

Chapter 18

The British Labor Mission

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People :

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CHAPTER XVIII

THE BRITISH LABOR MISSION

May, 1920.---New life has come to Petrograd with the arrival of the British Mission; many meetings, banquets, and festivities are taking place in its honor. I believe the Communists are inclined to exaggerate the importance of the visit and its probable results. Some even think the coming of the Englishmen augurs the political recognition of Russia in the near future. Soviet newspapers and Communist speeches have created the impression that the Mission represents the sentiment of the whole British proletariat, and that the latter is about to come to the aid of Russia.

I heard the subject discussed by a group of workers and soldiers at the meeting in the Labor Temple. I had been asked to render into English the resolutions to be presented, and a small table was assigned to me. People crowded about me to get a better look at the delegates on the platform. The full glare of the electric lights shone upon Ben Turner, the Chairman of the Mission, short, stocky, and well-fed.

"There, look at him!" a worker behind me exclaimed, "you can tell he's from abroad. Our people are not so fat."

"What wonder!" a soldier replied, "it isn't Russia, England isn't, and people don't go hungry there."

"The workers starve everywhere," a hoarse voice said.

"These are not workers," the first man corrected. "They are delegates."

"Of course, delegates, but proletarian delegates," the hoarse voice insisted.

"The English working class sent them to see what help we need."

"You think they will help?" the soldier asked hopefully.

"That's what they are here for. They'll go back home and tell the proletariat there how we suffer, and they'll have the blockade taken off."

"God be willing, God be willing," the worker sighed fervently.

A man passed by, energetically pushing his way through the crowd, and ascended the platform. His prosperous appearance, well-fitting clothes, and ruddy face were in striking contrast with the people about.

"Look at that fat delegate! They ain't starving in England," the soldier whispered to his neighbor.

Something familiar about the stout "delegate" fastened my attention. His eye fell upon me and he smiled recognition. It was Melnitchansky, the Chairman of the Moscow Soviet of Labor Unions.

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Considerable disappointment is felt in Communist circles regarding the Mission. The military displays have failed to impress them, the visits to mills and factories have produced no enthusiasm among the "cold-blooded Britishers." They seem purposely to avoid a definite expression of opinion regarding aid that might be expected from their country or the nature of their report to the workers of England. Certain remarks by individual delegates have caused uneasiness. Some Communists think it poor taste to honor a labor mission with military demonstrations, some of whose members are outspoken pacifists. A revolutionary country like Russia, they say, should lay more stress on the proletarian consciousness of the people as the true symbol of its character and the best guarantee of its peaceful intentions. The visits to the industrial establishments, it is claimed, could impress only with their lack of productive results and the fact that the factories and mills had been "primed" for the delegates. It is even whispered about that the Britishers sense in the official atmosphere with which they are surrounded a sort of surveillance very irksome to them.

The men sent from Moscow to welcome the Mission --- Radek, Melnitchansky,

and Petrovsky --- believe that every effort must be made to create a good impression on the delegates, in the hope of securing their favorable report in England and correspondent action there in behalf of Russia. Radek and Petrovsky are strong defenders of "diplomacy"; Petrovsky, especially, who apparently enjoys considerable influence in the councils of the Party, though his allegiance to Bolshevism is of very recent origin. I knew him in America as Dr. Goldfarb, labor editor of the New York Jewish *Forward*, and a very fanatical Social Democrat --- a Menshevik, in the Russian terminology. His conversion to Bolshevism was rather sudden, and I am surprised to learn that he holds the important position of Commissar of military education.

Angelica Balabanova, an old revolutionist and very lovable personality, who is on the Reception Committee, agrees with me that the best policy is to enable the Mission to learn the whole truth concerning Russia, and to enlist their friendship and coöperation in the work of upbuilding the country by their adequate understanding of its needs, rather than by the lack of it. But the other members of the Committee of Welcome hold a different view. Overzealous and anxious, they exaggerate the truth and minimize or entirely deny the weak points. At demonstrations and meetings this policy has been followed, but it is evident that some of the delegates saw through the mask of pretense. At the final banquet given in honor of the Britishers before their departure for Moscow, almost every speaker emphasized the fact that only the truth had been told the Mission, unconscious of the smile of incredulity in the polite attention of the delegates. Antselovitch, Chairman of the Petrograd Soviet of Labor Unions, rose even to the height of asserting that full individual liberty is established in Russia --- at least for the workers, he added, as if suddenly become aware of the recklessness of his statement.

Perhaps I did Antselovitch an injustice by omitting that falsehood in my translation of his speech. But I could not stand up before the delegates and repeat what I knew, as well as they, to be a deliberate lie, as stupid as it was unnecessary. The delegates are aware that dictatorship is the reverse of liberty. They know there is no freedom of speech or press for anyone in Soviet Russia, not even for Communists, and that sanctity of home or person is unknown. The exigencies of the revolutionary struggle make such a condition of affairs imperative, Lenin frankly

admits. It is an insult to the intelligence of the Mission to pretend otherwise.

At our visits to the mills and factories Antselovitch and his aides danced attendance upon the delegates in a manner clearly displeasing to them. One of the Britishers hinted to his colleagues that the places had received previous notice and were "prepared" for the distinguished guests. The information about conditions and output given by managers, foremen, and Communist employes varied so obviously as to elicit surprised remarks. Some members of the Mission were aware of the attendance of Tchekists and conscious of the timidity of the workers in their presence.

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A train de luxe, with Pullman sleepers and diner, was waiting at the Nikolayevsky Station to take the British Mission to Moscow. At every car the delegates were saluted by the guard of honor, young Mussulmen *kursanti** in their picturesque Tcherkess uniforms. The place presented an unusually serene appearance. The customary crowds with their heavy loads, shouting and pushing, were absent. Not a bedraggled workman or filthy beggar was in sight. Station and platform were the picture of cleanliness and well-regulated order.

At the stroke of 11 P. M. on Sunday, May 16, the Mission started for Moscow. The delegates were accompanied by a large coterie of prominent Communists, including Radek, Kollontay, Losovsky, his daughter, who acts as his secretary, Balabanova, Zorin, and some lesser lights. By request I went with the Mission as unofficial interpreter, sharing my coupé with Ichov, head of the Government publications in Petrograd.

On the way Russia and Russian conditions were discussed, the Communists striving to "draw out" the delegates, while most of the latter were careful to express no definite opinion. In general terms Ben Turner, the Chairman of the Mission, spoke of the need of a more humane attitude to Russia, while Messrs. Skinner and Purcell nodded their approval --- more of the generality of the Chairman's remarks, it seemed to me, than of their meaning. Williams was outspoken in his admiration of the good order which prevails in Petrograd, while Wallhead, of the Independent Labor Party, agreed with Allen --- the only Communist among the Englishmen --- in roundly denouncing the Allied crime of the blockade which is starving millions of innocent women and little children. Mrs. Snowden

preserved the well-bred dignity of high society, participating in the conversation to the extent of a patronizing smile that said very plainly, "I am with you, but not of you." Once she voiced her pleasant surprise at not finding the streets of Petrograd infested with highwaymen who robbed the people unhindered by daylight, as "some folks in England believed."

Of all the delegates, the most sympathetic to me were Allen, with his thoughtful, ascetic face, and Bertrand Russell, who accompanied the Mission in a private capacity, I believe. Unlike each other in temperament and viewpoint, both impressed me as men of deep insight and social sincerity.

In Moscow a great ovation had been prepared for the Mission. The railway platform was lined with Red Army men in dress parade uniforms and shining accouterments, military bands played the International, and Communist orators gave a "triumphant welcome" to the British guests. Kamenev greeted them on behalf of the Central Government, and Tomsy, President of the All-Russian Soviet of Labor Unions, in a long speech addressed the representatives of the British workers in the name of their Russian brothers. All the speakers characterized the happy occasion as the symbol of the common cause of the toilers of the two countries and voiced the conviction that the English proletariat is about to come to the aid of the Revolution.

For almost two hours the delegates were kept standing on the platform listening to speeches in a language unintelligible to them. But at last the ceremony was over, and the visitors were seated in automobiles and driven to the Soviet Hotel, assigned as their quarters. In the great crowding the Englishmen became separated, some of them almost submerged by the surging waves of humanity. Gradually the soldiers filed out, the crowd thinned, and at last I was able to make my way to the street. The Government machines had already left, and I looked about for an *isvoshtchik* (cab), when I noticed Bertrand Russell struggling out of the station. He stood bewildered on the steps, not knowing where to turn, forgotten amid the excited people shouting a strange jargon. An auto drove up at that moment, and I recognized Karakhan.

"I am a little late," he said; "are all the delegates gone?"

"Bertrand Russell is here yet," I replied.

"Russell? Who is he?"

I explained.

"Never heard of him," Karakhan said naïvely. "But let him come in; there's room for both of you."

Delovoi Dvor, the Soviet Hotel assigned to the British guests, has been entirely renovated, and looks clean and fresh. The large dining room is tastefully decorated with crimson banners and mottoes of welcome. Socialist legends of the solidarity of the workers of the world and the triumph of the Revolution through the dictatorship of the proletariat speak from the walls in various tongues. Potted plants lend the spacious room warmth and color.

Covers were set for a large number, including the delegates, the official representatives of the Soviet Government, some members of the Third International, and the invited spokesmen of labor. Russian caviar, soup, white bread, two kinds of meat and a variety of vegetables were on the menu. When fried chicken was served, I saw some of the Britishers exchange wondering glances.

"A jolly good meal for starving Russia," a delegate at my side remarked to his neighbor in the lull of clattering dishes and laughter.

"Rather. Natty wench," the other replied with a suggestive wink at the winsome young waitress serving him. "Thought the Bolsheviks had done away with servants."

Angelica Balabanova, sitting opposite me, looked perturbed.

On May 18th, the day following its arrival in Moscow, the Mission was honored with a great demonstration. It was a splendid military display, all branches of the Red Army participating. No workers marched in the parade.

The continuous round of festivities, special theatrical performances, and visits to factories, are apparently palling upon the delegates. A feeling of dissatisfaction is noticeable among them, a sense of resentment at the apparent surveillance to which they feel themselves subjected. Several have complained of inability to see their callers, the *propusk* system introduced in the Delovoy Dvor since the arrival of the Mission practically excluding visitors considered *persona non grata* by the Tcheka agent at the clerk's desk. The delegates are becoming aware of the subtle curtailment of their liberty, conscious of their every step and word being spied

upon. They resent the "prison atmosphere," as a member of the Mission characterized the environment. "We are friendly disposed," he said to me, "and there is no sense in such tactics." He was not content with seeing only things officially shown to the Mission, he said. He was anxious to look deeper, and he complained of being compelled to resort to stratagems in order to come in contact with persons whose views he wanted to learn.

"The Russian Revolution is the greatest event in all history," one of the delegates remarked to me, "petty consideration should have no place in it. A new world is in the making; to minimize the terrific travail of such a birth is worse than folly. The Bolsheviki, in the vanguard of the revolutionary masses, are playing a part in the process whose significance history will not fail to estimate. That they have made mistakes is inevitable, is human; but in spite of errors, they are founding a new civilization. History does not forgive failure: it will immortalize the Bolsheviki because of their success in the face of almost insuperable difficulties. They may justly be proud of their achievements."

He paused, then continued thoughtfully: "Let the delegates and the world look the situation full in the face. We must learn what revolution actually *is*. The Russian Revolution is not a matter of mere political recognition; it is a world-changing event. Of course we'll find wrongs and abuses in it. A period of such storm and strife is unthinkable without them. Evils discovered need only be cured, and well-intentioned criticism is of utmost value. Nor is it a secret that Russia is suffering from starvation, and it is criminal to pretend well-being by grand banquets and dinners. On the contrary, let the delegates behold the terrible effects of the blockade, let them see the frightful disease and mortality resulting from it. No outsider can have even an approximate conception of the full extent of the Allied crime against Russia. The closer the delegates come in contact with the actuality, the more convincing will be their appeal to the British proletariat, and the more effectively will they be able to fight the blockade and Entente intervention."

* Communist students of military academies training officers for the Red Army.

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