THE BOOK OF

THE MARTYRS *of* TOLPUDDLE

1834-1934

THE STORY OF THE DORSETSHIRE LABOURERS WHO WERE CONVICTED AND SENTENCED TO SEVEN YEARS' TRANSPORTATION FOR FORMING A TRADE UNION

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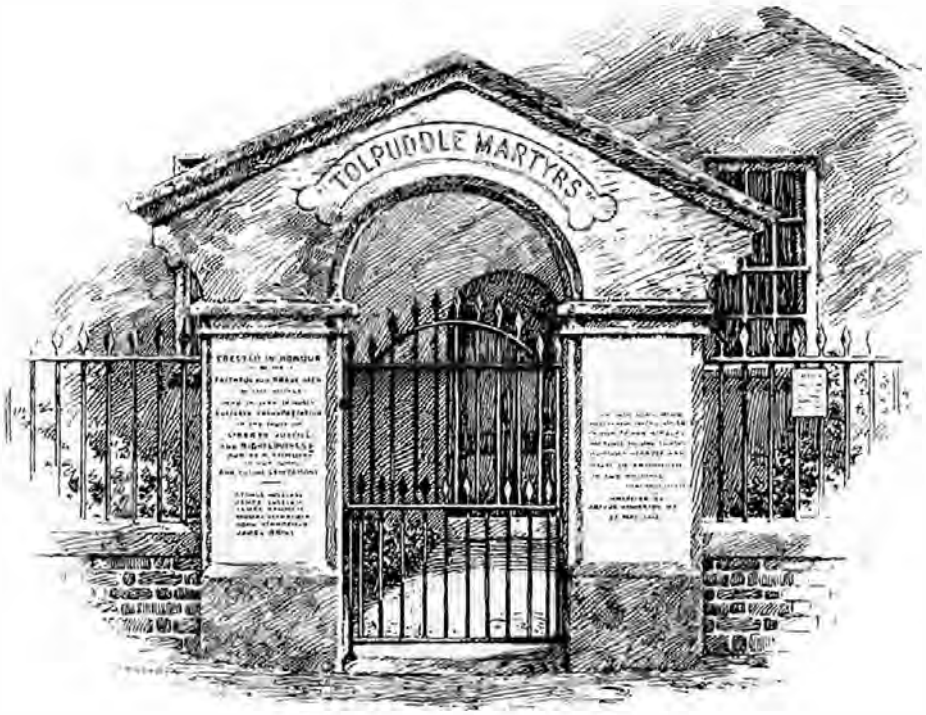
HARVESTING AT TOLPUDDLE

A Shavian Commentary on Martyrs

I am afraid I cannot say anything in praise of the Dorchester martyrs. Martyrs are a nuisance in Labor movements. The business of a Labor man is not to suffer, but to make other people suffer until they make him reasonably comfortable. A Labor agitator who gets into the hands of the police is inexcusable.

There is this, however, to be said for the Dorchester men. They got transported at the expense of their landlords and employers. As they could hardly, if they were reasonable men, have desired to live in Dorset as slaves—for that is what it came to—they were lucky to be pushed out of it. Let us hope they lived happily ever after in a land where Lord Melbourne would probably have been kept in a museum as a curiosity.

G. Bernard Shaw



Foreword

By the Chairman of the Trades Union Congress

FOR the present generation of Trade Unionists, this Memorial Volume is much more than the record of an historically significant event. It is, first and foremost, a tribute to the memory of brave men: but it is also an embodiment of the living spirit of our organised movement, and a testimony from the workers of to-day to the ideals and principles which have inspired our movement for more than 100 years.

Organised Labour has grown in influence and power because these ideals and principles have commanded, at every stage of its progress, the fidelity and devotion of men and women who have been capable of displaying the same courage, fortitude and grim resolution that the Six Men of Dorset displayed. These Six Men were tested, as few Trade Unionists have been tested, in the struggle to establish Trade Unionism. Their names stand high on the roll of the men and women who have been victimised, and we honour them because they stood steadfast despite the most savage persecution. They could not be persuaded by the promise of release into a betrayal of their principles, nor coerced by the most vindictive

punishment. They were not the first, nor the last, of those whose heroic stand against oppression made working-class organisation possible, but their memory is cherished because they suffered and endured the worst of hardships and the most dreadful torture as pioneers in the struggle.

These Six Men fought to win the beginnings of freedom, sustained only by their passionate conviction that their sacrifices would not be in vain. The Trade Unionists of to-day have inherited not only the heroic tradition, but the responsibility of guarding the achievements of working-class organisation which the pioneers of Trade Unionism initiated. Recent events have proved that neither the tradition nor the responsibility is disregarded by Trade Unionists of the present generation. Organised Labour is called upon, in our own time, to defend the right to combine. In some countries the institutions of free citizenship have been shattered, and dictatorships have been erected upon the ruins. Rights and liberties which were a few years ago deemed to be unassailably founded on reason, justice, and the reign of law, have been ruthlessly abolished by armed force. The people are only strong when they are united and moved by a common purpose, when they are organised.

What is the answer of Trade Unionism to this challenge to the people's rights and the workers' freedom? It is an appeal to the spirit of the Tolpuddle Martyrs which triumphed over legal persecution and the abuse of power as recorded in these pages. This history proves that the spirit of men who are capable of living and dying in sacrificial service to the cause of freedom is invincible. The statesmen and judges, magistrates and clergy who strove to destroy Trade Unionism in its feeble beginnings 100 years ago failed in their object: their attack was broken by the stubborn will and unshakable courage which animated urban workers and agricultural workers alike. This present attack will fail from the same cause, the determination of working men and women to resist enslavement and to defend the freedom we have won.

On behalf of the Trades Union Congress General Council it is my duty and pleasure to thank all the contributors to this Memorial Volume. Its production has involved a tremendous amount of research. It contains valuable historical material never before concentrated in a single volume, illustrating the social, political and economic conditions out of which Trade Unionism arose. The contributors, whose names are listed elsewhere in this volume, are all of them authorities on the aspects of the story on which they have written, and have given their services freely in homage to the men this book commemorates. I hope every Trade Unionist and supporter of the Labour Movement will acquire the book, and read it, and hand it on to their children.

A. CONLEY

Introduction

By SIDNEY AND BEATRICE WEBB

IT is fitting that the British Trade Union Movement should commemorate the judicial martyrdom of the Dorchester Labourers a hundred years ago. Many other Trade Unionists have suffered, both before and after 1834, at the hands of police and magistrates, juries and judges. There are many other incidents in Trade Union history in which the notorious ambiguities of the England and Scottish law have been used by the Government of the day as the instruments of a policy of repression and deterrence. But the case of the Dorsetshire Labourers stands out in the record, alike in the gentle innocence of the victims, and in the ruthlessness of the determination of the governing class to strike down an organisation which threatened to encroach upon the profits of capitalist industry.

It is worth while considering at what period and in what political circumstances this strange miscarriage of justice occurred. It was not a time of political reaction. On the contrary, it was the hour of triumph of the Whig Party—of the spirit of what is now Liberalism. The Tories had just been overwhelmingly defeated in the two successive tumultuous elections of 1831 and 1832. The House of Commons of the moment had recently been elected upon the enlarged franchise and redistributed constituencies of the "Great Reform Bill" of 1832. The Tory candidates had gone down like ninepins before the enlightened Unitarian, Quaker and Wesleyan millowners, mineowners, bankers and manufacturers of the North and Midlands of England, and the new London Parliamentary Boroughs, reinforced by all that was influential in "Political Economy" and Utilitarianism. "Bill Cobbett" had even been elected for Oldham. The Whig Government enjoying the support of a very large majority in the House of Commons and even holding its own in the House of Lords, was passing one "enlightened" measure after another. The game laws were being reformed—characteristically enough only to the extent of replacing the aristocratic monopoly of shooting hares and pheasants by the capitalist monopoly involved in getting the leave of the landowner and paying substantial annual fees for gun and game licences. The Old Poor Law administered by the Overseers was just being superseded by the New Poor Law, administered by the Boards of Guardians elected by the ratepayers, hardly any of them wage-earners, and with plural votes for the property owners. The new boards were forbidden to continue Outdoor Relief to the able-bodied and their families. The negro slaves in the West Indies and at the Cape of Good Hope were "emancipated," which meant their promotion to being the legally indentured labourers of their former owners. A beginning was even made in the protection from overwork of the little

children in the textile factories. The Lord Chancellor, who was keenly interested in all these reforms, was the liberty-loving Lord Brougham. But the essentially Liberal House of Commons, maintaining in office the most "enlightened" Whig Ministry, was not going to allow the labourers in the rural districts of Southern England (where the combination in every village of squire, parson and farmers amounted to an "irresistible" dictatorship of the capitalist) even to combine to defend themselves against a progressive reduction of their scanty wages.

Why were the Whig Ministry, the liberty-loving Lord Chancellor and the essentially Liberal House of Commons so prejudiced against Trade Unionism in the rural districts of South England? Why did they remain unconcerned at so atrocious a sentence as transportation for an offence—the administering of an oath—which would have been ignored if it had been committed by an Orange Lodge or a combination of English farmers at a market dinner? Incredible as it may seem to-day, the governing classes in 1834 were genuinely afraid of a rural insurrection. Only four years earlier there had been a wild outburst of rebellion among the labourers of South-East England, well-described in *The Village Labourer* by Mr. and Mrs. Hammond, when the hated poorhouses had been assailed and a few people seriously assaulted. This was easily suppressed by the troops of cavalry which quickly restored order, and by a special commission of judges who travelled from town to town imposing savage sentences on the rioters. But the outgoing Tory Home Secretary, on handing over office to the incoming Whig Home Secretary, warned him that the growth of Trade Unionism was the most alarming menace with which his government would have to deal. George Loveless and his fellows were the victims of this absurd panic among the propertied classes.

This has a significance for the Trade Unionists and for all the wage-earners of to-day. As yet, the propertied classes are not alarmed at the spread of Socialist opinions in Great Britain. But as trade revives and Trade Unionism increases its membership, and as the Labour Party recovers from the felon stroke dealt to it at the general election of 1931, the fears of the propertied classes will also be aroused. What will be the blow that they will then strike at the growing power of the common people? The law is still an armoury of weapons to which they may have recourse, just as unscrupulously and as ruthlessly as their ancestors did in 1834. What is called criminal conspiracy is still an offence, punishable at the discretion of the judge, by sentences as atrocious as those imposed on the Dorsetshire Labourers. And criminal conspiracy may easily be held to include an agreement of two or more people, even their common membership of an association for such a purpose, to do anything that the judges—not the juries—may hold to be unlawful; and even to do any quite lawful thing by means, or with intentions, which the judges—not the juries—might hold to be unlawful. Nothing but a strong party in the House of Commons, specifically charged with the defence of the wage-earners, will then save them from a repetition of the repression of 1834.

The Martyrs of Tolpuddle

by WALTER M. CITRINE

(I) THE ARREST

TRAGEDY came to Tolpuddle, a tiny village in Dorsetshire, at dawn on a cold, grey February morning in 1834. It struck at the lives of six poor farm labourers, pursuing them relentlessly from the doorsteps of their humble cottages to Dorchester Gaol, the convict hulks, and the penal settlements of Australasia.

Tragedy at dawn

The daylight, just struggling through the receding night, disclosed a man, in the middle thirties, gently closing the door of his little cottage so as not to awaken the still-sleeping children. This done, he strode out vigorously to his work down the village street, quite unconscious of the cruel fate which awaited him. It came in the guise of the parish constable, who, on that fateful morning of Monday, February 24, 1834, was required to undertake the distasteful duty of apprehending his friend and neighbour, George Loveless. The constable accosted him, "I have a warrant from the magistrates for your arrest,

Mr. Loveless." "For me?" "Yes, and for others besides you, James Hammett, Thomas Standfield, and his son John, young Brine, and for your brother, James." "What is the warrant for?" asked Loveless. "What have we done?" "You'd best take it and read it for yourself," was the reply. Loveless read the warrant, which charged him and his companions with having participated in the administration of an illegal oath.

The six men in custody

THE HOME OF C. B. WOLLASTON, J.P. *From an old print*

At the request of the constable, Loveless accompanied him to the cottages of the other men. Then the six of them in the custody of the constable, marched towards the dreadful ordeal which awaited them at the end of the seven miles' journey to Dorchester. There they were taken to the house of Mr. C. B. Wollaston, who was accompanied by his half-brother and fellow Magistrate, James Frampton, the squire of the neighbouring village of Moreton. They were questioned in a very summary fashion. After having been identified as the men who had been present at a Trade Union meeting on December 9, 1833, at Tolpuddle, they were committed to prison. Although they had not been found guilty of any crime, their clothes were stripped off, they were searched, their heads were shorn, and they were locked up like desperate criminals in Dorchester Gaol.

Victims of privilege

What had caused this sudden and drastic proceeding? Why was it that men against whose character there could be not the least reproach, were hustled away from their homes into the cold and cramped prison cells? Were they the victims of some malign destiny, such as Thomas Hardy might have seen to be written in their stars. Or was it

rather that they were the victims of a state of society which caused men who themselves were in the possession of all the privileges that wealth could give, to act with cruel injustice towards the humble labourer?

Reaction takes fright

The Study in Legal Repression which appears in another section of this volume, indicates the overwhelming fear that dominated the ruling authorities of the period. Fear is betrayed in almost every line of that repressive legislation. A haunting dread still lingered that the forces which had been liberated by the French Revolution in 1789, were spreading to Great Britain. Fear that the Corresponding Societies and the Trades Unions were centres of infection. Fear that the justifiable discontent consequent on the dire poverty of the peasantry, which had driven them to revolt only three years previously, heralded the approach of the dreaded revolution.

By courtesy of "Illustrated London News"

INTERIOR OF A DORCHESTER LABOURER'S COTTAGE

Originating in Kent, three years previously, this revolt had spread with lightning rapidity westward through Sussex, Hampshire and Wiltshire. The placid serenity of the Dorsetshire countryside had been disturbed by rick-burning and the smashing of farm machinery. Incendiary fires had lit the midnight sky in Dorset as in other counties. The name of "Captain Swing," the anonymous leader of the peasant revolt, still filled the landowners with apprehension. The transportation from the Southern Counties of 500 agricultural labourers, and the hanging of many others, in the panic and fury excited by the revolt, had been insufficient to cow the labourers. They had not relapsed into their former apparent docility. The Magistrates of Dorsetshire had discerned a disturbing independence in the bearing and demeanour of the labourers.

The awakening of the countryside

All round there seemed to be a new awakening, an unwillingness on the part of the agricultural workers to occupy indefinitely the situation in which "God had placed them." Over the centuries came to them the echo of the rugged rhyme of John Ball:—

When Adam delved and Eve span,
Who was then the Gentleman?

The agitation for the reform of Parliament culminating in the enfranchisement of the middle classes and the advent of a Whig Government under Earl Grey, in 1832, had

disappointed the expectations of the working class. Their support had been sedulously cultivated by the Whig politicians who did not scruple to exploit their grievances to the full; but the achievement of Reform left them where they were. The repeal of the Combination Laws in 1824 had removed the penalties for belonging to a Trade Union, and had greatly increased the organised power of the workers. Unions were in operation in practically every manufacturing centre throughout the land.

The growth of the Unions

By courtesy of "Illustrated London News"

EXTERIOR OF LABOURER'S COTTAGE

The workers on the countryside saw in Trades Unionism a means of alleviating the distress and poverty resulting from their dreadfully low wages. In nearly every county the Poor Law, modified by the Speenhamland system, needed to be used to enable the labourers and their families to live.

The Speenhamland system took its name from the Berkshire village where it was inaugurated in 1795. It permitted agricultural wages to be subsidised from the local rates on a scale which varied in accordance with the current price of bread, and the size of a labourer's family. Wages at the time were so low that the system spread until it became a serious national problem. The allowances acted as a subsidy to the farmer, and reduced some parishes to bankruptcy. The system was eventually abolished by the provisions of the Poor Law of 1834.

Parishes ruined by low wages

Conditions among the farm workers were almost unbelievably wretched. They were housed in hovels not fit to shelter cattle. Typical of the conditions of housing in Dorsetshire is the recorded case of a family of eleven persons who slept in a room 10 feet square, roofed with open thatch, only 7 feet high in the middle, and with a single window 15 inches square. Under the influence of the prevailing economic theories, few new cottages for farm labourers were built, and many existing cottages were pulled down. A Dorsetshire clergyman who gave evidence before a Committee on wages in 1824, said that the labourers lived almost entirely on tea and potatoes. Tea was 6*s*. a pound, sugar 6*d*. per pound, soap 5*d*. per pound, and candles were 6½*d*. per pound of eight. The average poor family would probably spend 1*s*. a week on oatmeal which was, of course, cheaper than flour, 8*d*. per week on tea, 8*d*. per week on sugar, 6*d*. per week on soap, and 3*d*. per week on candles. It is true that rent was small, and in some cases the labourers lived rent free, and had other small advantages. None the less the standard of life was desperately low.

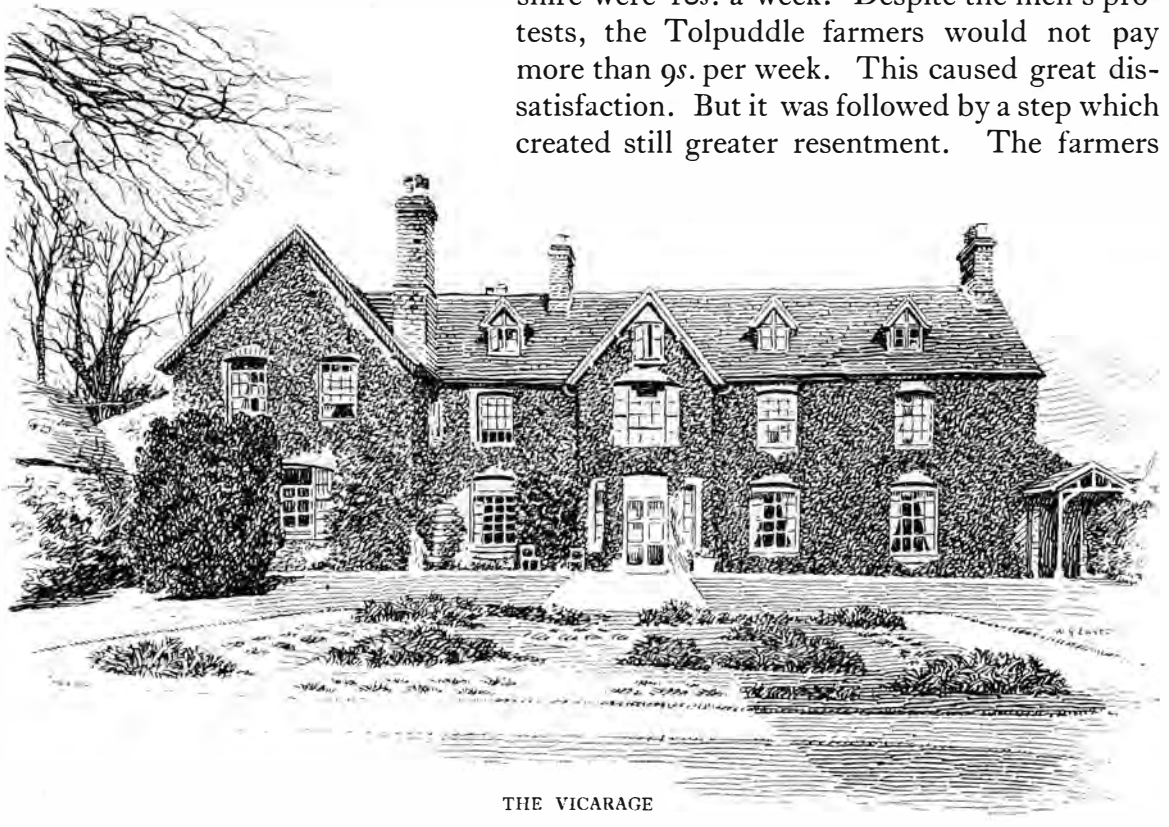
In Hampshire, Berkshire and Wiltshire, before the riots, the wages were 7*s*. to 9*s*.

a week. The average wage of agricultural workers throughout the country was about 10*s*. a week. In 1830-31 there was a general movement for an increase.

A demand for wage increases

The labourers in Tolpuddle were then unorganised, but under the leadership of George Loveless they met together and determined to approach the farmers to ask them to pay the same wages as were paid in other districts, where wages were higher. The services of the Vicar, Dr. Warren, were requested and a mutual arrangement was come to whereby the farmers promised to pay the Tolpuddle men the wages which the employers elsewhere were then paying. The discussions were very brief. There was no heat engendered or temper shown, and the men behaved with the utmost circumspection. This promise was not redeemed. The wages paid in other parts of Dorsetshire were 10*s*. a week. Despite the men's protests, the Tolpuddle farmers would not pay more than 9*s*. per week. This caused great dissatisfaction. But it was followed by a step which created still greater resentment. The farmers

Farmers' promise broken



THE VICARAGE

THE MARTYRS' TREE, TOLPUDDLE

not only dishonoured their obligation, but they actually reduced wages from 9*s*. to 8*s*. per week. The labourers were under the impression that the magistrates still retained the power, which they had exercised for centuries, of acting as arbitrators between the farmers and the labourers, and fixing the rates of wages which must be paid. Accordingly, headed by George Loveless, they went to a neighbouring magistrate, W. M. Pitt, Esq., of Kingston House. Following upon this, a meeting was convened in the County Hall, Dorchester, at which representatives of the men and the farmers were requested to appear.

Further w cuts

The Chairman of the Bench was James Frampton, a wealthy landowner of Moreton. He stated that the magistrates had no power to fix wages and that the labourers must work for whatever wages the employers cared to pay. There was no law which could compel the farmers to pay any fixed sum. Loveless indignantly protested that an agreement had been made between them and that the farmers had broken this agreement. He asserted with confidence that the Vicar, Dr. Warren, would confirm this because he had said of his own accord, "I am a witness between you men and your masters that if you will go quietly to your work, you shall receive for your labour as much as any man in the district, and if your masters should attempt to run from their word, I will undertake to see you righted, so help me God."

It was with a shock that the men subsequently learned that Dr. Warren completely denied having made such a promise. The way was now clear for the farmers to do what they wanted. They had been told by the magistrates they could not be compelled to pay more than they wished. Determined to give the men a salutary lesson, they now reduced wages to 7*s*. with the threat that there would be a further reduction to 6*s*. very shortly. It was then that the labourers began to combine. In the early hours of the morning and in the evenings, beneath the trees on the village green, they gathered in earnest consultation. George Loveless, foremost in everything concerned with the life of this tiny community, was looked upon as their leader. He was a local preacher in the Wesleyan Methodist Church, and Sunday by Sunday, either at Tolpuddle or in the neighbouring villages, his eloquence and sincerity had commanded the admiration of all.

George Loveless take the lead

By stern self-denial he had scraped together enough money to acquire a small collection of books, and had equipped himself with an education that distinguished him among his fellows. Respected by all who knew him, he was a man of great natural ability and strength of character. It was to him that his fellow labourers, driven almost to

despair, looked for advice and guidance. He did not fail them. He had read about the Trade Unions in London and in the North of England. He had heard how they had been able to obtain improvements in the conditions of labour for the tailors, the cordwainers, the flax dressers, the woolcombers, the stonemasons and a host of others. He had read of Robert Owen, who, fired with his prophetic vision of the Co-operative Commonwealth, was redoubling his efforts to form one mighty union of all the working class. He knew of the agitation which resulted some months later in the formation of the Grand National Consolidated Trades Union, whose membership rapidly rose to nearly half a million.

A Trade Union formed

"Why should not we form a Trade Union"? he urged. "We know it is vain to seek redress from employers, magistrates or parsons." His proposals were received with acclamation, and, in October, 1833, with the help of two delegates from London, the "Friendly Society of Agricultural Labourers" at Tolpuddle was established. Rules and an initiation ceremony, common to the Trade Unions of the period, were adopted and regular meetings were held, usually in the upper room of Thomas Standfield's cottage. Trades Unionism had come to Tolpuddle.

STANDFIELD'S COTTAGE AT TOLPUDDLE