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THE BRITISH WORKMAN DEFENDS HIS HOME



WILLIAM P. C. M. E.

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The British Workman Defends His Home

By
WILL CROOKS, P.C., M.P.

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INTRODUCTORY NOTE.

The life story of Will Crooks is one of the romances of modern England. Born in a one-roomed house in East London, he was familiar from infancy with poverty and hunger. For a short spell he was in a workhouse school. When eleven, he started a life of hard toil.

Such an experience would have soured and embittered many men. It broadened and deepened and created an infinite pitifulness in Will Crooks. When his fellow workmen, understanding his grasp of public affairs and his sound common sense, elected him as their leader, he used his power for the benefit of the poor. As London County Councillor, Guardian of the poor, Mayor of Poplar, Member of Parliament and member of the King's Privy Council, his life work has been consistent.

To-day, as the Right Hon. W. Crooks, P.C., M.P., he remains unspoiled by success. He lives among his own people in a little two storied house in Poplar. His home is a centre to which those in distress flock all day long.

His wit, his homely simplicity and his genuine kindness of heart have made the world his friend. When in the spring of 1917 he was struck down by serious illness, the King sent to enquire after his progress, peers and bishops waited for news of him, and in many a back room and workhouse ward there were heavy hearts until he was out of danger.

In the following pages Mr. Crooks, the democrat, worker for peace and advocate of international amity, explains why he has thrown all his energies and enthusiasm into advocating and aiding the cause of the Allies in this war.

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I am a Poplar man. I was born in Poplar in poverty in a little one-roomed house in 1852. As a lad I was apprenticed near by to a cooper. Nearly thirty years ago, the working men of Poplar chose me for my first public office, as member of the Board of Trustees. I live in Poplar to-day.

Poplar is part of the great working class quarter of East London, which starts at Whitechapel and stretches to Canning Town, the largest solely industrial quarter in the world. Here we have no leisured class, no middle class, none but working men and the tradesmen who supply them. East London is a natural reservoir for casual and shifting labour. In pre-war days, advertisements of factories to let here added as an attraction the words, "Abundant supplies of casual labour to be had."

Before the war, our people were the flotsam and jetsam of industry. The docks, the factories and the workshops employed a great deal of unskilled labour. The out-of-work and the half-employed naturally came here to be near what work was going. The familiar local phrase expressed the condition of most. They were "in and out of work regular." Our population changed every three years.

Casual labour means low wages, and East London is the home of poverty. We have many families living in

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one or two rooms; few families have a whole house to themselves. Gough Street, Poplar, where I live, is as good a street as is to be found within a radius of a mile. Yet I do not know a family save my own, that has a whole house to itself, and I think I know every family in the street. The houses in Gough Street are not large—two storied houses rented at thirteen shillings a week. But when thirteen shillings represents thirty-three per cent. of a working man's wages, he cannot afford as much for rent.

In Poplar the organized democratic movement is very strong. We have our fierce political controversies. Our efforts to improve the conditions of the very poor, to humanize the workhouse, to care for the child and to protect the rights of labour, have often been described. Our Labour League, born at the Dock Gates where we held our meetings, was one of the pioneers of labour representation in England.

We were strongly anti-war before the war with Germany began. We were so strongly for peace that we were willing to fight any man for it. In the Boer War we were outspokenly pro-Boer. At a time when national feeling ran very high, ours was the only district where not a single anti-war meeting was broken up. We not only held meetings in Poplar itself; we had demonstrations in Trafalgar Square, in the parks and in the streets. Three times at least during these demonstrations the opposition to me was so fierce that it seemed as though I would

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be finished. Some men threatened to drive me out of public life because of my stand for the Boers. Others, like a man with a club, backed up a dense crowd, who faced me one afternoon after a demonstration on Parliament Hill Fields, and threatened to brain me, were ready to adopt a shorter way.

We stood for peace, for liberty and for friendship among nations. On one occasion, on a public visit to Germany, I proposed the health of the Kaiser. We were not in any sense military. We laughed at the Algies and Berties of Piccadilly. We opposed in every way we could any men who sought to promote war or to do anything likely to provoke war.

To-day Poplar, for many years the centre of anti-war propaganda, is actively supporting the Government in its conduct of the war against Germany. The men who stood by me in the peace demonstrations in Hyde Park and Trafalgar Square in the days of the Boer War, have sent their sons to fight for England. The younger men among them are in khaki themselves. Our lads have volunteered by the thousand, and many of them have died in the trenches. Our women cheer the lads as they leave, and welcome them as they return.

I myself, the man of peace, have undertaken big recruiting campaigns. I have visited, lived among and encouraged the men in the trenches. I have taken the message of the men making the guns to the men using the guns, and coming back I have taken the message from

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the men in the trenches to those in the workshops. On one occasion I held 36 big recruiting meetings, on the Tyne, the Tees and the Clyde in 28 days. I have done everything that I could to help the nation in the war.

When war was first threatened against us, I visited Woolwich, which I represent in Parliament. I said then : " My position is that in the hour of danger I am with the Government. I cannot help myself. We have fought for peace until the last moment, but if war has to come, you and I have got to shoulder our burden. We have got to see the old country through, to stand shoulder to shoulder and present a united front to the enemy."

Why did we working men of East London, the men who fought for peace in 1900, act and speak in this way in 1914? The reason is simple. In the days of the Boer War we were pro-Boer because we thought that the liberty of the Boer was in danger. To-day, we stand by our country because we know that the liberty of our people is threatened. Our family is in trouble. Our family is standing together. And who, in the name of God, is going to say that we are not a family and fighting as a family ! This war was forced on us. Such a wicked war was never before waged.

Our homes are in danger, our wives and families are threatened. We understand this. The brutal murders of innocent folk in Belgium show us what Germany would do. It is not a question of prosperity, of conquest, of trade. We are fighting for liberty and for our homes.

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I have said many times that rather than give in to the barbarian who could do brutal murders such as the Kaiser has sanctioned, I would see my own family wiped out and every member of the British Empire perish.

When we understood this, we came together. We have had our family quarrels, very hot family quarrels sometimes, but at the bottom we all had a common interest in the welfare of our neighbourhoods and the safety of our nation. I had laughed sometimes at the Algies and Berties of Piccadilly. But when I found these Algies and Berties, possessing all that could yield ease, luxury and idleness, throwing everything up to fight for their country, and dying by the side of our lads in Poplar in the trenches, I loved and respected them for it.

We found that we were all in it. To-day it is as true as it was at the beginning. This is not a Government war; it is a people's war. We are all in it, the man at the village pump and in the fields, the blacksmith, the carpenter and joiner, the shipwright and the man of leisure. We are standing together because we are fighting for liberty and for the purity of our homes.

The men are so fine. They volunteered in their thousands, long before conscription was talked of. And they are taking what comes to them without a whimper. They left home, wife and children not only without a grumble but with a smile. Down each of our Poplar streets we have tales to tell of Dick who earned his sergeant's stripes, left for France and was killed in three

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weeks; of Jack, blown up in a naval fight; of Tom wounded, healed, and back again.

The example of these lads has had a wonderful effect on people left behind. I know men who were drunkards and loafers. Their dear ones have gone to the war, and I have seen the men at home pull up. They have cut drinking. They come home early at nights. They settle down to their work. And when the news comes that their lad was killed on the Somme, the Ancre or at Ypres, they take it quietly. It is as though they said, "I must try to be worthy of my soldier sons."

I was not surprised that the people of Woolwich were united for the war, for Woolwich lives mainly by the manufacture of war material. But in Poplar it was different. Here the coming of war seemed likely to bring to our already poor people nothing but greater poverty, dearer food, less employment. This is what actually happened at the beginning, although later on there was abundant employment in war work. But when things looked blackest, we took our stand. We have a small peace party. Its strength may be judged from the fact that when it holds its meetings at the East India Dock Gates, our great public forum, its usual audience is between five and fifteen people. If I stand up to advocate the war, several hundred people will gather in a few minutes. They do not stay merely to listen to Bill Crooks. They have known me for many years, for I have spoken there for thirty years. But

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they come in greater numbers than in the old days. They come because I tell them about the war.

I was walking down Commercial Road with a young fellow in khaki fresh back from the front, when he saw an old chum come up. "Why, Bert," he said, "Not in khaki? You've not joined up?" "Naw!" Bert replied. "I ain't such a fool." And he went on to argue against the war.

The soldier had to go on. I remained and turned to the young fellow. I purposely pitched my voice loud to attract the attention of passers-by.

"I noticed," said I, "that before you answered your friend, you took a cigarette out of your mouth. Do you understand that it is the likes of him, doing what he is doing, that enables the likes of you to be where you are in safety. You are not willing to do your bit to stop the Kaiser from murdering women and children." By this time a number of women, probably about fifty, were standing around listening. "Let me tell you about a scene at a Belgian railway station a little time ago. A train was loaded up with 800 young women, married and single. They had been dragged from their homes by the German soldiers. Tears were on their faces and their hands were outstretched as they cried, beseeching a neutral friend, 'Where are we going? For God's sake, tell us where we are going!' They were being dragged from their homes to Germany. And you, my lad, are not such a fool, you say, as to help to

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save your women and children from a fate like this."

There was no need for me to say any more. I heard the women calling, "Leave him to us, Mr. Crooks, leave him to us." I left. That is how our women feel about it. They encourage their sons and husbands to go. They want this wicked and dreadful war to cease, but they do not want it to cease until the power of the Kaiser to repeat such evil has been broken.

This is what has moved our people, the danger to the home and family. I have asked gatherings of men time after time what they would do if they came back from work in the evening and found no home. If they found a mass of ruins over the dead bodies of their wives and children. I have asked them if they would sooner fight among such scenes, shooting and dodging round the street corners, or do their fighting now. And the appeal has never failed.

It is our home that stands first with all of us. You know the familiar scene, the little home, the wife, the child. The father hurries back from work to play with the baby. He does not even stop to wash. The wife tells him not to disturb it. "It's mine, as well as yours, old girl," he says. He worships it. He worships her. The baby sickens. They hang over its cot, hour after hour, with anguish at their hearts. It dies. Heartbroken the man leans down, resting his head in his hand. "My God!" he cries. "What have I done to deserve this? I would have given anything, I would have done anything.

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could my boy have lived.”

As that father feels over his dead babe, we feel over our homes and over the cause of liberty we are defending. We will give anything, do anything to save it.

“But,” say some folk, “you are giving up liberty. You are Prussianizing yourselves. You are adopting all kinds of regulations in England. The people cannot do this, they cannot do that. You must stay at work; you must go as a soldier if you are called; you can no longer do as you like.”

Yes, but why? We have temporarily made a sacrifice of our individual freedom in order to secure it permanently. We are paying a price, but we are paying it of our own free will. You cannot get anything except at a price. You cannot have any spiritual gain without material sacrifice. When a big bit of work has to be done, you call in the expert and place yourself under his direction. We are engaged on the biggest task any nation ever undertook. We have called in the experts, the best experts we can find. We are letting them tell us what to do and how to go to work.

But if anyone supposes that the British people, who for hundreds of years have been pioneers in the fight for liberty, are going to allow themselves to be permanently deprived of freedom because of this, he is wrong. Our people have shown in the past that they know how to safeguard their rights. To-day they are willingly sacrificing much of the old freedom. But when the needs of

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When the war goes by, the temporary conditions will cease.

The great thing that concerns us now is the war. This is a fight to the finish, and the Kaiser has got to be finished. This war is everybody's business, workman and aristocrat alike. Everybody must help, and every class is helping. We are going to see this thing through. And we are willing to sacrifice everything.

We remember our brave lads. When visiting the front, I have seen men wounded. I have asked myself what are we that we should be worthy of the sacrifice these men are making. They are giving their limbs for us. They are giving their lives for us! They are giving their all!

I recall the words of the King when, as Prince of Wales, he attended a great gathering at the Guildhall after his journey round the Dominions. "Wherever we went the peoples' hearts swelled with pride at their co-partnership in this great Empire." We have no lands, no possessions, and yet we all share its common heritage of freedom. And it is that common heritage which is at stake. Liberty or Kaiserism? I am for liberty!

WWI Pam. - Dec 2022

