

TOO CLEVER BY HALF

By R. W. POSTGATE

HAS anybody ever seen a dead donkey? I know one man who thinks he has and that is J. F. Horrabin. Some weeks ago he told me "The W. Hee-Haw is dead," for that is his improper method of referring to the Workers' Educational Association, or W.E.A. But the old saw that donkeys do not die is still true, for although this Hee-Haw is extremely weak in the knees, it is not yet dead, but hiding, in the approved fashion, under a lion's skin.

The lion's skin is labelled "Workers' Educational Trade Union Committee," and underneath it is the old W.E.A., and, as ever, when it tries to roar, it brays.

§ Suffered Under Pontius Pilate

For some time past the W.E.A. has been feeling off colour. In the old days, when the working class were mostly fools, it was doing very well. Its object was to hand out to the enquiring worker the educational dope that the employing class wished him to have. Much money was forthcoming from capitalist circles for this end. Sir Ernest Cassel, the late King Teddy's friend, gave some thousands of pounds—I cannot remember the exact figure. Some of the money came from circles now very closely connected with Lloyd George. A. L. Smith, the able and reactionary Master of Balliol, is and was closely connected with it.

Money for jam? Not likely. That money was paid because the W.E.A. gave a certain type of education that the employer wished. "But we are impartial," the defender of the W.E.A. always claims. "If a class wants a lecturer on Marx, it can have it, if it insists and takes the proper constitutional means to that end." And very nice too. But just think how it works out in actual practice. A class which is sufficiently independent, not merely to insist on being taught the essence of Marxism, but also to insist that the lecturer be a genuine teacher and not one of the usual W.E.A. duds who will tell the class that "Marx was such a dear old man, but quite superseded now, of course," such a class will get its lecturer. Very true—and thank you for nothing. Such a class is hopeless already from the employers' point of view. What *did* happen, of course, was that all over the country, half-awakened workers, anxious to comprehend the capitalist system and to provide themselves with the weapon of knowledge of the class war, applied innocently to the W.E.A. for instruction in "economics" or history. Then they received automatically a University gentleman, who handed them out the mind-murdering dope of official economics. And that was the end of many a good potential rebel.

The function of the W.E.A. and its successor, the W.E.T.U.C., can be seen by turning up a chapter of forgotten history of the English working class—from about 1845 onwards. On the shelves of Mr. G. D. H. Cole (and I beg him to look them up), are numbers of books of this date and later, bearing such titles as "The Advantages of Machinery explained to working men"; "Thoughts on Supply and Demand"; "Trades Clubs and the Industrious Producer"; by Charles Knight and others. These publications, financed often by the Society for the Promotion of Useful Knowledge, were distributed through Mechanics' Institutes and Working Men's Clubs, and were successfully pressed upon the attention of the serious-minded workers.

The result was that the mind of the working class froze hard. The revolutionary sentiments of the Chartist and Owenite periods were killed, and in the ensuing thirty years the workers were completely under the domination of capitalist economics. Most of us with any experience in the Trade Union movement, can recall for ourselves examples of the products of those years—honest old men who were more fanatically afraid of Socialist or semi-Socialist proposals than the rankest Tory employer, and who fought against strikes and for friendly benefits as savagely as though their lives were at stake. We all recognised when we met them that there was no cure for them but churchyard mould.

The W.E.A., in effect, if not intention, has been attempting to repeat in this generation

that victory of the employers. Of recent years, however, it has met with a check.

§ The Third Day it rose again

Ever since the revolt at Ruskin College against the pro-capitalist bosh served out in that establishment, there has been a steady and firmly-rooted movement for independent working class education. This movement, whose propagandists have been united since 1908, in the Plebs League, aims at the formation of Labour Colleges and educational classes up and down the country for the teaching of the true and actual facts about the class struggle, the realities of economics and history, as opposed to the irrelevances of boss-class propaganda, served out by two-thirds of the W.E.A. tutors.

Fourteen years the struggle has gone on. And it has ended in victory. We may as well note it down—it is rare enough we can—here is one case in which truth and self-sacrifice alone have defeated Money. The W.E.A., in the thirteenth round, showed such obvious signs of distress and was so short of wind and spirit, that its seconds threw in the towels.

Not, indeed, that the Plebs alone can claim credit for the victory. One contributory cause was the reluctance of the governing class to continue subsidising an institution of doubtful utility, especially since the policy of talk of co-operation, a new world, Whitley Councils and all has given way to the policy of open violence against the workers. When they have chosen to use force why should they spend money on fooling?

So the W.E.A., down and out, tried a last resort. It tried to pretend to be the Plebs League. This isn't an inferior jest, but a statement of fact—Prominent members of the W.E.A. got hold of members of that most advanced and enlightened body, the E.C. of the Iron and Steel Trades Confederation, and began negotiations, as a result of which the best and liveliest part of the activities of the W.E.A. were to be taken over by a body called the W.E.T.U.C. This body (same old gang), was to be "under Trade Union control" and "practice independence as understood by the Labour College"—in short, to look as like the Plebs movement as humanly possible.

That is the fair face of the scheme. But the back side of it is the old W.E.A. "The practice is for a member of the confederation to be appointed as chairman and for the W.E.A. district secretary to be appointed as organising secretary," for each district.

Just so. Add to that that the personnel was taken over from the W.E.A., that the organisation done under the auspices of Mactavish, the W.E.A. secretary, and that the education was the same, and there you have them.

§ And sitteth at the Right hand of John Hodge

But the camouflage was inadequate. So last year the Plebs League was astonished to receive a letter from the same people announcing that they had constituted themselves a Commission of Enquiry into Trade Union Education, and desired to cross-examine the Plebs E.C. (Just as Jackson and I might constitute ourselves a Commission of Enquiry into the Personal Morals of Trade Union Leaders and demand to cross-examine—never mind who). The answer from the Plebs League and the Labour College was Buzz Off, Napoo, or some other form of words indicating displeasure or refusal.

However, that did not stop the "Wets," if I may so call them. They were in deep water and were after safety. They could no longer control a golden stream from the possessing classes: they might get hold of Trade Union funds. The long and the short of it is that the General Council is now proposing to take over all working class educational organisations, Plebs League the Labour Colleges and all, and run them. And in the selection of the Committee to deal with this the "Wets" have been too clever, much too clever. The list reads:—A. Pugh (wet), J. W. Bowen (wet), A. H. Findlay (probably a wet—he addressed the N.L.L.C. deputation with tears in his voice),

C. W. Bowerman (Ruskin College), George Hicks, G. D. H. Cole (wet), J. Mactavish (wet), T. W. Burden (wet), A. Creech-Jones (wet), Mrs. Calthrop (wet).

Now, George Hicks is a believer in independent working class education. He is the only one, for Findlay and Bowerman are sure votes for the wets. So the wets have provided themselves with a trifling majority of nine to one. Too much of a good thing. They could safely have left another seat to a genuine educationalist and it would have looked better.

Besides, there is this serious question: How on earth can the W.E.T.U.C. make up a deputation to be "received" and "examined" by this committee? All the likely members of the deputation have already been put on the Committee.

In another way also they over-reached themselves. They attempted to divide the Labour College off from the National Council of Labour Colleges. They asked for a deputation from the first, and from the second a written statement. They reckoned that if they could get the Labour College Governors, sleepy Trade Unionists, by themselves without the militants, they could diddle them into a sleepy acceptance of all their proposals. But the N.C.L.C. got wind of this, and when the Labour College Governors arrived, there came with them, to the visible chagrin of some members of the Wet Committee, a representative of the N.C.L.C. and one of the Scottish Labour College. The delegations presented a united front, and to the question "Will you consent to be taken over by the General Council?" replied "Willingly, if our personnel and the character of our teaching is untouched and our liberty to continue hammering the life out of the W.E.A. and W.E.T.U.C. is left to us." Which was by no means that the Committee wanted.

§ Amen

This is a queer story of intrigue, and the moral of it is that the revolutionary movement in education is, like the revolutionary movement elsewhere, up against some people who may not be knaves but are certainly not fools. They hoped to nobble the London Labour College for the Ruskin College type of education. They thought that if they could do so the Plebs movement will collapse. And, apropos of that, though it may be giving a card to the enemy, I cannot refrain from telling them to look again.

AN OLD WOMAN

By N. VANE

SHE was a little elderly person, just a fragile bit of street dust blown into my ken by the blustering winds of early Spring. So frail did she look that one instinctively took care not to push her roughly in those crushes on the Labour Exchange stairs. Younger women would stand aside for her to pass. Commiserating glances followed her sometimes.

While standing in the queues we talked, she and I, and soon she had told me bits about herself, how she lived alone in a single room in some overcrowded tenement, how she had been employed as a packer in Messrs. So-and-So's factory until trade depression had lost her that job. The twelve shillings dole seemed to be her sole income; yet the brave little spirit of her made her add always that she was sure times would improve and she would get her job back again. One fine morning not very long ago she came as usual to receive the dole. But... there was to be no twelve shillings for my little old friend this time. Thus fell the thunderbolt. "You cannot get any more money here," said the autocrat behind the desk. "You are considered not able and fit for work. I'm sorry, but—Next, please!" And so the queue moved on and passed her by, and no one paid any sort of heed to the meek little soul who stood there, stammering her surprise.

She went away after a minute. She bumped stupidly into a large policeman and disappeared in the crowd, meek and submissive to the last, while I remained to meditate on the advantages of the Workhouse.

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But I was wrong there.

A few days later a local newspaper announced that the body of an elderly and apparently respectable woman had been found in the river.

That was the manner in which she had solved the problem of superfluity.