

Crabbed Age and Youth

A Devine Comedy of the Watford Tribunal

Dramatis Personae

Lord Clarendon	Chairman.
Mister Hudson	Clerk to the Council.
Mister Longley	Draper.
Mister Clarke	House Builder.
Mister Solomons	Photographer.
Mister Gorle	Solicitor, Conscriptionist, Labour Leader and acquainted with the King of the Belgians.

Crowd of No Conscription Fellowship Men, Comrades, Constables and attendants.

The Bushey and Watford comrades did in the month of March appear before the local Tribunal with the now familiar result.

The chairman was the Lord and the Military Representative, symbolically enough, was on the left hand of the Lord. A Draper sat next to a House Builder and a Solicitor next to a Professional Photographer.

To the right of the Lord's chosen people were portraits of two old-time councillors done by a Bushey painter, who, when he has no commissions from local legislators, will condescend to paint angels for church windows. These pictures were as interesting to artists as pathology is to humanitarians. No cantankerous sentiment could be detected on their placid faces, for when the local man took up his brushes there was no European War and all the Conscientious Objectors had been robbed of their telescopes and books and burned and decapitated many centuries ago.

But I must not digress now for I am come to the point when the Lord spoke. I had arrogantly suggested on my appeal paper that what was valuable and precious in Art and Science and Literature had emanated from intellectual research; and that militarism either supported or created all those things hostile to a free and secure existence. Before I came to these chosen of the Masters I had suggested that intellectual progress and military pursuits are antagonistic. Then when the Lord asked me if I was a Quaker I saw that my policy and sentiments still remained misunderstood, so I rose to explain that I had accepted the communistic principles of Karl Marx, and consequently believed that the world could not progress towards a beautiful ideal of society or a scientific one until the nations federated on an amiable basis. But while these words were yet unspoken the Solicitor, with prophetic acumen and godly insight, denounced them as "Propaganda", while the Chairman said he was there to "elicit facts and not listen to speeches". This last indiscreet sentence must now pass as ignorance. This is the more lamentable as had it read, "elicit facts and not listen to the evidence" it would have passed with the public, not as bias and illiteracy, but as a decisive, rich, and becoming paradox. I had further evidence to show that the literature of Greece had done more for humanity than the wars of Greece; that Van Tromp, with all his magnificence did not do so much for Holland as Rembrandt and

Descartes; that the Spaniards' best day was not when the Armada was loosened but when Valasquez took up his palette. The Lord waved me down. How could I rise from my insignificance? I only had on my side the lessons of ancient decapitated scientists and charcoal heretics while the Tribunal were greatly inspired and strengthened by the methods of Torquemada. Their actions taught me that the man with estates was in the place of Democracy; the Camera Man in the place of the Artist; the Attorney in the place of the Economist, and the Draper of Bodies in the place of the Humanitarians. Before the Tribunals the appellant with artistic ideas is dismissed, the man with rheumatism postponed, and the wine merchant exempt from military service. Then after having stopped me speaking in my own defence one had the temerity to ask if I objected to bloodshed.

Our comrade Russ sat next before the Tribunal and his case was dealt with in the same clean and aristocratic spirit. They "elicited" genealogical facts about his grandmother and partly forgotten brothers; details which are most valuable to any analysis of scientific ideals or the individual conscience. But while on the side of lineage the examination was most wise and thorough, there are three small points to which the Tribunal was inexcusably indifferent. I admit that a consideration of the forgotten details would in no way have altered the result of the trial, for in all cases the conduct of the Tribunal showed great forethought and preparation. In no instance can I remember a hasty and spontaneous injustice being done to the appellant, for the Socialists were only dismissed after careful consultation with the versatile Labour Leader, while the Religionists were dismissed only after the Chairman's chat with the Christian member. The first of these three unconsidered trifles in Russ's case was that he wore a black scarf of crepe-de-chine, which should have been noted by at least one member of the Tribunal for its photographic possibilities; the second, that sometimes in the summer he slept in the open at night, which should have been elicited and condemned by the Builder; the third, that as a Socialist he would not fight in a capitalist war, which should have been considered by all, as in this assertion, all were alike equally implicated and condemned. But if we review the matter with a milder and less intolerant mind we will understand that if Russ did not know what parts of his Marxian economics were a heritage from his grandmother, his own statement of International Faith is, in the ten or twelve eyes of the Tribunal, robbed of half its value. But the trial ended well, for, as he declared he would not do medical work and assist the wounded, the Tribunal considerably gave him non-combatant duties in which he will only have to help the injured.

When our comrade Hudson sat next in the chair the modern God filled his pipe and the Clerk read the appeal. It was a reiteration of the communists' ideal of Wealth Production. The Lord asked what denomination he belonged to. Now with myself, as I have a pale face, there was some pertinence in the Quaker question, but with Hudson it is different. He is not sickly or peevish; there is not a trace of suffering on his face. It would have been more relevant to have asked the noble Lord if he was the only support his wife had or ask a poet if he sold matches. Our comrade replied that he was an atheist. The Christian Draper sniffed. A man here who would not submit to Kitchener and denied the authority. "You are one of them who resent all kind of control then, eh?" he said. "Not all control", our comrade replied, "only such as you have." The Chairman was indignant to hear a youthful idealist give such a retort to a shopkeeper who has sold the best linen within a farthing of a shilling in the town; to a man who has distributed more bibles and advertisements and subscribed to more

church organs in a year than the applicant would do in fifty years. In these days of heresy and commerce one can forgive a taunt to God, pass over a slight to Kitchener, but what Chairman of what Tribunal can pass over an Internationalist's insult to a homely employer. He cautioned our comrade and later dismissed the case.

The next judgement was to be upon our comrade Wilkins. He too was an Internationalist. Had the first been the only one of the day the idea could have been discredited and regarded as isolated Quixotism and futile faith. The poor, bewildered master of the show moreover learned that this Socialist was a Monist. "What is a Monist?" Alas! My Lord, you have given Oxford over to ignominy; the hallowed pile is desecrated. In the past, we were told, much damage and havoc was done with the jaw-bone of an ass, but it was infinitesimal compared with that done to the gray and hoary university with the jaw-bone of our Tribunal Lord. Alas! Poor Chairman, you came, you told me, to "elicit facts" but you remain to complete your education. Although comrade Wilkins explained on his appeal paper that he could more effectively assassinate Rothschild with a new ideal or a new economic law than with an old hatchet—although unlike an Indian God he did not wear a necklace of human bones or a girdle of human skulls, they still enquired whether he was prepared to take life. He replied that he did not believe in the sacredness of the individual existence, only in the sacredness of humanity, and would therefore help to establish Socialism by the ballot if possible but by force if force was essential. "We dismiss your case, Mister Wilkins." As the lordly judge spoke his loyal mouth pennies to the Escutcheon. "You may appeal to the County Tribunal", he said. "To the County Press Gang", our comrade retorted with such truth and emphasis that it became quite inaudible to the Newspaper Correspondent.

There was a long hush. The last of the pearls had been cast before the Tribunal.

The Draper demanded that the room should be cleared of the public. This was assented to by the Labour Leader, and endorsed by the Lord.

No one moved.

Then in this Earthly Paradise the Provincial God's still, small voice with a slight Oxford accent, said "Let there be police", and there were police. But this latter day Lord's behests are not so instantaneously obeyed as formerly, for his wand is only a telephone and his angels wear thick-soled boots.

So there was still time left for further heresy and the "Red Flag" was sung, and just as it ended the Constables entered the room and faced the perplexed Tribunal and those pigment Councillors on the walls, whose pensive eyes are fixed on the distant utopian Watford when each of the ten thousand inhabitants was docile and diligent and none had dreamed of Marxian Economics.

(May 1916)