

John Burns as I Knew Him.

WHEN I first knew John Burns there were very few other persons that knew him. That is to say, he was in no sense a public man. He was working at his trade, at the engineering establishment of the Messrs. Brothers, in Lambeth, London. Burns then resided in one of the artisans' model cottages on the Shaftsbury Park estate, Battersea. He had not a whole cottage to himself, but the two upper rooms only, with use of the kitchen for cooking, etc. For this accommodation Burns paid three and sixpence a week rent. Any one who knows anything about rents in London will realize what a humble abode this must have been. The rooms were very small, but they were cosy enough for Mr. Burns and his wife (they have no family). The little domicile was furnished more with a view to comfort than elegance. The most noticeable feature in the parlour were some shelves that bridged across a small recess at one of the corners, and on these were ranged two or three scores of books, all by standard authors and chiefly treating of history, political economy, and socialism. In front was a small desk, and this corner was John Burns' study.

I became acquainted with John Burns through politics, about the year 1884. It was in this way. Battersea was not then a borough, as it has since become (by the last redistribution of seats bill); but was a portion of an electoral division of the county of Surrey. On account of its populousness, however, it was the key of the constituency. Whoever polled the Battersea vote was elected member for the division. A rich city magnate, Mr. Sidney Stern, had fought the division and had been defeated. He was, however, "nursing" the place, with the intention of fighting for the seat when it became a borough. By "nursing," I mean he was subsidizing the place. He subscribed to all the charities, all the institutions, and kept a staff of paid agents and organizers continually at work. One of the institutions was the Battersea Liberal Club, of which I was a member. I noticed that the Club was not self-supporting; that every monthly balance sheet showed a deficit, and that that deficit was regularly paid by one of the agents of Mr. Sidney Stern. I protested against this. I urged that it was neither dignified nor proper that we should compromise ourselves to the first man who dangled his money bags before us. In the end a batch of us seceded, and we started the Battersea Radical Association, dependent entirely upon the subscriptions (one shilling a quarter) of its members. I was elected the president, and one of the first to enroll himself on the books was John Burns.

This was Burns's entry on a public career. Hitherto he had been known only as a member of the Battersea Parliamentary Debating Society, in whose discussions he took part. The new association, however, was in such a "small way of business" that this start on a career by Burns can hardly be said to be public. Indeed we were chiefly the object of sneers and jeers, as a batch of nobodies who were "traitors to the Liberal cause" and "false to the Liberal party." When, therefore, we passed a resolution that "no candidate in whose selection we had no voice would be acceptable to the Association," we were laughed at as the "three tailors of Tooley street." We went on working, however, growing in strength and numbers, and at last "official Liberalism" brought down Joseph Arch, to give a public address. The idea was that this would crush us, but Arch, who did not understand the position, gave a stirring address that quite justified all we had done. One sentence of his became memorable: "If," he said, "the Liberal party cannot stand the strain of radicalism without splitting, let it split." We at once adopted that declaration as the motto of our Association, and thus Arch, who had been called to curse, remained to bless.

An opportunity soon and suddenly presented itself of showing our strength, and in putting this forth, Burns played an important part. The sitting member resigned his seat, and we were in the throes of an election. Sidney Stern was at once announced as a candidate, and the threat of the Radicals above announced was laughed at and scorned. We had no man to bring forward, and we had no money. We determined, however, to be true to our resolution. We got printed, secretly, small hand-bills, on which we printed a manifesto calling upon the electors not to vote, and giving reasons for that advice. The night before the day of polling

each member of the Association undertook to put a copy of this manifesto under every door in the district assigned to him. Burns had allotted to him the Shaftsbury Park estate, on which he resided. That night, much to the consternation of the watchman, figures were seen flitting about putting a slip of paper under every door. Next morning every voter had a copy of the manifesto. Whether it were the suddenness or dash of the *coup*, or the merits of the manifesto, I know not, but Sidney Stern was ignominiously defeated; and defeated, too, not by the votes polled for his opponents, but by the persons who did not vote at all. There were more abstentions than there were voters who polled, and, as was said at the time, Mr. Stern had been defeated by Mr. Nobody. The defeated candidate withdrew his subsidies from the constituency, and Battersea knew him no more. He has since tried the same tactics elsewhere, at Ipswich and in Devon, but as yet without success, which shows that money cannot do everything, however much those that have it may think it can.

At this time I became very intimate with John Burns. Almost every night, after the doors of the Association were closed at eleven o'clock, four of us used to stay behind for a quiet conversation on questions of the day. These four were James Tims, secretary of the Association, who afterwards became representative for Battersea on the London County Council; an Austrian refugee, a Nihilist, whose name I forget; John Burns, and myself. Whatever subject we started to discuss we always drifted to Socialism, for, with Burns, this was the "question of the day" in *excelsis*, the aim and object of life *de profundis*. In some respects we were a typical quartette. Tims was one of those men who readily grasp the ends to be attained without at all comprehending the principles that lay underneath. The Austrian was a "physical force" man, and associating with but few who did not agree with him; he saw not beyond his *entourage*, and, therefore, believed the world to be on his side—all except governments, whom he regarded as enemies to everybody but themselves. Burns, too, was a "physical force" man, but only on one condition, viz., success. Force, he would admit, was no remedy, but he still regarded it as a strong argument. And, indeed, although he would not resort to force as an initiative, unless success were assured, yet he considered that on all occasions it was justifiable to resist force by force. It was the practical application of this view that finally landed him in jail, as will be shown below. As for myself, I could not, nor can I, regard practical socialism other than as the system of more equitable production and distribution. I cannot see that a socialistic state can exist except by the annihilation of selfishness and other sins. Socialism is based upon affection, and until we can socialise the emotions, and for that matter, the intellectualities as well, a socialistic state cannot be. This view, however, was too academical for Burns, who is pre-eminently practical.

The electioneering tactics above described caused our little Association to feel its feet. Other persons recognized this, too, and cheques were sent to us from persons who wished to join us. We returned the money with an intimation that nothing could be received beyond the usual subscription, one shilling a quarter. Our success, however, gave us courage, and we decided to extend our operations.

The result was the Radical Federation which is now such a power in London. I was its first president, a position I held for two years. The official Liberals sought to woo us at the time, and members of the Reform Club asked for admission to our conferences. I had to ask them to retire unless they could show that they had been sent as delegates. We made it to be distinctly understood that we did not wish our platform to be garnished by notorieties. John Burns was one of the delegates, but he soon resigned the position, and this discovers a unique trait in his character. Burns is no good as a committee man. His strength lies in his power of direct appeal to the people. There must be no barrier between him and those with whom he works. He rests entirely and solely upon the hearts of the people. Do not misunderstand me. Burns is not an autocrat as was Bradlaugh (with whom also I had much to do); or, if he be so, he does not know it: for never yet, I think, was a man so single-minded, and, who with the one object of his life constantly in view, does not realize or even understand any of the minutiae or workings, or even conventionalities that surround organizations. He sees his point and goes straight