction of Russian events on those in Great Britain.

Then, in 1931, came the smash, and also the release. The release set them free for work; the smash compelled their minds to face the revealed weaknesses of the British form of representative democracy, and stimulated them to interrogate its alternative. They determined to go and look at Russia. Whether or no he agreed with the grand gesture with which she threw Gradualism over board at a Fabian gathering in the early spring of 1932, one may not know; with her, too, the action was probably mainly expressive of bitter disappointment and temporary exasperation. Some disillusionment, however candidly faced and however

courageously transformed into renewed effort, there must have been for both: its main effect however was to spur them to an undertaking of a really heroic kind. At seventy, a journey to Russia is no picnic. She fell ill during its course; on which her own comment was that it gave her a grand opportunity of studying Russian medical institutions from the inside! Real gallantry in their facing of the physical discomforts: a finer and a rarer form of gallantry in their acceptance of the mental discomfort of the obligation to look, at close quarters, at something at once new and possibly subversive. This high intellectual gallantry they have always shown. At going to look, they have always been exemplary. At no stage in their career does the observer find them with their heads either in the air or in the sand.

Two less ostrich-like beings never existed. There may be things in human life which their eyes do not fit them for perceiving: but such as their eyes are, they have always used them. Each new phase in social policy: each new economic fact or tendency: each new evaluation of the conduct or object of existence, as it has come up in the course of their lives, has always found them alertly interested, full of intelligent curiosity, ready, nay eager to learn.

They are not easily moved from their own position, but that position is an observation point, not a rampart. Never have they got themselves into the posture of high priests of a closed body of doctrine. Never have they ceased to test the fabric of their own, and other people's Socialist opinion. They really have got open minds. Most persons, even persons of infinitely less than their responsible eminence, regard with a hostility that, at best, is veiled, any fresh idea that may upset views to which they have committed themselves. Not so the Webbs. Thus, when Syndicalism and Gild Socialism rose on the horizon, in the years immediately preceding the war, they did not, like most other British Socialists, at once assume a position of harsh and

condemnatory rejection of these presumed heresies; on the contrary, they proceeded to make a most impartial and thorough study of them. They met their exponents, on the friendliest terms, as far as their own attitude was concerned (that of the exponents, of course, they could not regulate); and they incorporated such elements of the new dispensation as seemed to them, after genuinely dispassionate review, to be sound. The same patient readiness to study, to learn, to take in new light, to admit new points of view, to attend to new voices, marks their attitude to Bolshevik Russia. They fought the hasty and unconsidered swallowing of it whole by certain sections of the British Labour movement, from 1917 on; they never concealed their view that the forward march of Socialism in other countries was being hindered, rather than helped, by the tactics of the Third International; but they never had any other general view than that here was a big thing, a big challenge, that must be met and understood. Silly to shut eyes to it: sillier still to rush either into enthusiastic acceptance or rude derision about it. Some people might see it as likely to "blow the Webbs sky-high." What of it? If that were to turn out to be an accurate description, accuracy rather than the Webbs must be served; and they would be the first to say so.

Any such expectation however could only be entertained by critics who insist on taking an entirely one-sided view of what the Webbs stand for. Democracy is certainly important in their plan of Socialism; but so is the fact that, always, it has been a plan. In the lecture on *Socialism, True and False*, which he delivered before the Fabian Society as far back as 1894,¹ in which he rejects all the varieties of what he calls "spurious Collectivism" from Insurrectionism to Utopianism, he does so in favour of an orderly planning. He compares the Fabians to the Benthamites, and tells

¹ Reprinted in *Problems of Modern Industry*.

them that "If we are to have anything like the success of the early Philosophic Radicals, we must be able, like them, to 'explain in the large dialect of a definite scheme what are our aims and whither we are going'." Planned action, the planned approach, the coherent programme—this is, from first to last, the essence not of their doctrine only but of their practice. He proved it, as a member of the London County Council. It was the master idea in the Campaign for the Prevention of Destitution of 1909 to 1911. It is the key idea in *Labour and the New Social Order*, as in *Labour and The Nation* : in either case it was Webb who fitted that key into the lock. In season and out of season, through good report and ill, they stood for planning, in days when that word was not in common use.

By 1931, and indeed for some years earlier, Russia had come to stand to the world not only or even mainly as one of the two great experiments in dictatorship, but rather as, primarily, *the* great experiment in practical planning. So much was this the case that, by 1931, many had forgotten dictatorship in their interest in and sympathy for planning. The Webbs were not likely to forget dictatorship, but were there in the world two persons likely to feel so keen an interest in, or so comprehensive a sympathy for, the Five Years Plan?

They read, therefore; they studied; they prepared themselves, before, in the latter end of May 1932, they took the final step of going to look. Their standard of preparation is immensely high. In the autumn of 1932, they published a small volume which they call *Methods of Social Study*. If there be anything of accident in the appearance of this volume, at the moment at which it did appear, the accident is a very happy one for the reader. Nothing could put him in a better position to appreciate the attitude they attempted to take with them to Russia than this guide on How to look. After a most illuminating disquisition, in the first chapter, on *The*

Sphere of the Social Sciences, they pass, in chapter II, to survey the "mental equipment of the trained investigator." This chapter is pure gold: incidentally also biographic gold, since they have written nothing that tells one more about themselves. To the investigator, they give three warnings:

"First, he must be able to focus his attention on what he sees, or hears, or reads.

Secondly, he must be prepared to set himself deliberately and patiently to ascertain all the accessible facts about the social institution that he is studying; and not imagine that he can, until he has mastered these facts, discover the solution of any problem, or obtain any useful answer to any question that may have been in his mind.

Finally, he must realise that he is biased, and somehow or other he must manage to discount this bias."

On attention, they are extremely suggestive. Its common failure, they point out, is due not so much to "intellectual dulness or slowness" as to egotism. True, the super-concentration of a Newton, an Edison or an Einstein implies genius, but

"The absence of adequate attention for the ordinary work of research may be due to sheer egotism. Indeed, most people, without being aware of it, would much rather retain their own conclusions than learn anything contrary to them. . . . To be a good listener, you need genuinely to desire to hear what others have to say, rather than to utter what you have yourself to say. There is, in fact, a 'moral' defect at the root of the failure of most beginners to achieve discoveries. They fail, it has been said, 'because they set out to prove something rather than to arrive at the truth, whatever it may be. *They do not realise that a good half of most research work consists in the attempt to prove yourself wrong*'."

That the student will not possess "complete intellectual disinterestedness" may, they say, be taken for granted. Bias there will be; learn therefore to know your own bias. When someone is described as "impartial" (above all in relation to political and economic questions) all that the description

means is that the bias of the describer and that of the person described are in fact the same.

In going to Russia, they were well aware, before they started, how necessary it was to be on guard against the bias that, as they point out, everyone, in fact, takes with him, on going to any foreign land. As he put it in one of the lectures he gave, on return,

“Going with an open mind is impossible. Irresistibly I found that I was looking to see what British ideas, or ideas of mine, they had incorporated. When I noted one such, I mentally ticked it off and said it was good.”

Whereas, he went on, Russia in fact represents “a new civilisation, which our classes and categories and terms don’t fit.”

To have seen the Webbs in Russia most of us, with our irrelevant sense of the humorous, would have given a good deal. They arrived to find Leningrad, somewhat inappropriately, *en fête*, for a reception to the King of the Hedjaz. They were, like any other visitors, largely “taken about”: their journeys planned for them, their comfort attended to, so far as the circumstances made it possible. They found some minor aspects of life surprising enough: thus Mrs. Webb got into the papers with a reproof to the young female Communists for the use of lip-stick, just about the time when the young males of the same order were solemnly deciding that the wearing of a collar was not incompatible with the true faith. On the whole, however, they were, undoubtedly, thrilled. That is the note in their impressions that no one who has received any of them can possibly miss. But, after delivering a few lectures, they have now retired to write. Until their book appears, to attempt to set out in any detail what they think about Russia is, of course presumptuous and foolish. In what they have said and written since their return, they have, however, drawn an outline both of their approach and of their conclusions.

They went, after years of general, and months of most intensive preparation. At any time in the early months of 1932, a visitor to Passfield Corner found them in a sea of books on Russia—all of which they had read and analysed: possessed of elaborate charts they had drawn out, showing all the features of the complicated constitution; and equipped with a series of arguments, points and questions. They had selected their field of study—the institutions of the U.S.S.R.—and they knew so much about it that it might have appeared to most that they had little left to learn. They had theories, which they were going to test, and a really vast knowledge, which set those theories in their background. He had even learned a little Russian, but they were not relying on that.

They set forth in the latter part of May, and spent sixty days in the country, travelling from the Baltic to the Black Sea, and from the Polish border to the Caspian. They saw the towns, the factories and some big State farms; they did not see, or try to see, the villages. In pursuit of their view that if you go to Russia, or anywhere else, you must concentrate on something, and in conformity with their natural angle of interest, they concentrated on institutions. They left Museums and art alone; they expressly left out of their view the Revolution, and the Terror. Into the argument—Can a country get to where the U.S.S.R. now is by any other route?—they have refused, so far, to be drawn. Every now and then they drop such a remark as:

“People in Russia, even ordinary workmen, are very conscious that there are no Rights of Man—any more than there are in America.”

Against which may be set another remark: that of the old fisherman whom they asked whether he felt better off now than he had done, under the Czar? He was thoughtful; then he said

“Life is pretty hard: but, now, we get what there is.”

In the main, they saw the “key people”; the people whose hands are on the levers. What they primarily looked at and sought to comprehend, was the actual working of a new form of democracy which cannot, as a “going concern,” be judged on its resemblances to or differences from, British democracy. British democracy, they found, is, by the Russians, dismissed as “atomised.” They defend their own form as ensuring “universal participation.” As he put it in his lecture to the Fabians, the people “are consulted no end, and they like it: but,” he went on, “the whole thing is settled over their heads.” As they see it, four great concrete blocks constitute the structure of the Soviet State, and provide, through an elaborately indirect system, for the representation of the people. They elect, first, on a territorial basis; second, on a functional one, as Trade Unionists—(“Though in theory membership of a Trade Union is not compulsory, it is impossible to be comfortable without joining the Trade Union.”); third, and fourth, as consumers, either through the Consumers Co-operative Societies, or the Producers Co-operative Societies. The steel frame supporting these ‘concrete blocks’ is the Communist Party, which is “not a Party, still less, in any sense in which we know the thing, a Communist Party.” Behind that Communist Party—small, rigorously and repeatedly purged, entered by a most severe selective process, committed to an iron discipline, lies a moral code, still in the making, whose virtues and whose sins alike are social, as are its sanctions. The good Communist does not drink or smoke; he has only recently been permitted to wear a collar; if he wastes time on women, he is admonished, and knows well what admonishment means, since he lives in constant fear of “deviation” with consequent delation and expulsion. He—or she, since the equality of men and women is a solidly accomplished fact—is apt to be a “prig of the first water.” But he is animated by an

exalted enthusiasm and a high devotion that resembles that which animates the member of the Salvation Army. This enthusiasm, and the belief in Russia, the hopefulness about Russia, which they sensed, everywhere, struck the Webbs prodigiously: they felt, as a sort of throb in the air, "a hundred and fifty millions of people, emancipated and eager."

Economically, they believe that the Russians "have got hold of the right end of the stick": they will succeed, because

"they have taken the whole business of production and distribution out of the hands of the producers, whether Capitalist or Trade Unionist, and put it into the hands of the representatives of the consumers."

If this is the position to-day, the fact that it is so, as he put it in one of his lectures, illustrates "the inevitability of gradualness." The swing in Russian policy has, indeed been remarkable. They began by saying "All power to the producers." Then, they abolished the Trade Unions, and sought to suppress the Co-operatives. To-day, the Trade Unions are regarded as indispensable; the Co-operatives are the fulcrum of the whole State economy, and the consumers, very properly, as the Webbs have always said, call the tune for the producers. To this position, the Bolsheviks have been brought by the logic of events and of facts. It is the position, of course, which Mrs. Webb outlined in her little book on *The Co-operative Movement* (1891), and they expanded, later, in their big book on the theory of *Consumers Co-operation* (1922). Like the result or dislike it—and they, more or less feeling themselves in the position of parents, rather like it—it is the underlying reason which supports their judgment that

"There is less chance of the Russian Government being overthrown than of any other Government in the world being overthrown."

In an article—the first of a series he is to contribute—in the *New York Times Current History*, Sidney Webb puts the point very definitely. He describes it as “the most important of all the suggestions made by those who are in a position to know the truth about Soviet Russia”.

“It is argued that in vesting the entire conduct and control of production and distribution, not in the producers as such, whether capitalists or trade unionists, but in the representative of the community of consumers, either governmental or co-operative, the Soviet system has almost unwittingly discovered the economic secret for which the world is searching. Only the conduct of industry by the consumers—who, as such, are not profit-makers—ensures an unhampered devotion to an unlimited increase of production and lowering of price. Only this control by the consumers (who as such have no interest in speculation or finance) allows escape from the altering booms and slumps of competitive industry. Only where the whole of production and distribution is undertaken by representatives of the consumers can the entire body of workers—whose standards will be safeguarded by their trade unions—be secured against periodical mass unemployment, which no trade unionism can obviate.

On the economic argument it seems as if, in Soviet Russia, there need never be any involuntary unemployment. The consumers demands, with a continual rise in the standard of life, will, each year, outstrip the output of the producers. The very basis of the system, the continuous payment at prescribed rates of wages for work or training to the whole able-bodied population, automatically ensures an effective demand that can be counted on in its aggregate amount for the whole of each year.”

In September 1932, Mrs. Webb spoke, as her husband had done a week or so earlier, to a Fabian Summer School; in the same month, she gave a talk under the auspices of the British Broadcasting Corporation. In October, they both confided their experiences to the Labour Party in conference at Leicester. In her broadcast address, Mrs. Webb summed up in a very carefully written passage—

“Is the much talked of General Plan of the Soviet Union a success or a failure? Even if I were competent to give you an ade-

quate answer—which I am not—I could not give it in a few minutes. But here is a tentative but carefully drafted conclusion which will, at any rate serve to start a discussion. I believe that Soviet Russia, if she can train in citizenship and productivity her hordes of peasants, say, up to the level of her twelve million trade unionists—a very big ‘if’—has solved the economic problem. This has been done by eliminating the profit-making employer, and organising production exclusively from the standpoint of the consumption, by the whole people, of the goods and services produced by all the workers by hand and by brain. Under this planned organisation of industry it seems to me that the effective demand of the consumers will always out-reach production—as it certainly does in Russia to-day—and that the greater output due to scientific invention, and extended control over nature, will be continuously absorbed by the increased purchasing power of the able-bodied inhabitants, all of whom, under the Soviet system, are either at work or in training. Thus there will be neither over-production nor under-consumption; human faculty and human desire will be automatically adjusted, in a steadily swelling flow of commodities and services, checked only by a rising demand for increased leisure and the personal freedom implied in leisure; not leisure of the destitute unemployed or that of the idle rich, but the leisure which has been earned and carries with it full maintenance and a good conscience.

Whether this equalitarian State—or, as the Communists prefer to call it, this ‘classless society’—will be a desirable place to live in, whether it will be good or bad, I offer no opinion. It is the youth of to-day who will have to make the necessary efforts and sacrifices and risk the consequences; it is for them to decide ‘Whither Great Britain?’ In this quest they will do well to study, alike, in its failures and its success, the workaday experiment of Soviet Communism.”

“Automatic adjustment”, here, is the phrase that gives one pause, and even makes one feel a little frightened as to the security of their description and their judgement. They, of course, saw, in the main, institutions, and had those institutions explained to them by persons working them, and believing in them. They saw a Plan, and they like Plans: are possibly disposed to see a plan and the execution thereof as one and the same. They found a society ordered and categorised, and they love order and run to categories. But

how much did they, can they, see of the common humans through whom any plan has to be worked? There are suggestions, here, of a dangerously dropped link. There are trained and expert observers wholly sympathetic with the ideal of planning, who feel the gravest apprehensions lest the whole thing break down on sheer lack of elementary human efficiency; who note that in the new buildings, the bricks are badly laid, the door and window frames poorly finished, the electrical work crude; who see the shoddy of which the clothes and boots are made; who, after watching the work in the new factories, are "not surprised by complaints about tractors breaking down".¹ The schematic eye may miss these crude facts; it is maddening to have system defeated by mere human incompetency; but these facts, in so far as they are facts, are vital elements in any considered judgement. It is disquieting to get the feeling given, so far, in their talks and lectures, that, for them, these things hardly existed.

On the other side—that of democracy—they did see much that they disliked and have not sought to extenuate. It would be interesting were they to put themselves, on this, in a position to compare Russia with Italy. Interesting; but not necessary. For they saw and have not sought to deny or mitigate a total absence of freedom, a lack of variety, an iron clamp on the young mind, and an effective and operative tyranny, justified by the continuance of "war conditions," and evidenced in the universal presence of spies. As Mrs. Webb told a sympathetic interviewer,

"Even in our casual contact with members of the Communist Party, the repression of free thought and free expression, in all that concerns the structure of human society, was obvious; it was in fact openly defended as a necessary 'war measure' to

¹ cf. *The Economist*, October 1, 8, 15.

ensure national unity in presence of a powerful enemy at home and abroad. More sensational, but, I think more likely to disappear, is the occasional physical terrorism; the trapdoor disappearance of unwanted personalities; the ostracism and persecution of innocent but inconvenient workers."¹

This "fanaticism and terrorism" will, so long "as it is known to go on and cannot be denied, discredit Communism in more developed countries". So, while they have said that they found people "pleased at being consulted": they themselves harbour no illusions as to the effect of that "consultation" on action, or as to its relation to the power behind the façade. As he put it, in answer to a question about criticism, "Es wird dafuer besorgt." There is a Dictatorship. The Communist Party keeps the thing going.

"Now it so happens that members of the Party occupy all the key positions, not only in the hierarchy of Soviets, Federal and National, but in the Co-operative and Trade Union Movements, whilst they dominate the army and navy, the political police and the militia. It will continue to be so, so long as the Communist Party retains its unity, its discipline, and its disinterested service, for the Party, through the control of all forms of publicity, whether books, newspapers, the wireless, cinemas and theatres, and also all forms of education, elementary, secondary and University, and by its continuous mass propaganda, cuts out from influence any other creed or policy than its own. Even more important is its hold on the youth of the U.S.S.R."²

The Communist Party keeps the thing going; the drive of fanaticism provides the steam.

At the same time, if they are asked—How does the soul fare? they can reply—How does it fare under Capitalism? So far, they have not been asked that by anyone; but one may be sure that, at moments, she puts that question to herself. Certainly, they were thrilled by something there—a sense of purpose, a readiness to accept sacrifice, a life keyed to a higher pitch of common consciousness than that of

¹ *The Clarion*, October 8, 1932.

² *The Listener*, September 28th, 1932.

Western Europe. That they think is there to stay; but they would be the first to say that no one can be sure about that. Do they think the U.S.S.R. way is the only way? They have not said that, or anything like it. What lesson, for us, they have drawn, they have not yet told us; but they will.

Any account of their reactions must therefore break off with an unwritten chapter, or, one may hope, chapters. There is a Russian book coming: for that book we wait.

CHAPTER XIV

FAVOURS TO COME

THERE is another book for which we wait; the book in which she is to carry on the story begun in *My Apprenticeship* into, and through the various phases of, *Our Partnership*. Some readers, no doubt, and among them those who most admired and enjoyed her masterly spiritual autobiography will hold that the tale of the development of a single mind must, in its nature, be more interesting and arresting than that of the work and companionship of two people can ever be made. Further, they may feel that while the early book owes its compelling appeal to its frank introversion, the latter is bound, since it will also be about a person who says he has "no inner life," to be unduly extroverted, and stuffed with the dry chaff of committees, conferences, problems, and all the dreary paraphernalia of public life. He, so she says, did not quite like *My Apprenticeship*; indeed it was apropos of that book that he emitted a cry, of caution or of pleading, to any future biographer: "No intimacy, I beg."

Whether or no she heeds that call, the book, by most of us, is awaited with keen eagerness. Not because it will contain any "revelations." There are, certainly, none to be made about two people whose record of effort and achievement lies singularly open before us, whose lives contain nothing that any biographer wants to gloze over or conceal, who have been, in all their ways and works, as candid as the day, and who have, in the ordinary sense, no secrets. None in the ordinary sense; and yet one that is haunting. For have they not discovered and applied the secret whose lambency,

interpenetrating its pages, gives so rare a fascination to the *Journal of Delacroix*? Here speaks an individual in almost every other respect as distant from them as the poles, who yet is like them in that he knew, as they know, the secret of contentment; and in that he got it out of work, as they get it out of work. With them,—and this is an aspect giving to their achievement, and its record, even when set down from the outside, an interest that is unique—the work has throughout been done, and the contentment in it realised, in comradeship. It is the duality of the effort and of the content they know in it that makes them fascinating persons to study, for any student of psychology—and that surely is everybody who is interested in human nature. Here, one is in contact with success in the greatest and most mysterious of human adventures. Any success has its mystery; no success is so mysterious as success of this kind; what we, despairing of more accurate analysis, call “success in living.”

Interest is deepened and mystery enhanced when, as here, it is success achieved, not singly, but together. Delacroix was content in solitude; there are, in the acquaintance of any of us, many cases of relative success in the business of living by oneself. Good as it is, that kind of content, it is yet a second-best, and secondary in proportion as it is less difficult. When one interrogates the experience of those trying the harder task, the business of living together, one is confronted with innumerable unhappy and yet inseparable pairs, the

“Herzen die sich schlecht vertragen,
Und dennoch brechen, wenn sie scheiden,”

of which Heine speaks; and hard set to it to cite one or two possessed of the secure contentment that radiates from the Webbs.

They have lived together for forty years, and made those years good for one another. Growing old has not blighted

their temper, chilled their ardour or diminished their zest, any more than it has slackened their work. Disappointments have not soured them, or dimmed their

“Cheerful faith
That all that we behold . . . is full of blessings.”

They are not bored with themselves, or with other people. They have not, despite plentiful temptations, taken refuge in any variant of cynicism. They are as keen, in their seventies, as they were in their thirties; as capable, as their swift reaction to Russia showed, of being thrilled.

They may be “queer people.” In some senses, they are. He has a queer absence of vanity, and of personal dignity. She has a queer lack not only of shyness but of any understanding of its roots. Both are without certain sensibilities which those in whom they happen to be acute feel so vital that they cannot understand how persons as intelligent as the Webbs manage to exist without them. The Webb world lacks some attributes of what most of us call the “real” world, and their picture of it is simplified, perhaps artificially, by that lack. Sometimes this colour-blindness, if one may call it so, imparts a naïveté, a fairy-tale element into their judgments. More often it operates as a kind of bleach. If everybody were like them, something of lustre, something of poignancy, something of joy, would go; as well as a great deal of muddlement, of waste, of stupidity, of cruelty, and of ugliness. It would be rather a homespun world; but there would be homespun in it for everybody.

She once, in a comparison she was drawing, with a characteristic large freedom of outline, between the Japanese and the Chinese, based her sense of the superiority of the former on the view that they possessed, and the Chinese did not, what she called “the three essentials.” She, always, generalises much more freely than he does; she is responsible, therefore, for a larger proportion of quotable remarks. But

although he once said that they found it best not to listen in on one another's lectures, lest they be revealed as disagreeing, that, one feels sure, was mere playfulness. They really do think in "we," in small as in large matters. They both think and act in "we" in regard to essentials. For them, therefore, and not for her only, one may take it that the "three essentials" are, as she put it, scientific method, a sense of public service, and an apprehension of the mystical element in life. As between Japan and China, on this, her comparison was sketchy, and is probably wrong; but the statement of values was illuminating. On any such test, they pass very high.

Scientific method they have created in application to the study of social institutions. There, they are pioneers, and pioneers who have driven a path, nay built a road, along which those who come after may walk: do, to-day, walk, almost without knowing to whom they owe that freedom. In this field, their work is sure of permanence. Nor, thanks to them, can economics ever revert to its earlier ignorant arrogance of claim. To it, too, they have given a scientific approach, by compelling it to accept its own relativity. The scientific method they created, they have also applied, in works of lasting significance. On Trade Unionism and on Co-operation, as on Local Government in all its ramifications, they are in no danger of being superseded. They have widened the sum of our knowledge, and clarified our vision, by a new point of view. Here again they are safe, for history.

Of the sense of public service, they are the brightest living exemplars. There is a story which, if not true, ought to be true, to the effect that on their engagement they exchanged rings inside of which was incised the inscription *Pro Bono Publico*. Everybody who hears this story believes it, so accurately do the words prefigure their years of loyal and disinterested service. Whatever they have not seen, they

have seen, and have held to, something outside themselves which they have served with unwavering and impersonal faithfulness. To this accepted ideal they have again and again made sacrifice. To it, they have given what was most dear to them. Up to 1914 they lived, in the main, very much as they liked, although in the Minority Report campaign there was a vast deal of sheer social drudgery which neither of them enjoyed, and he frankly detested. But from 1914 on forces made themselves apparent in the public scene, which compelled increasing breaches in their plan of life and work. When he went into active politics, and, above all, when, in 1929, he consented, entirely against his strong inclinations and declared intention, to carry on the ungrateful task: to become a Minister again, and even a peer—then, they were giving up, for the public good, the most precious thing they had: their orderly routine of constant companionship. They suspended work which they enjoyed, and knew to be useful, for work which they did not enjoy and whose utility they doubted. They did this, simply and solely because to do so was demanded by their sense of public duty. It is quite true that they have a liking for many forms of activity which most people do not like: the drudgery of sustained research, the slow toil of conversion through persuasion and argument, the sheer effort of intellectual unravelment. But, when the call came, they exchanged all this for a divided form of existence which was acutely disappointing to both, and relatively unproductive.

At no time have they sought anything for themselves, the world's rewards or its recognitions. They neither are, nor have ever desired to be, rich. They live with genuine simplicity: some would say with needless austerity. They have always, consistently, been givers rather than takers.

This devotion is the fruit of no cold intellectual conviction. "It is to some feeling in the individual conscience that we must look for guidance as to how to use the powers that we

possess." So, in their latest published volume, they express their abiding sense of what she has called the mystical element in life. They believe in more than they can see or touch. Here are regions into which the "outside" biographer will not seek to penetrate.

They have been charged with inhumanity. Perhaps that is the word easiest to find to cover their strangeness. Strange, certainly, by the standards of average human accomplishment, is the unity of affection, will and action achieved by two beings, naturally markedly dissimilar, and strange, too, the unswerving steadiness of disinterested labour that old age in them finds unrelaxed. Yet must not any of us, regarding them to-day, feel that they are, as Cato said of Scipio Aemilianus, real in a world of shadows? If so, it is because they know their purpose, and have been true to it.

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