

# OLD TRICKS BY OLD TORIES

*The man who waited for a "decent interval." Bruce Minton puts the spotlight on the band of legislators who refuse to understand the demands of this war. The danger of appeasing the appeasers.*

Washington.

**B**ACK in November, Sen. Millard Tydings of Maryland was making a great deal of noise condemning labor. At the time *NEW MASSES* remarked that the senator's excitement "in less polite language, is called 'blackmail.'" From Washington, I wrote, "So long as the labor movement was not dealt with sternly, he [Senator Tydings] could not see his way clear to favoring any further action by this country against the Hitler menace." And further, Tydings and those like him in the House and Senate, "are alarmed by the prospect of a just war against German fascism."

Since then America's complete entry into the just war has not been sufficient to persuade the reactionary bloc in Congress, with Tydings still in the forefront, to change its ways. After what is evidently considered a "decent" interval since Pearl Harbor, the same handful of disgruntled men are doing their best to impede the war effort. Of course, they wrap themselves snugly in the flag before they speak, and they try never, never to reveal their true motives. But this group hungrily attacked Mrs. Roosevelt because of Melvyn Douglas and Mayris Chaney, with the real objective of destroying the Office of Civilian Defense. Senator Tydings has popped back into the limelight with the statement that James M. Landis, new head of OCD, is totally "unfit"; Tydings has done his best to undermine morale by groaning in anticipation over the postwar tax burden; and the senator has denounced "defense strikes" and labor, though no such strikes have occurred, and though he is well aware that labor has waived its right to strike during the war period. Worst of all Tydings and those like him hold up the President's bill for unemployment compensation to those made jobless because of priorities and conversion.

In the face of this attack the overwhelming majority pledged to the most vigorous prosecution of the war against the Axis cannot afford to remain quiet. President Roosevelt has given strong leadership by pressing for his bill for unemployment compensation, by defending the Farm Security Administration's policy of making loans to southern citizens, and by his angry blast against Washington's "Cliveden set," responsible for defeatist rumors and stories helpful to the enemy (see *NEW MASSES*, February 24). Unfortunately certain administration leaders fail to stand up under the pressure from the extreme right; some heads of departments try to "appease" the disrupters in Congress—and therefore indirectly give aid to those who seek to obstruct the war effort. It is easy enough to perceive the ends pursued by the appeasers and the ultra-reactionaries; it is not so easy to comprehend the thinking of those with liberal backgrounds who play into the hands of their enemies.

AS CHIEF of the Office of Price Administration Leon Henderson's timidity has certainly not endeared him to the group which slandered him during the debate over the price control bill. But the price administrator's almost willing retreat in anticipation of criticism undoubtedly gives comfort to his enemies. For Henderson to all appearances does not grasp the fact that his backtracking only encourages reaction to new assaults against OPA—and therefore against the administration.

Henderson's job is simply to regulate prices and to control the distribution of supplies through rationing. At best, Hender-

son has failed to keep price levels within reasonable bounds. He has followed a consistent—and discouraging—pattern: the industrialist or manufacturer announces a huge price increase; Henderson issues an aggressive demand that such increases be postponed until his office investigates all circumstances; the investigation is held with undue lack of publicity, almost behind locked doors; and within a month, Henderson issues a polite statement praising the company in question for complying with the OPA delaying order, and granting the full price increase.

These increases have been permitted not only in a few instances, but in almost every case brought before the OPA. Potash, zinc, lead, copper, lumber, plastics, are only examples.

The need of reasonable ceilings on prices is pressing. Ceilings are intended to prevent war profiteering, and to maintain living costs within reach of the average consumer. Yet the cost of consumer products skyrockets almost by the hour, and Henderson's office makes no attempt—because the OPA shrinks from reactionary criticism—to prevent swollen profits.

Instead of doing the job for which it was established, the OPA is now inclined to take the position that higher wages will cause "inflation." Not so long ago, both Henderson and Isadore Lubin, US Commissioner of Labor Statistics, disproved this fantastic charge. In fact, by opposing reactionary attempts to include a wage-freezing provision in the price control bill, the administration successfully made the point that increases in wages "have not been responsible for most of the price increases that have occurred; prices advanced most for commodities least affected by labor costs." Moreover, productivity of workers has increased so much that "the increases in earnings [of workers] have been offset almost by the increased amount of goods a man turns out in one hour."

But having formerly established a position, Henderson now blandly reverses himself. Instead of attempting to correct the disproportion between wage earnings and consumer prices, Henderson spends his efforts on memoranda to the President arguing against any rise in wage rates.

More, Henderson is now quietly sending a committee to investigate conditions in Canada, to learn the workings of Canada's wage-fixing laws. Once again, this contradicts Henderson's former fight against all attempts to freeze wages. It is a serious error to look for precedents in the Canadian government whose labor policies are notorious, instead of being guided by British practice, for example, where labor participates in the war government, and where wage freezing has been rejected.

The present tendencies of OPA only succeed in doing a disservice to the administration. For Henderson's retreat tends to lower the living standards necessary for maximum production, weakens the nation's morale, retards the emergence of the political conditions essential for victory. Henderson is a man of great energy and considerable abilities. It is to be hoped that he will utilize them more constructively and cease playing into the hands of those who are only too eager to create disunity.

BRUCE MINTON.

**Have you organized a Free Earl Browder meeting in your community?**

# SHELTER

*She took the boy into her home to keep him out of the Gestapo's clutches. But her husband. . . . A short story about Paris under the swastika by Anna Seghers.*

IT WAS a morning in September 1940. On Place de la Concorde in Paris the largest swastika flag in any of the German-occupied countries flapped in the wind. The lines on the sidewalks before the shops extended as far as the eye could see. A woman named Louise Meunier, a machinist's wife and mother of three children, had just learned that there were eggs for sale in a store in the Fourteenth District. She quickly got ready, stayed in line an hour, and received five eggs, one for each member of her family. Then she suddenly realized that a school chum, Annette Villard, worked as a chambermaid in a hotel on the same street. She visited Annette and found that usually calm and orderly person in a strangely excited state.

Annette was washing windows and wash basins. Louise lent a helping hand and listened as her friend told how yesterday at noon the Gestapo had arrested a guest who had registered at the hotel as an Alsatian but who, it later turned out, had escaped from a German concentration camp several years before. The guest (Annette continued to scour the window pane as she talked) had been taken to Sante Prison. From there he would be shipped to Germany and probably put up against a wall and shot. But after all, war was war, wasn't it? Something else concerned her much more deeply: the guest's son. The German had a child, a twelve-year-old boy who shared the room with him. The lad attended school and spoke French like a native. His mother was dead. There was something mysterious in the family relationship, as was often the case with foreigners.

The child, returning from school, learned of his father's arrest. He remained mute, without a tear. But when the Gestapo agent ordered him to pack his things and get ready to leave the next day for Germany where he would rejoin his relatives, he cried out passionately in a loud voice that he would throw himself under a passing truck rather than go back to that family. The Gestapo agent retorted curtly that it was not a question of going back or not going back—either he went back to his relatives or into a reform school.

The boy trusted Annette. That night he had sought her help. Early in the morning she had taken him to a small cafe, the proprietor of which was her friend. Now he was sitting there and waiting. She had thought that it would be easy to find shelter for the boy. But so far she had received only "no" for an answer. People were too frightened. The wife of the cafe owner feared the Germans and was annoyed at the youngster's presence.

Louise listened in silence to Annette's story. When it was finished, she said: "I'd like to see a boy like that." Annette named the cafe

and added: "Perhaps you wouldn't be afraid to bring the kid some clean clothing?"

Louise presented herself to the cafe proprietor with a note from Annette. He led her into a billiard room which he kept locked during morning hours. The boy was sitting there, looking into the court yard. He was the same size as her eldest son, dressed in the same way. He had grey eyes. There was nothing in his manner which stamped him as the son of a foreigner. Mrs. Meunier explained that she was bringing him clean clothes. He did not thank her, but suddenly looked sharply into her eyes. Louise had always been a mother like every other mother: she had taken for granted that she had to stand in line, that she had to make a little go a long way, that she had to do factory home work in addition to her regular housework. Now, under the boy's gaze, her capacity for work multiplied. With it rose the measure of her strength. She said: "To-night at seven, be at the Cafe Biard near the Municipal Market."

She returned home quickly. To prepare anything like a presentable meal required a long time in the kitchen. Her husband was already at home. For a year he had lain in the Maginot Line. Three weeks ago he had been demobilized, a week ago he had resumed his trade. He worked half days and spent most of his free time in bars. Then he would return home furious with himself for having left most of the few pennies he had at the bar.

Today, his wife, too excited to observe his face, began to tell him the story as she beat some eggs. When she reached the point at which the refugee boy had run away from the hotel in order to escape from the Germans, he interrupted her irately: "Your friend Annette was stupid to get mixed up in such nonsense. If I had been she, I would have locked the boy up. Let the German deal with his countrymen himself. . . . Anyhow, he probably never did take care of his child. And the officer's right, too, in sending the kid home. Hitler has occupied the whole world. What good are phrases against that?"

His wife was clever enough to change the subject quickly. For the first time she saw clearly in her heart what had become of her husband. Formerly he had participated in every strike, in every demonstration; on July 14 he had always marched as if all alone he were ready to storm the Bastille again. But like so many others, he reminded her of that giant in the fairytale, who always went over to the one who seemed stronger and proved stronger than his former master; so that finally he ended with the devil. But Mrs. Meunier had neither time nor inclination for mourning. After all, he was her husband and

she was his wife; and after all, the refugee youth was waiting for her.

That evening she ran over to the cafe near the Municipal Market and told the boy: "I can't take you to my house before tomorrow."

Again the twelve-year-old looked sharply at her and answered: "You don't have to take me if you're afraid." The woman replied dryly that it was only a question of waiting a day more. She asked the proprietor's wife to keep the child overnight, explaining that he was related to her. There was nothing unusual in this request, for all Paris was swarming with refugees.

The next day she informed her husband: "I met my cousin Alice. Her husband is in Pithiviers, in the prison hospital. She wants to visit him for a couple of days. So she asked me to take her child in." Her husband, who could not stand strangers in his own house, retorted: "Just see that it doesn't become a permanent thing!"

Mrs. Meunier prepared a mattress for the child. On the way home she asked him: "Why don't you want to go back?" He answered: "You can still leave me here if you're afraid. But I'll never go back to my relatives. My mother and father were both arrested by Hitler. They wrote and printed and distributed leaflets. My mother died. Do you see where I have a front tooth missing. They knocked it out in school there, because I wouldn't sing their song. My relatives were Nazis too. They used to torture me. They cursed my father and mother." The woman asked him only to keep silent before her husband, her children, and the neighbors.

The children neither liked nor disliked the strange boy. He kept himself to one side and did not laugh. But the husband could not stand the youngster—he said that he mistrusted his look. He scolded his wife for giving the boy some of her own rations; he said she had a nerve taking in her cousin's child. His complaints generally developed into lectures: after all, the war was lost, the Germans had occupied France, they had discipline, they understood order.

Once, when the lad upset the milk can, he jumped up and struck him. Later the woman tried to console the boy. He replied: "It doesn't matter—it's better here than there."

"I'd like," Meunier began once, "to have a real piece of Gruyere again, just once, for dessert." That evening he returned quite excited: "Imagine what I saw! A big German truck full of cheeses. They buy whatever they feel like. They print bank notes by the million and hand them out."

Two or three weeks later Mrs. Meunier called on her friend Annette. The latter was not pleased at her visit and told her not to