



**William Gallacher**

**THE TYRANTS' MIGHT  
IS PASSING**

THREE SHILLINGS AND SIXPENCE

# THE TYRANTS' MIGHT IS PASSING

by

William Gallacher

*We'll sing a rebel song  
As we proudly sweep along  
To end the age-long tyranny  
That makes for human tears.  
Our work is nearer done  
With the setting of the sun  
And the tyrants' might is passing  
With the passing of the years*

JAMES CONNOLLY

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To  
John Fernie,  
a dear and loyal comrade who died  
November 13, 1952.

## CHAPTER I

### HORS DE COMBAT

FOLLOWING MY DEFEAT in the general election of January 1950, I placed myself at the disposal of the Scottish District Committee of the Communist Party. At the declaration of the poll I made a short speech which I concluded with:

"I was a working-class agitator before I went to Parliament, I was a working-class agitator in Parliament, I remain—a working-class agitator."

The Scottish comrades took me up on this and worked out a programme accordingly.

There was plenty to do. Propaganda meetings of all kinds were called for as well as articles and pamphlets on a variety of subjects. The most attractive feature of this well worked out campaign was a series of factory-gate meetings, designed to cover the main factories of the Clyde.

I got a strange feeling when I spoke at these factory-gate meetings. I was back to where I started nearly a half-century before. It was like renewing my youth, and I had an almost overwhelming desire to see the Clyde in ferment as it was during the first world war. But of course I understood the entirely different situation, and the different and much more difficult task that lay before us.

In 1914, we had to rouse the Clyde against the war and against the capitalist class who were responsible for it. Wages, rents, prices, were all contributory factors in stirring up the wrath of the workers.

In 1950, however, with wages, rents and prices still operating as factors, with the existence of the Soviet Union, Democratic China and the New Democracies, with one-third of the world's population in the democratic camp, the workers were entering the period of a real struggle for power. That was the changed character of the situation arising out of the conditions following the second world war. Crisis follows crisis, and each day it becomes clearer that no solution can be found under capitalism. The old order must go and the new order of socialism take its place.



That is the fundamental issue behind all the immediate problems. It is what the workers must face sooner or later. At present they still believe that somehow or another the petty-bourgeois leaders of the Labour Party will lead them towards this goal. Yet already with the results of the Morecambe Labour Party Conference before us, it is obvious that the rank-and-file of the Labour Party have begun seriously to question the right-wing leadership and policy of the Labour Party. But it will take much hard experience to disillusion them completely. Many a wrong road will be tried before they follow the only road, the Marxist road, that can lead to the overthrow of the capitalist class and the realisation of socialism.

Nevertheless, while I had all this in mind, I felt extremely exhilarated speaking at these dinner-hour meetings. So much so that while I was speaking to a couple of old pals in my home town, Paisley, one of them commented on how well I was looking. I talked as though I were a lad of eighteen or nineteen, and did an awful bit of bragging about my health and vitality. Leaving them I went up home, and two hours later I was writhing in agony. Before going any further with it, it might be interesting to introduce the old pals to whom I had been speaking.

One of them, James Stirling, has been a member of the Secular Society since his youth up. A confirmed atheist, courageous as half a dozen lions, and with the tenacity of a bull pup, he was classed as my "bodyguard" in the tough period of the first world war. Woe to anyone foolish enough to interfere with me while I denounced capitalism and the war.

The other, John Patterson, a very quiet, very intelligent co-operator, with a fund of good stories, and a very devout Roman Catholic. A strange trio! But the best of friends.

But there I was stretched out on the couch. I got up, I crouched over the fire, I walked up and down the room. I could get no relief. Finally Jean got me to bed, and she gave me a hot-water bottle to lay across my abdomen. It was no good. Up and down, down and up, and getting worse all the time. About five o'clock Jean went to the nearby telephone kiosk and phoned the doctor. He came about six o'clock. He couldn't make it out. He said to Jean, "If you've got hot water you

might try him with a bath." He went off at that. We had hot water so Jean filled the bath and I got in. It was unbelievable. For three hours I had been in agony, then immediately I sat down in the hot water there was absolute, complete relief. Not a pain of any kind. I lay back and said to Jean, "If you get me a couple of blankets, I'll sleep here". That was actually how I felt. After a bit I had to get out. The pain came back, but not nearly so severe. Jean then went out to attend a meeting of the Paisley Co-operative Coal Board, of which she is a member, and I lay in bed quite contented till she came home about ten o'clock.

I had another bath and the same experience. Complete relief. When I got out I scarcely felt the return of the pain, it was so slight. I had a good night's sleep and felt much better on the Saturday morning. No more pain.

However, I remained in the house all Saturday, just as a precaution. Had I remained at home on Sunday also I might have beaten back the attack. But I was booked to speak at an open-air meeting in Glasgow on the Sunday afternoon and an indoor meeting in Motherwell at night. There was a biting east wind, with an occasional drizzle of rain that Sunday when I went out. If I'd had any sense I'd have turned back and got into bed.

I made my way from Paisley up to West Regent Street, Glasgow, all the way feeling worse and worse. The comrades saw that something was wrong. I made a short speech and then I wanted somewhere to lie down. "You'd better go home", they said.

I got home, went to bed, a really sick man. About five in the morning, I started shivering. What a business; the bed was shaking and seemed likely to collapse. I kept saying to myself, "What am I doing this for, I ought to stop it," but I went on doing it. The neighbour next door was brought in. I heard him saying, "He's in a very bad state. You'd better get the doctor." About eight o'clock, the doctor came. As soon as he saw me he telephoned for an ambulance, and off I went to the Royal Alexandra Infirmary. I was taken up to a ward. All the beds were occupied, but in a room adjoining the ward there was an empty bed, and in there I was plunked. I had often been in hospitals, as a visitor, and like most people had a dread of



them as a patient. But I lay back with not a thought or a care—at peace with the world.

There were two surgeons, Dr. Miller and Dr. Cochran, who gave to me, as to others, great care and attention. Early on they diagnosed the trouble as acute inflammation of the gall-bladder, which later on the X-rays confirmed, and they were afraid it might affect the lung and start pneumonia. For three days I had nothing but an occasional drink of soda-water, then I went on to the hospital diet, and believe me I enjoyed it.

One of the nurses introduced herself to me as “Nurse Machray”. What a rush of feeling swept over me. “Are you the daughter of one of Pat’s brothers?” I asked her. “Yes”, she answered. What memories that stirred up.

Pat Machray, a really brilliant young lad, was, as I mention in *Revolt on the Clyde*, my first platform colleague. A ready witted and eloquent speaker, a facile writer and a clever cartoonist, he would have made a great name in the movement had death not cut him off in his early years. When he took on a controversy in the local paper, the *Paisley Daily Express*, the placard would appear with, among the list of contents, “Letter from P.M.” The paper would sell out. I remember on one occasion when he was tackled by a religious correspondent who specialised on the “efficacy of prayer”, Pat wrote that this fellow reminded him of the woman who told her neighbours, “With the help of God and two big policemen I got rid of that noisy lodger of mine”.

Pat and I ran socialist meetings every Sunday evening. We took turns of speaking. In those early days I was inclined to be a bit fancy in my apparel. No one would think it to see me now. One Sunday evening in the square at Paisley, before a very big crowd, Pat had got up on the platform and was going ahead in fine style. I was standing by the side of the platform waiting my turn. That evening I was wearing a beautiful cream waistcoat, with bright emerald-green borders around the edge and along the four pockets. A thin silver-mounted cane matched the waistcoat. Pat got well away in his stride. He was warning the workers about the sort of people they had to watch. The people who would try to fool and fraud them. “Keep your eye on the lad with the big pot-belly”, he urged his audience, “Keep

your eye on the lad with the triple-expansion chin". Then, getting really warm to the job, he shouted, "Keep your eye on the fellow with the fancy waistcoat". The roar of laughter that went up shook him for a moment, only for a moment. He looked down at me to see what had happened, then his face lightened up with a broad, infectious grin. He  jerked his thumb  at me, and said to the crowd, "He can speak for himself".

The room I was in was used as a lounge room by ward patients who were able to be on their feet. It had a fine window for looking out on to the main street, a practice the patients thoroughly enjoyed. Thus there was always company for me with all kinds of stories about ailments and operations. One of these lads was recovering from a very bad accident. His right arm was caught in a belt and torn almost to shreds. It had been amputated just below the elbow. A nice lad he was, and a Roman Catholic. I knew this because the local paper had published quite a story about my collapse and quite a lot of visitors had a look in at the room as a consequence.

One afternoon while the lad who had lost his arm was in the lounge room, a Catholic clergyman appeared. The lad made to leave the lounge room and return to his bed, as is the rule when a visitor comes. But the clergyman guided him back into the room (I wouldn't like to say pushed). He also wanted to have a look at the "exhibit".

Well, this Catholic was talking to me one day and we spoke about Pat McKenna losing his second leg and about other tragic and painful cases in the main ward. After quite a bit of this he slowly moved his head from side to side and offered me the following:

"It's a blessing there's somebody above looking after us."

I looked at the lad. He was solemn and serious, while I thought, "There wasn't much looking after you when your arm got caught".

Another patient had been through an operation for stomach ulcers. For years he had suffered, but now, he said, he had got a "new lease of life". He spoke about being in George's Square, Glasgow, that Friday in January 1919, when the battle with the police took place, and I gathered from this and other remarks that he was an old-timer in the movement. He also

reminded me that he and his wife had occupied our house in Well Street for three months, when Jean and I were in London. They had been unable to get a place of their own and Jean had given them the key. But I still couldn't place him, as many different people had been in transient occupation of our Well Street home. I told him about the other lad. I said, "He's a Catholic, and he said to me, apropos of the suffering in the ward, 'It's a blessing there's somebody above looking after us'. I said to myself, 'There wasn't much looking after you when your arm got caught'." I thought he would get a smile at that one, but he didn't. He just looked glum, and eased away from the bed and out of the lounge room. When Jean came in, I said "There's a lad in here who has had an operation for stomach trouble and he says he and his wife occupied our place for three months; who is he?" "That's Halliday", she replied. "My God," I groaned, "he's also a Catholic. No wonder he didn't laugh". I had then to tell Jean the story of the lad who had lost his arm.

But alas, poor Halliday. He hadn't got a new lease of life. He hadn't even got an operation. In three months he was dead. By that time, of course, I was out of hospital (three weeks I had in it) and feeling fit and well again but with a considerable bit of weight to make up.

## CHAPTER II

### SABOTAGE

BEFORE AND DURING the election, the anti-Communist campaign had sunk to an almost unbelievable level. The "antis" were wallowing in mud and filth and splattering it around in every direction. I said to my comrades at the time, "Well they've got down so low, they can't get lower." But I had under-rated their capacity for malicious mendacity.

On my return from a most interesting and health-giving holiday in the Soviet Union, I found Britain not only being dragged into the Yankee imperialist aggression in Korea and China, but along with this an effort on the part of the political leaders, the press and the radio, to outdo the "smear" campaign of the Yankees.

As a consequence, whatever went wrong, whatever happened anywhere, it was Communist "sabotage". One day, a large building in the Vale of Leven, where a mass of material was stored for the Coates Cotton Combine, caught fire. It was a terrific blaze. Next day we got the headlines "Sabotage Suspected". In fact, some of the more sensational papers went even further and had the job all cut and dried. A few days later I was speaking at a demonstration in St. Andrew's Hall, Glasgow. I referred to these reports. I expressed the opinion that suspicion was likely to fall on certain Tory leaders who were addicted to what American Indians called "Firewater", but I felt quite sure they'd try to take suspicion away from themselves by putting the blame on the Communists. As a matter of fact, I remarked, this campaign has gone so far, there's nothing for which we will not be held responsible. I went into the bookshop this afternoon, I told them, and a fellow came forward to me with a scowl on his face, as he growled, "Hey, Wullie, whaur's aw this rain comin' frae?" "No, no," I protested, "you can't hold us respon-sible for that."

Of course there was no "sabotage" at the Vale of Leven store, but the original stories were never repudiated, with the consequence that millions of readers had the poison planted in their minds with no possibility of an antidote. Truly the legal system

in this country, to say nothing of moral standards, is amazing. The most infamous lies can be, and are, published, and nothing can be done about it, yet if I name and state my candid opinion of the liars, my publishers can be ruined by a libel action.

This "sabotage" slander was given its greatest boost and what may be called official standing, in a broadcast by Attlee on July 30, 1950. A short while before there had been an explosion on some ammunition barges at Gosport, near Portsmouth. Fortunately there were no casualties, but it could have been an appalling disaster. The first official report issued by the men on the spot contained the words, "The question of sabotage doesn't arise." Apparently this report didn't give satisfaction in some quarters, for a few days later a further report was issued from the same source with the words changed to read, "The question of sabotage cannot be discounted". "That's better", you might have heard the "antis" mutter. "That'll give us a chance to spread ourselves around." And spread themselves they did, no doubt about that. First off the mark, as I have said, was Attlee.

Here is his contribution to "moral rectitude" and "truth":

"Thirdly I would ask you all to be on your guard against the enemy within . . . *there have been recent cases of sabotage, such as the outrage at Portsmouth.*"

No qualification in that. "Sabotage" he says, and "sabotage" he means. So let us for a moment have a look at this question and see if it is possible to get an understanding of its character in the scheme of political warfare.

When sabotage is mentioned it is always in such a way as to create the impression that it is a recognised method of Communist Party activity. Nothing could be further from the truth. On the contrary, sabotage, like political assassination, is in flat contradiction to all that Marx and Engels, Lenin and Stalin teach. There is volume upon volume containing the innermost thoughts of those great teachers; on the character of capitalist society; the class struggle that goes on in that society; and the "art" of revolution which is so essential to bring about the change from capitalism to socialism. Yet in all the mighty production of this great combination of genius there is nothing which can be found that would permit of a Communist or a Communist Party indulging either in sabotage or political

assassination. Such practices would destroy any possibility of building up the proletarian forces which alone can carry through the revolution. Sabotage and political assassinations are bourgeois and petty-bourgeois methods of attack. They represent "individual enterprise"—the "heroic" individual who will sacrifice his own life, if need be, to get rid of some villainous or obnoxious ruler, or who will make a personal demonstration, even at the cost of other people's lives, in order to concentrate attention on whatever political demands he and his class are engaged in propagating.

But the Communists don't believe that the change from capitalism to socialism can be achieved by "heroic" individuals carrying out spectacular actions in the form of sabotage and political assassination. That's the sort of thing which appealed to small, secret groups in Tsarist Russia and elsewhere when the bourgeoisie was striving to free itself from monarchical and aristocratic control. But along with the "heroes" it cultivated "informers" and "agents provocateurs" until a stage was reached when it became difficult to tell one from the other.

The Communists, on the other hand, base their faith on the working class. There, and there alone, is the power that can defeat and overthrow the ruling, exploiting class of this or any other country. Everything we say, everything we do, must be directed towards this great task of winning the workers for the revolutionary struggle for power. Secret groups, individual demonstrations or stunts, would make our task impossible. The change cannot be brought about by the individual, no matter how brilliant. It can only be carried through by a class—the working class. Individual acts would create suspicion and distrust and would disrupt instead of uniting the forces. Even the accusations, the lies and slanders of our enemies, have that effect. That is why they are made. The capitalists and their petty-bourgeois allies dread above all things a united, class conscious working class.

And well they may. For when the workers rise, united and strong, the capitalists will go down never to come up again. Sabotage, or the suspicion of sabotage, or the spreading of malicious rumours of sabotage make this, our great task, ever more difficult. Our enemies will use these malicious slanders



more and more as their system decays and weakens. Nay, more, they will, if the opportunity offers, put their own agents on such criminal tasks as that perpetrated in Germany, when Goering set fire to the Reichstag and then started bellowing like a maddened bull about this dastardly conflagration being the work of the Communists.

But Goering has been out-bellowed! Ladies and gentlemen. meet a genuine sea lion, Mr. Yates. Who's Mr. Yates? you ask, and I answer, Mr. Yates is the General Secretary of the National Union of Seamen. But I must confess that, although I have been a working-class agitator for nearly half a century, I had never heard of this gentleman until I saw a copy of *The Seaman* for July-August 1950. Attracted by the broadcast of the then Prime Minister, Mr. Attlee, our sea lion—for a sea dog couldn't roar half as loudly—roared:

"The Prime Minister told the House that evidence is in the hands of the Government to satisfy them that the explosion that took place in ammunition barges in Portsmouth Harbour on July 14 was caused maliciously by persons unknown. Enough evidence is available to show that these explosions were based on considerable scientific knowledge. They constitute an act of sabotage. They point to the presence in our midst of a foreign power.

"What happened at Portsmouth is but one incident amongst many. There have been other cases of mysterious damage to naval vessels, fires, explosions and breakdowns that could not have occurred by accident. The perpetrators have not the smallest regard to the consequences of their action; they are utterly callous about the loss of life and widespread distress that may result. It is only by a miracle, as the Prime Minister said, that the explosion at Portsmouth did not cause a serious loss of life among workers in the armament depot and their families living nearby. . . .

"But what of those who connive at their crimes? What of those who remain within the organisation whose policy these atrocious acts are planned to further? What of those who take instructions from the leaders of such an organisation, to burrow like rats into the administration of the unions, who are accomplices—perhaps without knowing it—in the planned campaign to hand over the leadership of the unions to Communists and to use the resources of the unions for

their propaganda of violence, terrorism and lawless disorder? There is only one course to take with them. They must be hunted out, run down, and driven out of our movement."

Now I think it will be generally admitted that that is going pretty strong, in view of the fact that there hasn't been one solitary act of political sabotage in this country. Yet this combination of slander and incitement is being served out to seamen. Often away on long trips and out of touch with their fellow-workers, they have little chance of checking what appears in their own paper. Any "agitator"—anyone opposed to Yates and his clique—has to be "hunted out, run down, and driven out of our movement". That is, of course, if they aren't put to death "in due course of law", says Mr. Yates.

At the September Trades Union Congress, Sir Vincent Tewson commended to the delegates this palpable but venomous trash. I felt that something had to be done. But what? No use trying to get into the press with a repudiation. I have innumerable notes from editors, including one from the *News Chronicle* and one from the *Daily Herald*, thanking me for writing but informing me at the same time that my article couldn't be published. No hope with the B.B.C., and certainly not the ghost of a chance of getting in with a rebuttal to *The Seaman*. I decided to try another course, so I sent the following letter to the Public Prosecutor:

"Sir,

On July 14 an explosion of ammunition occurred at Portsmouth. On the first report issued it was stated 'the question of sabotage does not arise'. A few days later a change took place and a further report was issued which said, 'the question of sabotage cannot be discounted'.

This was followed by a somewhat categorical statement by the Prime Minister, broadcast on July 30. He declared that an act of sabotage had actually been committed.

Now a fellow named Yates, of the National Union of Seamen, makes a very precise accusation in the seamen's journal, a copy of which I enclose. Not only so, but if I read what he says aright, he knows the people responsible.

As a citizen of this country I would therefore make an earnest request that you, as Public Prosecutor, take this

matter under your cognisance. The police should immediately interview this man and find out what he knows about this alleged criminal act :

- i. Either he has information which he should be made to divulge with a view to the prosecution of those responsible, or
- ii. He has no information and is deliberately 'creating a public mischief' for which he himself should be prosecuted.

I will be pleased to learn that you have decided to take action on this very serious allegation of sabotage which carried with it the danger to many lives.

Yours faithfully,

William Gallacher."

I sent a copy of this letter to Yates, with a short note as follows :

"Dear Mr. Yates,

I am enclosing a copy of a letter I have sent to the Public Prosecutor. If you are a public-spirited citizen you will go to the police of your own accord and give them whatever information you possess about the alleged act of sabotage referred to.

Yours faithfully,

William Gallacher."

I sent a copy of each of these letters to Tewson, along with a short letter :

"Dear Sir Vincent Tewson,

As a most humble citizen may I approach you, sir, as a Knight of the Realm, and solicit your support in getting Mr. Yates to make a voluntary statement to the police on a matter about which he and you appear to have some knowledge, viz., the alleged act of sabotage at Portsmouth.

I am enclosing copies of letters sent to the Public Prosecutor and to Yates.

Yours faithfully,

William Gallacher."

I got a printed postcard from Tewson, acknowledging my letter, but nothing more, and not even an acknowledgment from Yates.