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ON a day now nearly thirty years ago, a politician, walking along the Embankment, found his way blocked outside the Army Clothing Factory by a dense crowd of workers, mostly women, standing with intent faces lifted to a young woman mounted on a chair. She was "only a fair-haired slip of a girl," but she was speaking "with uncommon fire and persuasiveness." He stood to listen. The simplicity and directness, as well as the emotional force of her appeal, struck him: an unusual combination of shrewdness and magnetism: with now and then a delightful stroke of humour. Her audience, dull at first, was coming to life. She was trying, it seemed, to persuade them to come into a Trade Union; nothing very new in that, yet this girl somehow made it seem new; new, and rather exciting. No generalities from her; she seemed to know all about their conditions, their wages, hours and fines. Bread and butter stuff, in the main; yet connected, all the time, with something bigger, very real to her, which, somehow, she also made real to them.

"Who is she?" he asked a man, standing by: a workman who had paused, as he had.

"Why," he replied, "that's Mary Macarthur. She's waking 'em up, proper. Bit of all right, she is." He nodded. Had he been a Dundonian, instead of a Cockney, he might have added, "She's a nicker."

Of that name, the politician, and other persons, whether or not they normally took much interest in politics, were to hear, continually, in the course of the next years. Working women were coming into the news. There were strikes, and successful strikes, among the jute workers in the North, the corset makers in the Midlands: stories of a "Girls' Parliament" among the London work-girls; a sense of general stir and movement, with, behind it all, a captain who seemed to know her job. In the papers were letters, interviews, articles by this same Mary Macarthur: pieces,

simply and yet vividly written, which woke the reader up to facts he had forgotten or never known about the conditions under which women were working, and the wretched wages they were paid for making the common articles of daily use in every household. If they were beginning to revolt, they were right ; but what was one to do about it ?

Sweating—horrible word for a still more horrible thing—confronted the Londoner in terms from which he could not escape when the *Daily News* organised a great Exhibition, with the women workers actually there. That, too, it appeared, was the work of Mary Macarthur. One day she had burst into the office of the editor, Mr. A. G. Gardiner, and poured out to him a torrent of burning words about the grim under-payment of women workers, in factories and in their wretched homes : told him how, in one factory, a girl had dropped dead, only the other day, from sheer exhaustion : how, another, sickening with diphtheria and too poor to afford bed-clothes, covered herself at night with the fine baby linen she was stitching at one penny per finished garment, and so, all unwitting, spread disease and possible death to the infants for whom her work was bought by mothers who would have shuddered away had they any conception of the conditions under which it was made : how women chain-makers, toiling for fifty hours a week at the heaviest work in their own forges, were lucky if they brought home seven or eight shillings at the end of the week. She stormed at him, burst into tears, appealed to him, passionately. What was more surprising, however, was that she had an idea, a plan, and a superbly practical plan—the organization of an Exhibition. She had worked it all out ; there was no resisting her. The Exhibition came into being : daily, she was on duty there, giving short, pithy lectures, with here and there a touch of humour, in which she explained how and why the flower, hook and button, ball and sack, shirt and fur, box and jam, match and dress makers, and hundreds of others, actually toiled and starved. How she found time to do it was a puzzle, for she was secretary of the whirling office of the National Union of Women Workers, as also of the Women's Trade Union League, and the task of bringing women into unions kept her busy, addressing meetings from very

early morning till very late at night : never failing when she was billed to speak, no matter how small the meeting, nor how dreary the street corner at which it was to be held. Had she not stood for an hour at the appointed pitch in a snowstorm so blinding that her one companion could hardly see her, while shadowy figures darted by, none heroic enough to stay to make a meeting ? One day, the papers reported her as making, at the Guildhall, a speech which converted the organised Trade Unions to the principle of a minimum wage ; on the next, she was in Scotland ; on the day after in Yorkshire ; on the day after that, guest of honour at a dinner in the House of Commons, with Keir Hardie in the chair, preparatory to her departure for America.

Yet it was neither the agitator nor the orator, but the quick-witted, long-sighted, and completely equipped practical organiser who appeared before the Select Committee on Home Work set up by Parliament in 1907, in direct response to the public feeling aroused by the Exhibition, and the pressure of the new Labour Party in the House of Commons. The broad-cloth-coated men sitting round the semi-circular table in the sombre committee room were, some of them, vaguely sympathetic, but none saw his way through the tangled mass of evidence that had been put before them. This matter of women's work seemed to be a jungle : they felt baffled, overwhelmed. Yet this young woman of twenty-seven, very attractive looking, with her fair hair, blue eyes and slim figure, speaking quickly and yet so clearly in tones that betrayed the fact that she hailed from across the Border—one parent a Highlander, the other from Aberdeen—seemed to have got it all quite clear in her head. She not only woke them up ; she put the whole question suddenly into focus. Nothing emotional here ; hard facts, logically marshalled by a clear head. Women generally, earning an average wage of seven shillings a week : home workers an average of four and sixpence. This average concealing the fact that, for women, there was no sort of standard rate ; so the " good " employer was being penalised and under-cut by the bad. Willing to pay a decent, living rate, he could not in practice do so, because there was no machinery for imposing that rate on his

competitors. This she gave them as their thread through the maze ; this view she drove home by a mass of actual illustrations. Thus, in the Cradley Heath chain-making area she had visited a number of employers, and in every case the employer

“ admitted to me that the rates were scandalously low, and said that if only we could get a meeting of all the employers, he was sure that a 15 or 20 per cent. rise could easily be given. The difficulty is to get a meeting of the employers.”

In another case, at an ammunition works in Edmonton, the demand for a fifty per cent. cut caused a strike. A Trade Union was formed, and the firm consented to arbitration. Then, however, they showed that competing firms were paying even lower rates.

“ It is impossible to describe the anguished impotence with which we sat listening to the statistics of the rates and wages paid by these unrepresented firms. Had we been able to command their attendance, and could the decision of the arbitrator have been binding upon them—as would have been the case, had we been a Wages Board, and not a voluntary Arbitration Board—there would have been a general levelling up of wages, instead of a levelling down.”

At the end, a member of the committee, a previously hostile “ realist,” said to her in set terms : “ Your evidence has brought Wages Boards within the sphere of practical politics.” The matter was clinched when, as the result of the profound impression created by her evidence, she was asked to bring a number of the actual workers before the committee at a private session. Then the committee reported in favour of giving statutory Wages Boards power to fix minimum rates ; the House of Commons agreed ; and on January 1, 1910, the Trade Boards Act received Royal Assent. Four trades were scheduled, in the first instance : chain-making, machine-lace making, paper-box making, and wholesale and bespoke tailoring. In these trades, Boards were to be set up, constituted from representatives of employers and employed, the employed, in view of their known weakness, being permitted the aid of assessors.

Mary Macarthur had got the machinery into existence.

Next, she had to make it work. The first and crucial test came in the chain-making area, at Cradley Heath. There, conditions were so bad, and the exploitation of the women so terrible, that it was the first industry to be scheduled. After long and difficult negotiations, in which as assessor to the workers' representatives she finally brought the Associated Employers to agreement, minimum rates for various classes of work were at last fixed by the Board. They represented a vast improvement from the workers' point of view. Under the Act, however, three months' notice of these rates had got to be given ; those three months were feverishly utilised by the employers, contractors and middlemen—and women—to pile up stocks by overtime working, and so prepare a slump in the industry for which the blame could then be cast on the new rates. Moreover, the employers outside the Association got great numbers of their workers—ignorant, illiterate, and terrified—to affix their marks to a paper contracting out of the operation of the Act. The situation was dangerous in the extreme. Mary at once called a conference of the Associated Employers and finally got from them an undertaking that they would stand by the Board's rates, on condition that they were not under-cut by the outside firms and middlemen. This condition she prepared to secure, by a bold stroke—so bold that it almost frightened her colleagues. She called the workers to whom less than the Board's rate was being offered to repudiate the signatures and marks got from them under false pretences, and come out on strike. Such was the hold she had established over them, such was their faith in her, and the warming effect of her personality, that, to a woman, out they came, although, as far as they could see, they were faced with sheer starvation. There was no money in Cradley Heath, and although her National Federation of Women Workers made itself responsible for a strike fund, it had hardly any money either. She, however, at once turned her genius for publicity into collecting the sinews of war, and rousing public opinion on the side of the strikers. She gave interviews, she wrote letters, she addressed meetings of all kinds ; she even employed the new power of the cinema to show what the life of the chain-maker was like ; she got the newspapers to open

funds. In the end, it was public opinion, mobilised by her, that settled the strike. It took ten weeks of grim endurance, but in the end the outside employers had to come in and give way. The final meeting is described by J. J. Mallon, who was there, as "not like a strike but a prayer meeting;" at the close the women crowded round to kiss the hands of their deliverer. The Board was safe; the minimum rates were paid. As the local paper put it at the time: "For years the chain-makers have been working for miserably inadequate wages, and, until Miss Macarthur came upon the scene, they were powerless successfully to ask for more."

The fight thus won at Cradley Heath had to be fought out in each of the three other scheduled industries; and it was fought with the same vision, courage, generalship, and unstinted giving of herself. To the workers whose cause she championed, she gave something more than the minimum wage she secured for them. Mr. Mallon has described some of the street meetings held in Nottingham, among the lace workers. He says:

"I am not sure that Mary Macarthur's most moving speeches were not made at some of these queer, unreported assemblies. Something moved in her when the poor faces of the home-workers looked up at her as she held forth on a chair at the street corner, and still more when she noted the raggedness and malnutrition of the children. She spoke amazingly; like a compassionate angel . . . On one memorable evening—she was feeling the strain of her continuous exhortation, and was a little over-emotional—she plunged a large audience of home-workers into tears and kept them there. Though they wept, they were happy. Poverty and suffering had cut them off from the world, but Mary Macarthur had *re-established communication, and made them feel that they were still members of the human family.*"

In this last sentence is indeed the key to her work; her unfaltering devotion and remarkable success in it. Her sense of the "human family" was active, constant, passionate. Injustice, whenever, wherever she met it, set her on fire. She could feel the wrongs and sufferings of others as her own, and never got used to them. She felt them as a call to action. Action—swift, practical action—was her element; for it she had all the gifts: the power to

plan, as well as the power to strike. She wrote, of course, abundantly ; but writing was, for her, merely a means of getting something or other done. She had little or no æsthetic sense ; a pen, so her friends told her, she handled like a walking-stick. For two hectic years—1906-8—she wrote most of the lively paper she founded, *The Woman Worker* ; and would, at times, dash out of her office to sell it in the streets. In her writing, she had the knack of throwing off phrases just enough removed from the commonplace to serve as slogans ; there, she had the humour and much of the vitality of which she had complete command on the platform ; but the platform was her element, to a degree to which the desk never was. As a speaker, whether at conference, mass meeting, street meeting, or committee, large or small, she had every kind of skill, from sheer oratory to subtle wangling : a power, almost uncanny, of “ getting ” her audience, whatever its composition. But neither in speaking nor in writing do general or abstract ideas, like Democracy or Socialism, figure prominently. She was a Democrat through and through ; she was also a Socialist ; the existence of a purpose, bigger than herself, was always with her ; so much with her, that she had no need to talk of it.

She lived, and will live, as the champion of the working woman. To women everywhere her service is indeed incalculable. She gave them self-respect : by her personality as by her achievement she broke through the sense of isolation and helplessness. On the freeing of the woman worker she concentrated : for it, up to the autumn of 1911, she made the major sacrifice of refusing to marry the man who loved her and whom she was learning to love ; it, she saw as “ fundamental work ” in her own phrase. In her concentration, however, was no hint of narrowness. Always her work for women was part and parcel of the wider struggle for human freedom and for a society based on justice. She knew the sufferings of the exploited of her own sex ; she also knew, from direct experience, how limited and stifling the lot of even the most “ comfortable.” When, in 1903, she left her home in Ayr, she exchanged ease for hardship, the secure position of the “ lady ” for incessant toil and drive. After a stormy and not very educational

schooling in Glasgow, she had come back from a year in Germany to an effort to fill her life by being a Primrose Dame and a contributor to the local paper. It would not do. Then she got her father to take her in as book-keeper to his big drapery establishment, where she came for the first time into contact with the girl who must work to live. To write a skit for the paper, she went with the girls to a meeting of the Shop Assistants Union. "Going to scoff, I remained to pray." The words are apt: the idea behind the Trade Union movement, as put by John Turner, seized her, then and there, with the force of a revelation. Very soon, she was President of the Ayr branch: then of the Scottish Council of the Union. In that capacity she met and made friends with Will Anderson and Margaret Bondfield, both moving spirits in the Union, and persons for whom its work was joined on to the larger issues of Socialist politics; made her mark at Conferences. The first sharp break with her father's point of view came when she insisted that she must support Robert Smillie, standing as a Labour candidate in Mid-Lanark. It was an action significant of the immense movement away from its old moorings her young mind had taken, and of its sense of the ocean in which, native, it was to swim. In the summer of 1903 she left Ayr for London, to find her work in life.

It was waiting for her. Margaret Bondfield, to whom she went, was searching for a secretary for the Women's Trade Union League. Unless a new organiser could be found who would rouse women who, as Mary Macarthur was to put it later, "are badly paid and badly treated because they are not organised, and not organised because they are badly paid and badly treated," it seemed as though the League, founded thirty years earlier, must peter out. Here, in this electric girl, Lady Dilke and Gertrude Tuckwell believed that she had been found. And so it proved. For Mary, the little, dreary office in Club Union Buildings wore already the air of the theatre of adventure, and the sense of it filled and thrilled her. She was not going to wait for Unions to join the League; she was going out to make them. And she did. Made, she was going to keep them—a far harder task. Ground won was, for her, as

she put it later apropos of Lady Dilke, "never a place of rest but a place of arms, a foothold whence we may fight our way to positions yet more commanding." Within three years of her taking over, she not only made unions where none had been before; she got the various scattered little unions, by 1908, into a single organisation, the National Federation of Women Workers, with seventeen branches and over two thousand members. The actual figures were never very imposing, but she was past mistress in the art of bluffing, with something about her that made it impossible to call her bluff. As a shrewd observer put it, she and Miss Tuckwell, her devoted and very able President, "with all their camp followers were no more than a stage army, but they said that they were the women workers of Great Britain, and they made so much noise that they came to be believed." Certainly, she missed no chance.

The sudden revolt of the women working in the food and other factories of Bermondsey, in the hot days of the summer of 1911, called her at once to the spot. There were actually twenty separate strikes, involving as many separate factories and sets of conditions; there was also the tremendous problem of feeding the workers, few of whom were in any kind of organisation. That she met by launching an appeal, through the press, not for money but for loaves and milk; she poured workers into Bermondsey, for practically continuous meetings, designed to hold the women together: she herself carried through the complex negotiations with the various groups of employers. She won; her personality diffused enthusiasm and the sense that here was a great adventure; her practised statesmanship commanded the respect of the most obstinate employer. An essential element in that statesmanship was her clear realisation that the jam makers and the tea packers, the sweet stuff makers and the box makers, were part and parcel of a common industrial army, and cheap women's labour must not, to their own destitution and the under-cutting of the men's rates, be allowed to drag living standards down. Her own battalions, large or small, were always part of the much greater army fighting for Socialism and Democracy.

Thus, while she worked for women, year in and year out, amid scenes and drama—some of it wearing to her associates:

much of it costing real personal sacrifice from herself—she was never in the narrow sense a feminist, always an equalitarian. Her realism, her sense of humour, her strong belief in comradeship and co-operation between the sexes, and the passion for justice that brought her out on the side of the weak, wherever they were to be found, gave a wider basis to her industrial and her political effort. A pungent sanity colours her remarks about her own sex. "Women are not all wise, any more than they are all beautiful." "A woman matured in stupidity is the most intractable material that could be found." "The future woman must have the masculine steak and beer standard, instead of the feminine one of buns and tea. But man need have no fear of the woman of the future if he will only realise that his interest and hers are one." Here was her central conviction—"his interest and hers are one." A keen advocate, therefore, of adult suffrage, she was never interested in the limited Bill which would enfranchise only a handful of middle-class women. When she herself, in 1918, stood for Parliament—the first woman to be nominated as a candidate—she stood, not as a woman, but as a representative of the Labour Party. "I do not believe that any woman ought to be returned simply because she *is* a woman. But I hold equally strongly that no woman should be excluded for the same reason." In her Election address, she stated that "it takes a man and woman to make the ideal home and I believe that neither can build the ideal world without the help of the other."

She stood, of course, as Mary Macarthur—and had trouble with the returning officer about that. But, by 1918, her experience of life had been deepened by marriage and motherhood: her first baby lost, to her bitter grief, but Nancy, the second, born in 1915, was the light of her eyes. In 1911, Will Anderson's loyal and unswerving devotion, and the perfect friendship he had schooled his heart to give her, at last convinced her that their common work might be more effectively done together than apart. In 1918 she could talk of the ideal home as one who knew it. Uncomfortable housekeeping, hers, no doubt: too much office about the house; a feverish temperature, often, and too many domestic upheavals: "treasures" announced

with enthusiasm, proving all too often to be "devils": a rush and pressure that slower blood might have found intolerable; but genuine companionship between husband and wife, flowering into authentic happiness; a personal attachment that grew stronger as each learned to know the other with the intimacy only shared life can bring. Will Anderson satisfied the deep emotion of her passionate nature and its need of hero-worship: in him, she found a mate of strength equal to her own, and of a calmer wisdom. Years back, in 1903, when he asked her to marry him, and she, full of her new work in London, said "No," he had said to her that she "had not yet been attuned to her deepest and sweetest music," was not yet, "wonderful woman as she is, so rounded and complete as she will be." He was right, and she knew it. Her work, after her marriage, had a new ripeness and a deeper range. There is genuine social imagination in the memorandum she wrote in 1913 for the Committee set up to consider the sickness claims of women under the Health Insurance Act, on which she had fought Mr. Lloyd George so long, while it was passing; while her argument for the establishment of a State medical service, on preventive lines, is as relevant and as forceful to-day as when she penned it. During the war years she showed qualities of genuine statesmanship, such as marked her out, no less than her husband, as a future member of a Labour Cabinet.

The war was for both a shattering catastrophe. Throughout its hideous course they worked like lions: he in the House of Commons, to which he was elected at a by-election in 1914, as a member of the small pacifist group; she outside, as the fearless, tireless champion of the working woman and, no less, of the working man. Her first and instant task was to protect the mass of women thrown out of employment in the early months; about their case, she felt so keenly that she was ready to lead a procession to Buckingham Palace. Instead, she was called into the consultations that led to the setting-up of the Queen's Work for Women Fund; and, in connection with this, won from Her Majesty herself, as from the great ladies and eminent civil servants associated with it, the respect and the affection that had, before, been given her so freely

by the simple working woman. Soon, however, a different emergency called her : women of all sorts were being drafted into the munition factories to take the places of the men called to the colours. Understanding the impulse of service that made gentle and simple rush into war work, her whole energy was bent to prevent its being exploited, and, in the long run, turned against their husbands and their brothers. There was to be a world after the war : she never forgot it. Women must not be sacrificed, or used as blacklegs, in the new munitions establishments that were hastily being rushed up on every hand.

With the tenacity of the lion, and something of the wisdom, on occasion, of the serpent, she fought the battles of the women and of the men ; by sheer force of personality, she compelled Ministers, State Departments, and Trade Unions to recognise human claims the women themselves could not put forward and the pressure of the hour made it easy, and apparently patriotic, to overlook. Patent enough, the weakness of her constituents. Organised women were but a tiny fraction of the vast army of women workers mobilised within the first year of the declaration of war ; that army, constantly growing until it reached figures over two millions, composed in the main of women new to industry, with no tradition of organisation, and quivering with heroic impulses, was in no sense a fighting force. Yet she bluffed employers and Ministers into believing that it was. She claimed to speak for two million women, of whom nearly one and a half million had never worked for wages before and were hardly aware of her existence : and her word prevailed. Before long, the engineers, the most exclusive craft union in the country, were glad to have her as their champion ; and one Minister of Munitions after another had to concede her demands. In her tenacity, Mr. Lloyd George met something he could not charm away ; against her, wiles, eloquence, nimbleness were of no avail ; she knew all his dodges, and could work them, when she chose, as well as he could. She knew every turn of the game and played it, with firm wrist, keen eye and unyielding purpose. When argument would not serve, she used her charm, or, if that did not work, frankly resorted to bullying.

To tell the story in detail is not necessary, although the

more it is studied in detail, the greater is the admiration compelled by her generalship. In the upshot, she not only secured decent conditions for the war-worker; she established certain facts, now more or less taken for granted, which would not have been so taken, but for her. First, and not least important, that long hours are detrimental to the out-put, as well as to the health, of the worker. Second, that women's wages are not a separate chapter, but part and parcel of the wages of men. At the end of the war, thanks to her, the wages and general status of the woman worker, and of the man, were definitely better than they were before; a standard was set, which it has proved hard to break down. The notion that any standard should, in fact, be a living standard, is now accepted, if not always acted upon. She was, as were all who stood for the maintenance of Trade Union conditions, bitterly attacked, at the time, by the short-sighted, who thought, even about the war, in terms of weeks and months; but she won a new kind of respect for all who came into contact with her. For personal recognition, personal honours, she cared not at all; the substance of achievement was what she valued, and that, for her, was ever only a starting-point for fresh effort.

During the 1918 Election campaign, she in Stourbridge, Will Anderson in Attercliffe, had to meet the full tide of calumny. She was, of course, defeated, though her vote was a magnificent one; that she did not mind. His being out of the House was a harder blow: she would not have stood herself had she not felt sure that he was—as was no Pacifist—safe. Together, however, they prepared for a new and harder fighting than any that had gone before. She, with her old dash and energy, organized the women for whom the sudden closing down of munitions factories spelt disaster; led them, in procession as of yore, to Whitehall: forced Ministers to make provision for them, and to keep their pledges, when given to her. He threw himself into the campaign, in which her heart was with him, for a Peace of reconciliation. Neither was yet forty; little could either guess how near the end of the struggle was for them both.

Early in February, 1919, he spoke at a meeting in Bradford; caught a chill on the way home, and, within a fortnight, lay dead of pneumonia. For two more years she,

literally heart-broken, worked on, resolutely fighting to the very last. She went to Washington, for the first Conference of the new International Labour Office, and carried the brunt of the work for the Maternity and Child Welfare Convention. She spoke, with her old fire and force, at Labour Party Conferences and meetings. She organised the transformation of the National Federation of Women Workers into a district of a great general Labour Union, the National Union of Municipal and General Workers, in consonance with her firm conviction that "her interests are the same as his." More serious, however, than the grave physical mischief, which compelled her to undergo two operations in the year 1920, was her inner desolation. After the second operation, her friends knew that the hurt was mortal; on New Year's Day, 1921, she died.

The years that have passed since her death have changed the colour and dimmed the brightness of many reputations. Hers has submitted to no fading. Men of good will everywhere agree that the only loss comparable to that of Will Anderson is that of his wife. Her, no description fits so well as that which Carlyle wrote of John Sterling: "You could see, here looked forth a soul which was winged; that dwelt in hope and action, not in hesitation and fear." Sterling's candour and purity of heart she had; in her however, these lovely qualities were allied to a burning purpose and an unfaltering will, which translated hope into action. A brain of admirable hardness lay behind a personality of compelling force and charm, whose enhancement was never her aim. Not for herself did she labour, rejoice and agonise. She gave, unstintedly, that disinterested service that is the hope of Democracy and its guarantee, asking only for fuller opportunities of being used in the common cause.