

# Labor's First Night

By FRANK H. SIMONDS

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London, March 8.—In British public life, vastly more than in our own—although even in Washington it plays a part—the social aspect of politics has always been important.

Political salons are a tradition and dinners and routs go far back of Thackeray and his Georgians.

Thus it was that, when Labor won its amazing, its astounding, victory and the first hours of astonishment had passed over, the question, the dominant interrogation in certain quarters was: Will Labor have its social phase, and if so how and where?

The question had immediate pertinence when, after the brief recess following the fall of the Baldwin ministry, the moment approached when a Labor Prime Minister would meet Parliament. Tories and Liberals, following immemorial custom, planned their dinners and their receptions—what would Labor do?

And then Mrs. Noel Buxton, wife of the famous Balkan champion and historian who is Minister of Agriculture in the new Cabinet, stepped into the breach and bade Labor welcome at a reception at a West-end hotel in London. Thanks to her hospitality and thanks to the intervention on my behalf of Henry W. Nevinston, known and admired in America since the Washington Conference, the most chivalrous champion of lost causes and forlorn hopes in three continents and innumerable islands, it was my privilege to see Labor on this its first night.

The impressions which I shall try to set down here can only have a value if at all as they very imperfectly serve to present the picture of something which had never before happened in British politics and will never certainly happen again in quite the same way—the spectacle of the men and the women of a new party freshly come to power undreamed of, a mingling of Labor leaders, intellectuals, miners, Cabinet Ministers, one Prime Minister, one Lord Chancellor, a thin sprinkling of Lords, old and new, poets, historians, editors, essayists, social workers and social authorities, all the elite, all the brains, not a few of the hands and some of the stoutest hearts of an authentic revolution, suddenly brought together under the spell of victory, still under the thrall of a triumph so unforeseen as to impose a certain silence, lest the fatal wrong word should break the spell and dissolve the reality which seemed the mirage.

It was perhaps ten o'clock, when Nevinston and I made our way into the hotel through the thin wall of bystanders waiting patiently against the assured coming of the Prime Minister, not yet arrived. As we checked our coats at the bottom of the staircase, I noted that my slip was numbered 760 and since we were among the latest comers it is fair to calculate that the whole party numbered about 800.

Climbing the twisted staircase we came immediately into an outer hall crowded with groups of people formed in little circles. Pausing for a moment at the staircase we paid our formal respects to our hostess and then were presented to the happiest person I have yet seen in Europe, the little daughter of the Prime Minister.

Standing beside her hostess, gravely receiving and returning the words of greeting this girl—perhaps she is older, but in her simple dress and among so many elderly, she seemed no more than sixteen—with shy and startled manner and yet calmly and with utmost self-possession, looked out upon a world that had come to greet her father, tomorrow to be fully and completely Prime Minister of Britain. There was about her the touch of youth which suggested that for her it was all almost a dream, and there was besides the touch of dignity that made her after all her father's daughter as unmistakably as the remembrance in her face to his. Patently it was her first party, and what a party, and to it she added something indefinable but at once charming and unmistakable.

Passing this barrier of formal introduction I followed closely upon my gallant guide, now like a small boat attached to a vigorous steam-launch; then losing my bawser and steering as Henry of Navarre bade his followers, by the white oriflame, this time of Nevinston's locks, I began the amazing circle of introductions.

First by a sudden right turn abrupt and unheralded I arrived almost in the arms of C. P. Trevelyan, President of the Board of Education, and bearer of a name many times distinguished in British letters. A left turn, and with equal abruptness I was cast upon the charity always gracious of Pethick Laurence and Susan Laurence, his wife, who together had won the final victory in the great war of "votes for women" and are potent factors in the new Labor group. And from their presence diagonally through groups of Labor M. P.'s thick as the leaves in the Valombrosa, I came to a halt before Massingham, perhaps the greatest of British editors and surely one of the intellectual giants of the Radical cause in England.

Again I was caught up in the surge and, vainly struggling after, was presented breathless to a keen and shaggy eyed gentleman, vaguely, very vaguely perhaps, suggesting the late Lord Bryce. My name Nevinston announced and then, commissioned to seek coffee for some stricken lady, the knightly soul he always is, he deserted me. A little lamely, I fear, I asked a name and was met with the smiling rejoinder, reinforced by merrily twinkling eyes, "Oh, I'm Lord Kimberley," and so, caught in a narrow aisle of safety while about me and around me the British Revolution flowed ceaselessly and the tide of socialism rose high-

er and higher a vagrant American encountered his first Earl.

As Nevinston returned, there was a new stirring toward the center without immediately apparent reason. A closely drawn group began to open ranks and presently there emerged a compact, smiling, keen-faced, little woman, whose emergence brought from rich and left immediate pleased murmurs of "Oh, it's Margaret." Again my faithful master came into action and in another moment I stood before the shrewd and uncomfortably appraising glance of Britain's first Cabinet woman, Miss Margaret Bondfield.

Next, while Nevinston did an incantation over my head at another figure towering above me, I found myself in the presence of Gooch, the historian whose recent book on the Nineteenth Century enraptured the enthusiasm of all competent reviewers. Over my head still he boomed a thunderous declaration that "Isolation was impossible and America could not stay out," thus concentrating on me, poor cockleshell, that volley which I could wish might have fallen upon those battleships of Isolation, Borah and Brandegee.

From Gooch by devious turnings and twistings, by several poets, justly incredulous when Nevinston gallantly and mendaciously affirmed my knowledge of their verse, gently caroling off E. D. Morel, fiercest critic of France, of the Allies, of all things, King Leopold's enemy of the Congo days, I was cast up like driftwood at the feet of Sydney Webb, President of the Board of Trade, father of the Fabian movement, at whose feet so many have sat and still sit, the Cabinet Minister who in learning and in scientific preparation is perhaps the best qualified Minister Britain has ever known.

Then ensued an interlude in the course of which I encountered Miss Evelyn Sharp, whom last I saw newly back from Russia, where she had performed marvelous and devoted service in the hideous famine time two years ago! Then Josiah Wedgwood, who sits for Arnold Bennett's "Five Towns," is in the new Cabinet and never has been out of any debate for many years.

Then came tangency to another lion, the target of many gentle jabs and of much amused banter, Colonel Thomson, when I last saw him. Then he was equally famous in Paris as the man who blew up the oil wells in Roumania when the Germans broke through in 1917 and as Lenin's frankest admirer in the Paris Peace Conference. Now he was General Thomson, tomorrow he would be Baron Thomson, Labor's first created peer, sent with two other conscripts to represent revolution in the last citadel of feudalism. He, too, is a Cabinet Minister, Secretary for the Air, I think, not wholly inappropriately.

Beyond the staircase where I had mounted, there was a new stir and presently there came, wearing a cape coat, a square almost squat figure, Labor's greatest captive from the Liberal party, Lord Haldane, Lord Chancellor and Minister of War in other Liberal Cabinets and now Lord Chancellor again. This was the man who carried the messages to Berlin, whose conversations with Tirpitz did not prevent naval competition or avert the World War, the man whose famous and unfortunate phrase "Germany is my spiritual home" cost him seven full years of national execration. Thanks to Nevinston he gave me a passing word with just a sly almost chuckling glance tinged with gentle malice hardly to be expected in an orator who once introduced "Sittlichkeit" to an amazed America.

Next appeared Arthur Henderson, member of many past Cabinets, Labor's representative in coalition, now chief strategist of the whole army, Home Secretary in the new Cabinet, candidate in an approaching bye-election, holding in his party the position comparable to national chairman in our own party system and held the greatest political organizer in British politics.

Last to come, expected, awaited that the evening might be complete, was the Prime Minister himself. First there was a faint far off sounding of cheers below, then a noise of feet on the staircase, a certain electric thrill in the air and Labor's first Prime Minister arrived clad like all of us in morning clothes, in the dress in which most, if not all, of these wonderful people had done battle for ideas and dreams against hard and grim realities. Mr. MacDonald took his place beside his little daughter in the receiving line and suddenly her face blossomed like that of a child when the Christmas tree first glowed in darkness comes alight with all its many candles.

Of any formal demonstration there was nothing, neither was there any sudden rush; the leader had patiently come to his army but not with any manner of authority; and so in little groups without haste his captains and his private soldiers, women as well as men, rather more women than men, moved across to say good evening to "Ramsay" and pass on.

So in my turn Nevinston compelling and fortune favoring I was brought before Mr. MacDonald and introduced, decorated with I know not what titles of journalistic eminence, which I am relieved to believe he did not hear. As he faced me he was a tall, striking figure, a face sober, sombre almost to the point of sadness, high cheek-bones, deep-set and piercing eyes, a rather narrow forehead, crowned with a wonderful mane of whitening hair, the one distinguishing detail. A little hard and

grim the face was, just as the figure, broad, loosely hung, suggested the laborer—although I believe he has never worked with his hands—until suddenly the face lighted with a swift flash of his eyes, which seemed to break as an electric light when you press the button and what was dark becomes instantaneously illuminated. A vigorous hand-shake, a kindly personal word of greeting, and I save way to others.

Drifting away and watching at a distance the face seemed to me still more rugged, with a sense of weariness and yet of surviving reservoirs of strength. Looking thus at this man who on the morrow would face Parliament as Prime Minister it was impossible not to recall the vicissitudes of ten years. Less than that space of time had passed since he alone in Parliament stood squarely against the declaration of war. The weight of a whole national disapproval had fallen upon him as it had in the Boer War time, yet he had never recanted, never modified his position. The press had lashed him, and even more painful circumstance, perhaps, his golf club in his own corner of Scotland had cast him out. Even his constituents had finally rejected him in Lloyd George's khaki election. Yet now, himself unchanged, all about him had changed, and tomorrow he would be in fact Prime Minister. Certainly rarely in political history in England or out of it has there ever been such a transformation in the personal fortunes of one man.

And now having perhaps with far too great detail described the outward circumstances of this, Labor's first night, I would justify myself by a few words of comment. There was in the very atmosphere something which was in itself almost impossible to describe and quite beyond all forgetting. Here were gathered in two relatively small rooms more than half of the new British Cabinet, upwards of a hundred members of a new Parliament, ranging from dockers and miners to Lords and at least one Earl. Here were men and women whose names are familiar from one end to the other of the English speaking world, men and women of letters, of scientific achievement, of social service, and, I think, save for myself and perhaps a Hindoo girl in native costume, there were no strangers. Here were men and women who over years in widely separated fields only slowly drawn together, had been fighting for a common cause. They had, if I may use the figure, been scattered in all sorts of outposts, unconscious of supporting troops, knowing only of the strength of the opposition. And suddenly by the magic of a victory totally undreamed of they had been brought together here.

Most, probably all of these people were radicals in the American sense, many of them extreme radicals. Most of them had suffered socially, some even more directly for their faiths. Yet they were, seeing them together, impressively British, British by race, by manner, by everything. That imponderable and magnificent myth, the British Constitution, might have given its benediction without a qualm. Between all these people only newly divided by Cabinet rank and official dignities there was something of the feeling you might find in a company of soldiers who had together made a long campaign, not of weeks but of years, faced enemies and privations, tested each other in the long hours which weed out those of little faith and weaker nerves. Now they had come through at last to victory and a sort of curiously indescribable but uplifting sense not so much of the value of triumph as of that of comradeship.

I have been all my active life a political reporter. I have seen every form of American politics from the election district on the East Side of New York to the national convention. I have seen party gatherings in battle, in defeat and in victory, the nationally great under practically every circumstance, yet there was in this Labor gathering a spirit, a something which I cannot better describe than say it was different from all else in my experience. It was frankly a high water mark; those who were living it said with just a touch of that sadness which complete success brings "It never can happen again." Yet it had a quality which you think of when you read of other great and significant movements in human history, high endeavors carried forward by people big and little, wise and even foolish, moved by the curious, impelling influence of a common cause and the force of an intercommunicated enthusiasm by which people are lifted out of themselves for the moment and do impossible things—alas, only

for the moment, too. There was also in this amazing gathering a sense of essential democracy, hardly to be quite paralleled in any American experience; Democracy and that infinitely rarer thing that the French demand, too, namely, fraternity. I think everyone was more or less conscious that the moment was transitory and that tomorrow supervene, the ordinary sordid compromising party politics, would supervene, that the hour would not and could not be recaptured, yet it was the hour for which so many in the groups had worked so long and lived so hard and would never altogether forget even in ultimate failure.

Before I left America Mr. Hoover told me that for him the odd, the astonishing thing, about the Englishmen he saw and met and heard of in odd parts of the world, men of business, trade and adventure, was that they were going out over many seas of post war disappointment, this spirit was the dominating fact in Italy and France. But in Britain Labor's first night.

termination to avert menacing evils at home in something of the Elizabethan spirit of high adventure and daring. Now the strange thing in England today for at least one American is also precisely that curious sense of an Elizabethan England. Not the feeling of an old country weary and staggered by burdens of which there are an endless number, but of a young country or, better, of a spirit of youth in an old country springing up unexpectedly, answering the challenge of adversity, of national perils, sordid and material many of them, with a defiance coming from the very depths of the race itself; and if Mr. Hoover could find in business men travelling for trade in business men travelling for trade this romantic spirit perhaps it will not seem fantastic that I should find it here in London in Labor's first evening at home.

Under the strain of war failure in Russia "won" Bolshevik, under the stress of post war disappointment, this spirit was the dominating fact in Italy and France. But in Britain Labor's first night.

tain Labor itself repulsed Lenin and middle and upper-class Britain rejected Mussolini. Deep down in the race there was and is a consciousness that much is wrong and many things must be changed, but along with this goes the unconquerable conviction that all that is to be done must be done in the British way. No party, no group, no leaders, have a monopoly on this new national sentiment. If Labor fails, it will promptly be relieved of power. It is not Labor's revolution, it is Britain's revolution. But it is, believe it more strongly every day, a real revolution destined perhaps to change everything but the surface of British national existence and to have consequences far beyond the extensive frontiers of the British Empire.

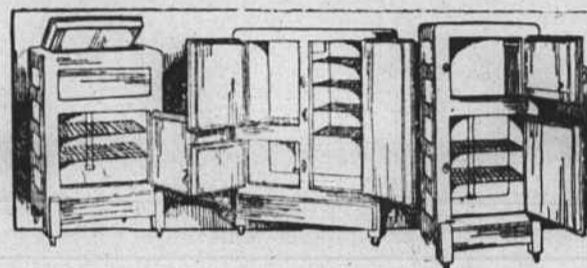
And perhaps in a fashion which I have been quite unable to phrase exactly, although I felt it strongly, this spirit was the dominating fact in Labor's first night.

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