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The British Government Engineered the Coal Strike

SOME spiritists claim that houses built for and inhabited by individuals having earned sinister reputations, attract towards them characters of similar disposition long after the original tenants have passed out of existence.

There is one case such people could cite with the assurance of its standing the severest acid test of an analysis that could be applied—No 10 Downing St., London, England.

The original owner of this house, Sir George Downing, was a soldier in Cromwell's army during the revolution and, afterwards, a spy in the pay of the merry monarch, Charles II.

George (the "Sir" came later) Downing, for so many gold pieces and certain privileges, betrayed the more dangerous and most powerful of his Puritan comrades to the scaffold.

At this business he prospered and, having acquired the lease of a portion of land, he set a number of masons and craftsmen to build three houses which he numbered 10, 11 and 12 Downing Street, which he named after himself, and in No. 10 he made his home. Satisfied with this rascal's ability, as shown so far and the possibility of still greater development as a knave, the King knighted and then promoted him to the post of Secretary of the Treasury.

When the lease lapsed, the property reverted to the Crown, which happened at the moment to rest on the head of George II., who made a present of No. 10 to Sir Robert Walpole. Walpole was afraid to accept it without some condition; for, wise as he was, he knew that even though a man be worth his price he sells himself by accepting it. The condition, which he succeeded in attaching to this present from the King to the chief of state, was to make No. 10 Downing Street belong in perpetuity to the First Lord of the Treasury.

Of all the knaves who have inhabited this house since the demise of the original owner none ever succeeded in earning more gold pieces and honors than the last occupant, Lloyd George, who was domiciled here until "Chequers Court" was presented to the nation. If Carlyle was right in his judgment that "England possessed a population of twenty millions,—mostly fools," it is just as likely as not that the Welsh lawyer is more fool than knave, more clown than statesman, while his supporters are simply dropping to lower stages in imbecility than was the case in Carlyle's day. Whether this be so or not depends upon the reader's judgment after I have duly presented this case of the miners' strike.

The strike itself is but one more event in the long sequence arising out of the European war. When the British Government decided upon operating the mines for the duration of the war and for a certain period afterwards, the policy was laid down that they would be responsible for the wear and tear of machinery, the payment of labor power, royalties to landowners, on whose ground the collieries are located, and an even rate of interest to the stock and bondholders of the different companies.

When you remember that there is a great difference in the quality of coal in certain districts, that the cost of production in some is greater than in others, which imposes an extra handicap on such managers to obtain for their lovers of unearned increment (!) the average rate of profit, you will agree that government control under these circumstances

was a considerable advantage to colliery owners in those districts where the grade of coal was lowest and where the cost of production was highest.

With the signing of the armistice and the demobilization of the great armies of workers in the huge war plants, the machinery of production in such industries became still—the power that moved them was shut off. And from this moment a surplus of coal was inevitable, a surplus which must always mean idle workers clamoring in the market for jobs. A "ca' canny" policy was adopted by the miners as a check upon this condition, a policy which brought the landowners, whose royalties are proportionate with the tonnage produced, to the seat of government, and into the press, with wrathful cries to "Speed up!" And in the general chorus the stock and bondholders, who were getting fat with export coal selling at £12 per ton in Italian ports, at which price there was a great demand, lent their voices. The miner simply retorted, "Pay more!"

With the signing of "Peace" and the arrival of the first portion of the German indemnity paid in coal, a problem was presented to Lloyd George that required his closest attention. France at this time was receiving more free coal than Britain, and her domestic requirements were less, that is for factory purposes, her factories, taken on the whole, were not operating to the same extent as in Great Britain. Moreover, she was now operating the mines in the Saar basin and repairing others less damaged by the retreating German army. With all this enormous quantity of coal the French capitalists engaged in export trade in a market strongly dominated previously by British merchants. The foreign policy of the French Government was planned with a view to possessing the Rhur district and Upper Silesia; in these countries immense deposits of coal and iron ore are found, and the under currents of secret diplomacy were set in motion with the view of controlling these areas. A successful achievement in this direction by the French would have been detrimental to the coal industry of Britain, and it is this which is responsible for the present relations between these two countries, and the change of heart in the British Government's body towards Germany.

From 1920 onwards not only was France plucking the trade in coal from British owners, who were blind to the fact that monopoly prices were bound to react upon them, the coalowners in the United States became a strong competitor in such markets as the British had played a hold-up game for some time. Coal was rushed from Atlantic ports to European centres, cutting the price of British half in many instances.

Knowing that his foreign policy had been somehow mis-calculated, the loss of export trade being the proof of it, George decided on decontrol of the coalfields at the earliest moment, to place once more on the shoulders of the former owners the trouble of making profits for themselves, leaving only the free coal from Germany to be disposed of by the government for national purposes.

You will remember that towards the close of 1920 trade depression was universal throughout the capitalist countries, and in Great Britain the textile industry collapsed, while shipyards laid off men by the thousand.

At that time the surplus of coal on hand must have reached a prodigious size, and even then it was rumoured in the press of the country that decontrol would take place soon. In March the government plot had ripened; on the 31st the mines were turned over to their previous owners. And the immediate effect of this was the decision of the company operators to declare a cut of nearly 35 per cent. in wages.

The cut in wages was made first in those districts where the general nature of the mine was such that the cost of production was greater than in others, and the average rate of profit harder to obtain. The effect of this reduction was the strike itself. The miners' proposition was to have the profits of the entire mine regions pooled, the output of coal from the rich and the poor districts to be, as it were, the property of one, and a uniform rate of wages to all the different grades of labor used in the mines. In this proposition is involved a sacrifice on the part of those miners in the highest paid districts, who were prepared to accept a reduction in wages sufficient to make up the difference paid in the worst areas. As the "Westminster Gazette" puts it: "The miners will not think it fair that a man should be paid only £2 5s. a week in the Forest of Dean for doing exactly the same work as another man is paid £5 1s. 9d. for doing in South Yorkshire."

The "Nation" (British) in an editorial commentary on the situation has this to say:

"Because the Prime Minister could not keep faith with the coal miners and has made the men engaged in that industry distrust him; because his foreign policy has temporarily ruined the British coal trade, and his treatment of it at home has set the two parties to it by the ears, because he would not ask the richer coal-owners to reduce their profits, though the better-to-do-miners were willing to cut their wages to help the worse-paid ones; because he had called on thousands of workmen to accept, at an hour's notice, wages on which no self-respecting man with a family can live, and on a scale of reduction such as no household economy could stand; because he has talked the language of the class war, when there was not a scrap of reason for using it, and then encouraged that war by summoning one part of the nation to take arms against the other it seems as if the country had been muddled into a struggle which no one wants, from which no one can benefit, and which a good half of the people cannot understand."

In short, it was Lloyd George's plan to blot out from the ken of men the records of his defeats at the hands of the diplomats of Europe and elsewhere, by deliberately precipitating a bloody war in England, reduce the British slave class to still lower depths of degradation and poverty, or leave them to fertilize the fields for the next generation. Like Macbeth he must go on murdering first one and then another. But Macbeth was a nobleman compared with this fellow.

R. K.