

A PORTRAIT IN LOSSIEMOUTH

KEES VAN HOEK.

I STOOD at a cross-road in Lossiemouth. Behind me lay the lovely multicoloured fields and hills of Morayshire, a landscape which Cameron's railway posters have made famous the world over. The spacious misty and silver Firth of Moray lined the horizon in front of me. It was so quiet in this little township of Northern Scotland that one could almost hear the faint murmur of its elegantly small and gracious breakers playing their eternal game of time and tide.

But it was not the landscape which held me enthralled. For right before my eyes glared what every beauty purist would call a blot—and a serious blot too. A haphazard array of small and poor cottages, of half derelict fences, an old church with hardly a window pane left unbroken. Hens picked in undaunted optimism amidst shrubs and hedges for the remnants of cabbage and cauliflower. In this street where they had pointed out to me Mr. Ramsay MacDonald's home, his was the only two-storey building in a row of grey cottages, small and unassuming, but irreproachably clean.

A riot of memories flashed as in a film through my mind, when I remembered the glimpses of the great which I had been privileged to have: with Dr. Bruening in the modernistic Chancellery of the Wilhelmstrasse, with Count Apponyi on the towering Burg of the Magyar kings, his sumptuous salon where Cardinal Secretary of State Pacelli granted me an audience in the Vatican Palace, or the refined spaciousness of Charles Evans Hughes's residence in Washington.

These mirages of international splendour, on which at the time I had valued setting foot,—they now seemed only common hunting ground for tourists. I had to travel sixteen hours away from London to behold a vision: just a deserted street, a kind sun setting the worn roofs of its very low houses ablaze and whipping a pageant of colour out of these interminable lines full of washing, the only garlands round the houses of the poor. A woman crouches on the ground, darning socks, one eye a watching her little urchin who with a moist finger-tip repaints the small lettering, "The Hillocks", on the wooden gate of their neighbours.

Their neighbour: the Right Honourable James Ramsay MacDonald, Prime Minister of Great Britain: all his other titles fall

away against the magnificent resonance of that mighty post which he holds under the personal friendship of his Sovereign, the trust of his countrymen and the admiration of the whole civilised world.

More than one statesman has risen from humble birth to the most dazzling heights of eminence. But he is perhaps the only one who has never severed the bonds which tie him to the humblest of the masses which he came to govern. There is no sentry in this street, nor even a constable; his guard is the veneration of the simple village in whose lap he seeks a harassed rest from the burdens of office. The cobblestones are hard and uneven, but a Sir John Simon, an Ambassador Dawes, a General Hertzog have trod them. As from the blue, telephone wires plunge into this backway street, making a beeline to and fro that single house, the only outward sign that a man lives here in whose hands such important part of the world's destiny lies.

The wide portico lies on the side of the house, away from the street. It is turned towards the sun, like all windows of the main rooms. A hundred square yards, ablaze with yellow gorse, are the house's own, but an unhampered view stretches towards the dark expanse of the Black Hill in the distance.

In the light and sunny sitting-room, bookcases form the main decorative theme; many of the books are the pocket editions of a man who had to build his library with economy. On the chimney stands a portrait of R. L. Stevenson; a fine oil painting portrays a rosy youth who did not belie his intelligent looks, for he is now Under Secretary for Dominion Affairs in His Majesty's Government. Framed prints display the vastness of Elgin Cathedral, even in the splendour of its ruins still the Lantern of the North.

A deep melodious voice—the Scottish accent purringly evident—suddenly behind me breaks the silence. “These prints must interest you, for they were made by a Dutch officer who came over with Charles II and remained in the service of William and Mary”. I find myself in the long coveted presence of my host. And in the sudden reaction of the moment I cannot think of any other answer than: “You know Holland, Mr. Prime Minister?”

The question was most illogical, but it breaks the ice, if ever there is ice in the atmosphere of a Scotsman at home. The stern face of Mr. MacDonald relaxes. He answers, knowing that it will startle me: “I once made a walking tour through your beautiful country, and that was long before hiking became a fashion”. From the nearby bookcase he extracts a copy of his *Wanderings and Excursions*. His strong able hand, broad golden wedding-ring on both the small finger and the ring finger of the left, holds the dainty

volume ever so lightly, there is the caress of a booklover for such precious things as books in his touch. Whilst searching its contents, he recounts: "I walked right through Holland, visited your picturesque dead cities..." "But we are thoroughly alive, apart from remnants of gone-by activities", I venture to reproach mildly. "I know, I know", the P. M. intervenes, "I have seen your life throbbing through your fascinating capital"... A moment's silence... "I met Dr. Troelstra there, he was a very fine man..."

Could any recollection throw a better light on Mr. MacDonald's character than this unsolicited tribute to the great leader of Dutch Socialism—incidentally a fine poet—now long deceased, who offered everything life hold in store for him, brilliant gifts, first-rate connections, to champion a cause then still ridiculed? "And I may mention another fine man of Dutch blood who was a friend, General Botha, the great South African. We first met after the Boer War in an obscure London hotel. Ever since then, when in London he came to my house and played with my children."

A courier had arrived with a case which the P. M. unlocked, handing its sealed contents to his secretary to be placed on his desk. And meanwhile I came to reflect on the happy coincidence that in these times, in which the international difficulties so closely affect the national situation, the present occupant of No. 10 Downing Street should be more travelled than all his illustrious predecessors. Has Mr. MacDonald not studied on the spot practically every European country, the Near and Far East, India and South Africa, the West Indies and the States, as well as Egypt or Honolulu?

"I have loved walking from my earliest youth," the P. M. mused, looking out from the window, far away beyond the hills and the seas. "*Wanderlust* is the most precious of all the troublesome appetites of the soul of man. What better service can it render? It saves the soul from being lost." A pleasant sporty laugh: "Gladstone once wrote from Balmoral that he had found a 24 miles walk too much at 53. But I can still easily do a 30 miles beat."

I watch him closely as he reclines. He easily looks the *mens sana in corpore sano*. His strong face, a bit drawn perhaps, is squarely set on sturdy shoulders. A grey-yellowish chequered sport jacket with knickerbocker trousers, light blue woollen stockings and remarkably small brown shoes, the squire's outfit brings him out to greater advantage than a dressy morning coat. For in this easy colourful dress, cheeks tanned and dark eyes under a mass of abundant silver silky hair, he is every inch a handsome and decorative looking man.

"You believe in the *diplomatie-de-presence*", I had asked. "With all my heart", came the quick reply. "Certain criticisms of which you are no doubt aware do not concern me in the slightest. If I had not gone out to foreign capitals, they would as wholeheartedly have attacked for me staying at home. I have always believed in the policy of direct contact. You remark that I have inaugurated it? That may be so, but other statesmen have not been slow to follow: Bruening, Briand, Chamberlain, Dollfuss. Of course the usual diplomatic channels have every reason for existence, but that is more for routine work." He speaks slowly, accentuating his words: "In many an emergency the cause would have been lost but for a personal eye-to-eye talk to smooth things over."

Here the telephone interrupted. The Foreign Office calling. There is another call on its way, so the omnipresent secretary warns me the moment that the P. M. redescends the stairs. Once London suddenly so much in evidence, I try to take advantage of the interruptions by talking politics for a little while. I had mentioned the Four Power Pact, than just initialled at Rome.

"The great Powers must either keep together or separate. Does not separation hold the danger of war? There is no question of squeezing out the small nations. The very last thing Great Britain wishes is to see the influence of the small nations, one of the few silver linings in the cloudy post-war situation, diminish. There is only one fear for that, when certain small nations, taking the name of liberty in vain, try to maintain the conditions of war". Is it not silly to talk of the possibility of war in the present state of universal bankruptcy in which the world finds itself? I had asked.

"War is not waged for money only, and history warns us how the most worthless elements of a country can ride the whirlwind in a war panic. Besides, another war may be very short but very fierce. All wars settle leaving crushing debts and ruined ideals, and generally with a peace which is but a hidden truce for the sowing of new war seeds. Against that the small nations can pull their weight, they can now force the great Powers to listen to their reasoning. I trust in their help for the World Economic and Monetary Conference. Will it succeed? It must. This time it will not be a question of voting, but of arguments. You ask me for a slogan? I hate slogans. But my fixed idea is that only by international understanding can we reach national prosperity. There is in certain quarters a gloomy pessimism. It can be understood, for the distress of the world is so great. But that is the very reason why we are all determined to succeed. The country which defies

the cry for solidarity and collaboration would have to bear too great a responsibility. They are trying to segregate the aggressor at Geneva; economic aggression will stand equally condemned before the forum of the world gathered together in London."

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In wishing me *au revoir*, the P. M. had jovially added: "I hope you like this little place". There was going to be no doubt about the liking as far as I was concerned.

I had walked down the street after leaving "The Hillocks" to where the single-track railway runs between its small stone entrenchments, right through the market square. For who cared in those days about the interests of these fisherfolks? Only in the last decade the township, now boasting as many as 4,000 souls, has acquired a residential quarter, hotels and a "posh" golf club.

It is only a stone's throw from his present residence to a little cottage in a tucked away corner of the market square. I stood in the small room where, odd 66 years ago, the President of the World Conference was born, so near the railway that the bumping of the coaches over the sleepers could almost have rocked his cradle. The present tenant, trying to restrain a puppy from chewing my laces, did not mind at all my breaking into the privacy of her house. For it seems nothing unusual. "Often people come to look around; many an American makes the journey from some Highland resort only for this purpose". I do not wonder. There is as much magic in the lesson which Lossiemouth teaches as in George Washington's.

I meet a colleague here, who came from a neighbouring house. She is almost eighty now, she has put on her best black satin dress, and carefully combed her hair with water. She was the first to interview Mr. James Ramsay MacDonald, a young lassie then holding the few hours old baby in her arms. "He was a bit plump", she confesses, "with rosy cheeks and glossy black curly hair". That has impressed her most of all. For it denotes that Celtic strain in many of the Highlanders. There is no squalidness round this old quarter of Lossiemouth. In fact there is a Treasure Island right in front of the ancient maternal house: the market, the railway, a canal, a bridge, the sea on one side: a huge sandstony rock on the other, with churches and houses which must have seemed like so many bastions to youthful eyes.

From here Jimmie went to School at Drainie, "to be licked into shape by Bain's Grammar, the tawse and the much respected dominie", as the P. M. himself told me. It was a two-mile walk every day, often through snow and ice. When Mr. MacDonald pays

tribute to the old dominie, it is no mere lip service. For one can hear from the villagers how years later, when the old man was slowly dying, young Ramsay on leave from London used to come and sit for hours at his bedside, reading out aloud to the old Tory. But one of his schoolmates, whom I met in his low-ceilinged draper's shop opposite the harbour, one of these places where time stands still and where you hear the clatter of your own words slowly rolling away beyond space, said: "Achas, the dominie was one of the laziest characters you could think of. It was Jimmie himself who could work hard and did work hard. He became a pupil-teacher at the school. His mother believed in him, and so made him, more than anybody else. She was a fine body, tidy and thorough. Only on Saturdays or holidays was Jimmie allowed to help in the fields, lifting potatoes; on other days the home work meant everything". A reddish countenance with a goaty beard is thrust underneath my face. "Do you see this mark?" and indeed one can distinguish a scar between the grey stubbles. "That's from a stone which Jimmie threw at me, because I had called him names. And he was not a coward either, for he did it almost right in front of this house". You were not sore? "Achas", again that throaty sound, his Scottish chuckle, "I always saw him off and on. I attended both his complimentary dinners here, his first as M. P. and the other when those letters got reversed".

There is a fascination in talking to these villagers. The cut of their clothes is not Saville Row, neither do they go in for manicure or face massage. But there is nothing cheap about the cut of their hearts, and nothing rusty with the glance of their kind and clear eyes. I met an old woman where Jimmie and his pal used to spend the evenings after the homework was done. She used to unwind old stockings, worn beyond any hope of repair, and the boys had to wind the wool into balls of which presently a quilt was going to be made. I do not know how many old stockings make a quilt, it is a problem which only a thrifty Scotchwoman can solve. Afterwards the boys used to pin haddock and whiting on a pike, smoking it in the chimney. Years later the Prime Minister, bringing the late Lady Cynthia Mosley to this humble home, made straight for the fire-place and piercing through the chimneyhole he questioned his old chum's mother teasingly: "Where is all the luckners?"

But though these villagers search a man for his innermost values, they have nevertheless a Scotsman's eye for the clear realities of life. When young MacDonald, 18 years old, had made up his mind to make his fortune in far away London, now and then friends drifting south met him. He was hard up at that time, addressing

envelopes at 12/6 a week. His best friend told me: "He lived in a little bedroom near Gray's Inn Road; he never took me there, we went instead to a small vegetarian restaurant. But however poor, he always took every care to look a well groomed young man, his trousers pressed, his coat brushed if perhaps shiny, his collar clean even if worn inside out."

It seems that his earliest political affiliation was with the Radicals. As a sort of Liberal agent, he once made Lossiemouth unsafe for Mr. (later Lord) Finlay, putting a spoke in his wheel of which his friends still tell with sparkling glee. Keir Hardie, whom he first met at a Home Rule for Scotland meeting, set his heart aglow for the Labour ideals. But his doctrine never was a strict economic formula, to be expressed in algebraic signs of x and y ; it was almost founded on the poetry of Burns, instead of on the dry dogmas of Marx.

"He will be Prime Minister yet", his mother use to assure her confidants. When still no more than an ordinary schoolboy, he organized among the loons of the village the Lossiemouth Union Jack Field Club. I have had the minute-book in my hand. A retired teacher saved it from his sister, who thought it was such a waste of nice clean paper. . . One day it may rest in the British Museum, for its implications as a national relic makes this Lossiemouth saga nothing less great than the MSS of the Forsytes. It is a small notebook in which, just over half a century ago, in March 1883, the minutes were started. The rules were drafted by the chairman, and it said under the heading VII "That the chairman's authority be recognized". But an amendment of one of the members, "that the members can alter the rules according to their wishes", was decidedly crossed out. No Bolshevism under MacDonald's chairmanship, then no less than now!

It is a curious coincidence that this young man—later the head of a world conference gathered together in a Geological Museum—should then start his first presidency by lecturing the members, as the minute-book naively puts it, "on the principal features of this country before the days of Adam and Eve". I have skimmed through this boyish book, the embryo of the future man and leader. "Excursion held on Sept. 1st to Loch of Spynie, James MacDonald leader". Soon the budding journalist makes his appearance, for there was a magazine night: "the Editor, Mr. J. McD., opened it with a paper from himself about the magazine and the advantage to be derived from it." His own bent, founded on the burning element of his love of nature, was towards geology, although he

managed to impart an interest in everything that came to hand. None of his friends doubt that his rise in the world of statecraft meant at least the loss of a brilliant scientist.

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During the last days of their Lossiemouth holiday I was privileged to witness the MacDonald household in the kitchen of "The Hillocks". Sir John Lavery, looking almost Pickwickian, engrossed as he was in the filling up of a canvas which made my Dutch heart leap with joy! For no lace-ruffled Dutch master could have put so much colour next to so much loveliness into an interior as this little sturdy man, with the tiny spectacles shading the twinkle of his eye and the gruff voice hiding the easy cordiality of his manners.

There was lovely blue porcelain on the chimney shelf, and around an abundance of the usual hearth utensils in all colours of copper from flaming red to pale gold. On an oak bench Miss Ishbel sat, doing some needlework, leaning against a cushion, riot of colour of the MacDonald tartan. She is not very photogenic, and the press illustrations do not half do her justice. For in typical charm and healthiness of the bonnie Scotch lassie, none can be her superior. Jeanie, the old maid, leaned over talking to her, and at the other side of the hearth the Prime Minister was reading his mail. Some Bibles and religious books stood on a rack in the corner, for they are staunch Free Church supporters and do not easily miss their Sunday service.

I had to be careful in my questions, so as not to involve the sitter's attention so much that he should crane his neck to look at his interrogator. For then Sir John would censure with a stiffer gruff than any Speaker would dare to make against the leader of the House. He had been at his desk from 7 a. m. to 2 p. m. this particular day. "I am a very early riser and a very late bedder, for I love to be at home at eve when the day has closed and the blessing of growing weariness lies like God's boon upon you," he had confessed. But how do you keep fit? "On oat meal and fresh air, and sometimes to flee from familiar faces and surroundings, because one's mind has become like a bit of grass, too much trod on."

One chance remark definitely annoyed Sir John, for it made the P. M. answer it, facing me squarely. — "How long will the National Government last?" I had enquired. "It has still three years to run, and it will run those easily. I have never known a cabinet working together in such a team spirit as the present one. We give and take, but we pull one line. Some people try to make out

that we are divided; of course we have our differences and difficulties. But so had Gladstone, or Campbell-Bannerman. Read in Garvin's vivid biography of Joe Chamberlain on the rivalries of those days. But our team will pull through; the only danger which threatens it is the personal exhaustion of its members under the incomparable burdens of office."

Mr. MacDonald still has to be very careful with his eyes. For every word of reading, at once up go the black horn-rimmed spectacles with which he constantly plays whilst holding them in his fingers and resting his eyes. The conversation goes on. Lady Lavery, as lively as she is beautiful, teases the P. M., and Miss Ishbel, constant companion of her father, illuminates the universal leg-pulling by approving flashes of her pearly white teeth. Turning once more later on to international topics, our host remarked: "There is no question so big that it cannot be solved; but the young generation is misled by impatience and superficiality. There are more machineries for world conciliation than there ever existed before. The new generation has every chance for making full use of them, to the everlasting betterment of conditions." There is no weariness in his reproach, but infinite patience paradoxically mixed with an almost burning apostolate...

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I had to go to Lossiemouth to behold a vision, the vision of democracy's triumph which I beheld in Moray Street. Every hour which I spent here these few days made its outline grow stronger into a reality as edifying as it was moving. "When I was walking back from Kirk with Jimmie last Sunday morning", a schoolmaster said. "When he comes to see me every New Year's morning," a little woman recounted. I had made eyes, but the villagers confirmed me that every New Year's Day Mr. MacDonald "first foots", as it is called here, brings a first visit, to those of his friends and acquaintances who are older than himself. It does not matter that he is the highest Councillor of the Crown, and that they are humble fishing folks of a forgotten little port.

I came to Lossiemouth with the respect which every sensible foreigner has for that statesman of international repute who now holds the post of Prime Minister of Great Britain. In a few days—from what I saw and heard and witnessed around me—that respect has grown into veneration. Of his niche in the history of the world nobody will entertain any doubt. His name is bound to live forth among the greatest of a great succession of Prime Minis-

ters. But whosoever met him in the charming simplicity of his home, whoever was privileged to discover the real Ramsay MacDonald—that side of a public man's life which is least in the public eye, and which often bears the least scrutinizing—his dominating and everlasting impression will be that of a man in all his greatness charmingly simple and in all his sternness intensely lovable.