

19th Century Protest and the Matchgirls Strike (1888): Annie Besant, London's First Wonder Woman

Time traveling to Bloody Sunday and the Matchgirl Strike

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In Dons of Time, Tonio Wolfe travels back in time to Bloody Sunday and the Matchgirls Strike

During the Sedona vortex expedition he had seen her a second time. Of the infinite choices available to him in that moment he had found her in the midst of a crisis. Could it be an accident? What did it really mean? At least it was possible to isolate the moment — November 13, the climax of a series of demonstrations that had been building for months.

The dispossessed of London had begun to protest unemployment. The term was new, just coined. The police response was predictably harsh, often resulting in injuries and arrests. Even the press wasn't safe.

For those in charge the problem was mainly tactical, a question of how to maintain public order. That meant stopping the protests in Trafalgar Square. Demonstrations had become an almost daily occurrence there. It was the most convenient place in the city for an outdoor gathering, and a central refuge for the homeless. Hundreds of men and women slept in its nooks and crannies, joined in daylight by thousands more, the ragged denizens of the city's notorious East End.



Trafalgar was also near Westminster and Buckingham Palace. As a result Lord Salisbury, who often saw threats to public safety where there were none, ordered the chief of the Metropolitan Police to take care of it. Perhaps the Square should be ringed with fences, the security-conscious Lord advised. That way, if trouble came at least the trouble-makers could more easily be rounded up.

Annie Besant was also thinking about tactics. To that end, she had organized a Socialist Defense Association so those in jail could get legal help. Many of the charges were being trumped up. She also assembled a group of well-to-do supporters who would show up night or day in response to a telegram and bail out anyone unjustly arrested.

The boiling point finally came on November 13. The Radical Federation had called for a major march and rally that Sunday in response to three abuses of power. One was the imprisonment of a Member of Parliament, another was the ongoing repression in Ireland. But the primary focus of the day was the notorious Coercion Act, which had suspended civil rights indefinitely. Annie was invited to speak.

Four days before the rally Sir Charles Warren, the Home Secretary, issued an order forbidding meetings in the Square. However, he simultaneously offered private assurances that "legitimate political gatherings" would not be disrupted. On Saturday he changed his mind again and issued a final order banning all processions.

Delegates from the labor and radical clubs, the Fabians, Social Democratic Federation and Socialist League met that Saturday night. There was little time to deliberate, however, so in the end they opted to move ahead. They would gather at various places around the city in hopes of disorienting the authorities by approaching the Square from several directions. What they didn't know was that spies had tipped off the police and the place was surrounded before they arrived. Backing up the coppers were squadrons of "life guards" with bayonets. It looked like what it was — a massacre in the making.

He had seen it go down remotely in the desert. Annie wearing her usual outfit, the neckerchief, short skirt and boots that had captured Tonio's attention, leading a procession from Clerkenwell Green along the city's narrow streets. Thousands more marching from Holborn, Bermondsey and Deptford.

Before the riot was over thousands of citizens were injured, many of them newcomers to protest and police violence. Just south of Trafalgar, a young writer named Alfred Linnell was fatally injured by a horse. The next morning, still dazed and traumatized, dozens of decent people were sentenced to jail in Bow Street Police Court. William Stead quickly launched his own defense fund and raised enough money within days to free everyone on appeal. Annie defiantly led them out of Millbank Prison, bruised and battered but unbowed.

More cynical than most, G. B. Shaw called it "the most abjectly disgraceful defeat ever suffered by a band of heroes outnumbering their foes a thousand to one." Then again, no one considered it a rousing success. Three people had died. And what was gained? Nothing as far as Tonio could tell.

Within days it was known as Bloody Sunday.

The riot became a turning point for Annie. Due to her identification with the march she moved from being well-known to famous and, in some circles, notorious. It also confirmed

what her old friend Charles Bradlaugh feared and deepened the break between them. Not only had she joined forces with the Socialists, she hadn't even consulted him before leading the disastrous march. Fighting for freedom was one thing, but to Bradlaugh this looked like an invitation to slaughter.

Annie agreed in one sense. The situation was dire, possibly deadly, and having faith in the legal system felt increasingly naive. But she had reached the conclusion that more radical action was required. At least Stead and the socialists were prepared to fight back. In private moments, however, she wasn't so certain. Neither socialism nor atheism seemed to offer the real answers the world needed.

London, July 11, 1888

THE HOUSE of Commons was a model of architectural symmetry and political pragmatism. When the chamber was full during parliamentary debates, government supporters took seats to the right of the speaker's chair. Opponents and others sat on the left. Senior members from both camps, the so-called "front benchers," occupied seats closest to the center. Separating the opposing sides was a gangway, known as the Floor, measuring the distance of two swords.

The original reason for the gangway was to prevent duels from breaking out.

Located at the north end of Westminster Palace on the banks of the Thames, the ornate chamber was originally called St. Stephen's Chapel, part of the royal residence until the "lower house" moved in from Westminster Abbey. Over the next few centuries the medieval look faded and finally vanished until the entire palace was remodeled in the early nineteenth. Less than a decade later, an accidental fire destroyed both chambers of parliament and most of the residence.

The next round of renovations took twenty years, this time a controversial mixture of Sir Charles Barry's conservative Gothic style and the neo-classical approach becoming popular in the States. The work wasn't done until 1860, just as young Charles Bradlaugh, then emerging as one of the country's leading freethinkers, launched *The National Reformer*.

Almost thirty years later, in the same chamber, he and two other MPs were waiting as Annie Besant arrived with a delegation of matchstick girls. Most were under sixteen years old.

After years of resisting the oath of office and repeatedly facing jail and disenfranchisement, Bradlaugh had finally succeeded in winning the right to speak and to vote in parliament in 1886. Since then he and Annie had parted ways over Socialism and Bloody Sunday. But they were on the same page about the matchstick strike.



Matchgirl Strikers 1888

Tonio had selected the moment carefully. For months, in secret, he'd assembled his profile and concluded that this was the best opportunity to see Annie at the peak of her political career in London. In June, after attending a talk by Clementina Black at the Fabian Society, she had interviewed some women who worked at the Bryant & May match factory and published a searing account in *The Link*. They called the story "White Slavery in London."

"Born in slums," Annie wrote, "driven to work while still children, undersized because underfed, oppressed because helpless, flung aside as soon as worked out. Who cares if they die or go on to the streets, provided that Bryant & May shareholders get their 23 per cent and Mr. Theodore Bryant can erect statues and buy parks?"

"Girls are used to carry boxes on their heads until the hair is rubbed off and the young heads are bald at fifteen years of age. Country clergymen with shares in Bryant & May's, draw down on your knee your fifteen year old daughter; pass your hand tenderly over the silky clustering curls. Rejoice in the dainty beauty of the thick, shiny tresses."

Using hard facts and compelling imagery she drove home the extreme working conditions and the severe, often deadly effects of the phosphorous used to make matches. Hair loss

was just the start. The skin of many girls turned yellow over time, then green and black as they succumbed to a deadly form of bone cancer known as phossy jaw. The use of phosphorous in manufacturing was banned in the US and Sweden, but Britain's government considered such a restriction a dangerous restraint of trade.

The girls at Bryant & May worked fourteen hours a day for less than five shillings a week. At times they didn't even get that due to a draconian system of fines that covered things like talking or taking a toilet break without permission. The fine for arriving late was half a day's wage.

Shortly after her article appeared Bryant & May management circulated a statement along with a demand that workers sign. The statement basically said that the undersigned were satisfied with their conditions. Several workers refused, organizers were fired, and before the end of June more than a thousand girls were out on strike. The Salvation Army soon joined in the call for better factory conditions.

The Times blamed Annie and other agitators for the labor "unrest."

On July 4 she received an anonymous note. "Dear Lady," it began, "they have been trying to get the poor girls to say that it is all lies that has been printed and trying to make us sign papers that it is all lies; dear Lady nobody knows what it is we have to put up with and we will not sign them. We thank you very much for the kindness you have shown to us. My dear Lady we hope you will not get into any trouble on our behalf as what you have spoken is quite true."

Annie was moved to tears, and soon action.

Two days after the letter arrived, all work at the Bryant & May factory ground to a halt and a delegation of one hundred women approached her for help. A strike fund was quickly established, with Shaw, Beatrice Potter and Sidney Webb distributing the funds collected. Stead and others used their newspaper outlets to increase the pressure and launch a boycott.

But the striking girls also wanted a union and Annie was their first choice to lead it.

BRADLAUGH BROUGHT two allies with him to the meeting. Samuel Montagu, a member representing Whitechapel, was the son of a Liverpool watchmaker who had become a successful banker and philanthropist. He was also an Orthodox Jew and had recently founded a Federation of Synagogues in the East End. The third MP was James Bryce, a liberal jurist and historian who represented the city's Tower Hamlets before moving to South Aberdeen.

Once the girls sat, Annie reviewed the issues involved in the strike, her role and their demands. "After my story appeared I was threatened with libel," she recalled, "but it was easier to strike at the girls. That's why we are here. Although we appreciate Mr. Bradlaugh's support and the questions he is asking, this won't be settled until we can sit down with management."

"Mr. Bryant is a reasonable man," offered Bryce. "What's his response?"

"He don't like publicity," one girl snorted. "But he ain't said a thing."

"What could he do?"

“Improve the air is one thing, sir,” an older girl replied bluntly. “After they added that upper floor to the place, the ventilation didn’t work no more. The fumes is so thick you can barely breathe. That’s the real reason we get sick.”

Annie pointed out that since the girls took meals inside the factory, phosphorous was also being ingested with their food. If someone complained about the pain as their teeth rotted from the poison, foremen had them pulled, often by brute force and without permission.

“We need Mr. Bryant to stop listening to his foremen and meet with us,” she said.

Bradlaugh called the company’s actions intolerable, but admitted that, no matter how many speeches he and others made, a legislative solution would take far too long, if it came at all. “Your power is the public’s good opinion,” he advised, “more effective and timely in this case than any action by this chamber of cowards.”

Some of the girls gasped, shocked by his candor and condemnation of both colleagues and his class. None except Annie had ever been inside the intimidating room before or witnessed a parliamentary debate.

After listening quietly for twenty minutes Montagu joined the discussion by posing a larger question. “What concerns me, beyond addressing the egregious conditions you have brought to the nation’s attention, is the ultimate goal of the movement that appears to be underway. As I see it, there are two schools of thought — gradualism or revolution.

“So, is it to be the Fabian’s path or Marx and Morris?”

“If not the one it will be the other,” Annie replied. “Are we asking so much? The right to organize collectively, to take meals in a separate room to prevent contamination and illness, the reinstatement of those who have been fired, an end to the arbitrary fines and unfair deductions from wages. All of that, yes! We also want to bypass the foremen and bring the grievances directly to management. If they hadn’t prevented complaints from being heard for so long,” she scolded, “many girls could have been saved.”

Although Tonio had insisted on this precise time and place, the matchgirls’ strike, even the opportunity to witness this unique encounter, wasn’t the ultimate reason for his timing. It was a destination of opportunity. Even with a device that could take you to virtually any place or time you still needed to choose exactly when and where. You could visit London through the Jump Room forever and never run into the person you wanted to see. But on this particular day, Tonio knew where Annie would be.

She strode toward the gangway to address the girls huddled to one side and the old men on the other. “Where is the real cure for our sorrow? How will we rescue the world? Do we seek more? Absolutely! But the road is long and has many turns. Today we fight for health and fairness, tomorrow perhaps for a common room, a refuge for girls who never had a proper home, a welcoming atmosphere and a bit of comradeship. If necessary, Mr. Montagu, yes, we are ready for revolution. The poor, after all, have little to lose. But at this point I still hold onto hope for gradual improvement, a peaceful path to liberate the enslaved and change the world.

“What we need is a movement of love and self-sacrifice,” she said, “inspiring us to give rather than take.”

These moments are excerpted from [Dons of Time](#), Chapters 22 (Doubts) and 25 (Struggle).

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