

*Slowly comes a mighty army—as a lion drawing nigher
Glares at one who nods and blinks behind a slowly dying fire!*

THE above lines were written out for me by Elizabeth Gurley Flynn, well known for her militant activities in the American Labour movement, and underneath she wrote the words: "Greetings from the unemployment agitators on the firing line — to our fellow-workers across the sea." I remember, some years ago, seeing pictures of Gurley Flynn being arrested on the picket line. And about the same time I heard of Mother Jones—even then a grey-haired woman—who was with the miners in their fiercest strike struggles. It fitted in with the unbroken tradition of revolt that a young Irish girl and an old Irish woman should be giving themselves to the cause of oppressed workers in America.

It has been charged against the Irish that they remain aloof from movements outside Ireland—meaning that they have never forgotten that Ireland needed freeing. But it should be emphasised that, in every movement against tyranny, Irish men and women may be found. The MacNamara brothers and Tom Mooney were gaol martyrs in America, while the British Labour struggle is starred with Irish names. Fergus O'Connor and Brontë O'Brien (the schoolmaster of Chartism) were among the leaders and inspiration of that movement, while on the industrial side, as trade union pioneers, Irish names stand out. Mother Jones—well known as a fearless agitator in America—also deserves recognition as an Irishwoman. Her life illustrates the principle that the common struggle transcends nationality without obliterating it.

The outline of her story is simple. In her autobiography she wrote: "I was born in the city of Cork, Ireland, in 1830. My people were poor. For generations they had fought for Ireland's freedom. Many of my folk have died in that struggle." She was trained as a teacher, and taught in a convent school. Later she went to Memphis, Tennessee, where she married an iron moulder in 1861. In 1867—a fateful year—

yellow fever swept the town. Her four children died. Her husband died. She sat alone. No one dared to come near. And all had their own tragedies. But after the funeral she got a permit to nurse the sufferers, and did so till the plague ended.

From Memphis she went to Chicago, opening an exclusive dress-making establishment by the lake front. Here she observed the selfish extravagance of her customers and their indifference to the shivering misery of the poor. In 1871—another fateful year—a second catastrophe occurred. In the great Chicago fire her premises were completely destroyed. With hundreds of other homeless refugees, she camped by the lake front, finding shelter in a church which was thrown open. In a fire-scorched building the Knights of Labour held meetings, and Mother Jones became interested in the Labour struggle.

A memory of these days was of the Chicago martyrs who were done to death in 1886. Soon she became known, and was sent for whenever there was a strike—one of the earliest in which she took part was a railway dispute at Pittsburgh. But she was associated most closely with the miners. These oppressed workers had the same claims on her life as her own dead children would have had. They called her Mother Jones in the mining camps, and always asked for her help in times of trouble. She tells of a mining strike in Virginia, when a miner who accompanied her was charged with illegal possession of a revolver. He was fined twenty-five dollars. Mother Jones paid the fine on the spot. A miner told her later that the company guards had not reckoned on the fine being paid. They had planned to lock both prisoners up and burn them in the coke ovens at night, saying that they had been set free and wandered off somewhere. That was the kind of opposition which Mother Jones battled against.

She was sent for hurriedly from Arnot, Pennsylvania, where strikers had become discouraged. They booked a room for her at the company hotel. She held a meeting, and asked them to take a pledge to go on with the strike. The men shuffled, but the women rose with their babies in their arms. Near midnight the hotel manager put her out of her room. She went to a miner's shack up on the hillside, and they made her welcome. In the morning the whole family was evicted for harbouring her. Their poor sticks of furniture, their holy pictures and all were flung into a wagon, and they set out, with the children, for the strike meeting. The sight of this wagon settled the miners' determination to stay out. The company had over-reached itself. It made no allowance for that human indignation and manhood which it did not understand.

Mother Jones tells how she sent the women to deal with imported scabs:—

"I decided not to go up to Drip Mouth myself, for I knew they would arrest me, and that might rout the army. I selected as leader an Irish woman who had a most picturesque appearance. She had slept late, and her husband had told her to hurry up and get into the army. She had grabbed a red petticoat and slipped it over a thick cotton night gown. She wore a black stocking and a white one. She had tied a little red fringed shawl over her wild red hair. Her face was red and her eyes were mad. I looked at her and felt that she could raise a rumpus. I said: 'You lead the army up to the Drip Mouth. Take that tin dishpan you have with you and your hammer, and, when the scabs and the mules come up, begin to hammer and howl. Then all of you hammer and howl, and be ready to chase the scabs with your mops and brooms. Don't be afraid of anyone.'

"Up to the mountain side, yelling and hollering, she led the women, and when the mules came up with the scabs and the coal, she began beating on the dishpan and hollering, and all the army joined with her. The sheriff tapped her on the shoulder.

'My dear lady,' he said, 'remember the mules. Don't frighten them.'

"She took the old tin pan and she hit him with it, and she hollered: 'To hell with you and the mules!'"

In West Virginia she prevented a striking miner from being murdered by company gunmen who were beating him up. She rushed forward, alone, in the darkness and cried out that others were coming. The gunmen ran for cover. But in that district no one dared to take the chair for her at her meeting. The meeting was billed in the dead of night, and she held it, introducing herself. At another place where all announcements were forbidden she got two men, one pretending to be deaf, to go slowly through the town, while the other shouted in his ear particulars about her evening meeting. She revealed a terrible record of shootings and evictions. At one camp six miners were murdered in their sleep by hired gunmen, and left bleeding in their beds. A miner, with a consumptive daughter and younger children, were evicted, while he was sacked, for giving Mother Jones a cup of tea.

"I didn't entertain her!" said the man. "She paid me for the tea and bread."

"It makes no difference," said the superintendent. "You had Mother Jones in your house, and that is sufficient."

The girl died from the shock of the eviction.

Mother Jones was a friend to sweated mill children as well as to the miners. In 1903 she was in the big textile strike at Kensington, Penn., where 75,000 textile workers were out. She decided to take the mill children, sallow, sickly, and some of them mutilated by their toil in the mills, on a propaganda tour. They started on the public square of Philadelphia. Mother Jones says:—

"I put the little boys, with their fingers off and hands crushed and maimed, on a platform. I held up their mutilated hands and showed them to the crowd, and made the statement that Philadelphia's mansions were built on the broken bones, the quivering hearts and drooping heads of these children."

She had difficulty in getting permission to hold meetings in some towns. At one place the Mayor said a meeting could not be held because there was not enough police protection. "These little children have never known any sort of protection, you honour," she said, "and they are used to going without it." The meeting was held. The children grew brown and healthy on their picnic march, for Mother Jones and her helpers looked after them well. Everywhere they met with kindness. Farmers drove out with wagon loads of fruit and vegetables for them. A senator invited her to come to his hotel at Manhattan Beach, and she arrived with a happy crowd of children, including a fife squad, which played "Hail, Hail, the Gang's All Here!" The senator ran away out of the back door when he saw the army coming. But Mother Jones ordered a fine breakfast for them in a private room, and had it put down to the senator's account. Her campaign helped to secure the passing of a Child Labour law in Pennsylvania, making things a little better, and the children had the time of their lives.

During the Cripple Creek strike, Mother Jones was deported from the State of Colorado, a letter from the Governor being handed to her as she was hustled on to the train telling her that under no circumstances was she to return to the state. Arriving at the border, she sat all night in the station at La Junta, without food or money. In the morning she asked a train conductor to take her back to Denver. He did. Arriving in Denver, she sent a letter to the Governor, saying:

"Mr. Governor, you notified your dogs of war to put me out of the state. They complied with your instructions. I hold in my hand a letter that was handed to me by one of them, which says 'under

no circumstances return to this State.' I wish to notify you, governor, that you don't own the State. When it was admitted to the sisterhood of States, my fathers gave me a share of stock in it; and that is all they gave to you. The civil courts are open. If I break a law of State or nation, it is the duty of the civil courts to deal with me. That is why my forefathers established those courts: to keep dictators and tyrants such as you from interfering with civilians. I am right here in the capital, after being out nine or ten hours, four or five blocks from your office. I want to ask you, governor, what in Hell are you going to do about it?"

He did nothing. She went all through the State holding enthusiastic meetings.

Her understanding and sympathy with the miners is revealed in these words:—

"Mining at its best is wretched work, and the life and surroundings of the miner are hard and ugly. His work is down in the black depths of the earth. He works alone in a drift. There can be little friendly companionship as there is in the factory: as there is among men who build bridges and houses, working together in groups. The work is dirty. Coal dust grinds itself into the skin, never to be removed. The miner must stoop as he works in the drift. He becomes bent like a gnome. . . . The miner's wife, who in the majority of cases worked from childhood in the near-by silk mills, is over-burdened with child-bearing. She ages young. She knows much illness. Many a time I have been in a home where the poor wife was sick in bed, the children crawling over her, quarrelling and playing in the room: often the only warm room in the house."

There is no haze of romanticism about these lives. No bands playing, just sordid poverty, often ignorance, and brutishness as well. People, in the main, cannot be refined and good under bad conditions; otherwise the conditions would not be bad. But there was much nobility of character shown in these struggles. And it was these conditions and these people which Mother Jones saw called for her, and, with the chivalry of comradeship, she gave herself to them.

Mother Jones had humour, too. One day a crowd of miners' wives who were picketing were arrested for disturbing the peace. They were brought into court and fined thirty dollars or thirty days. Mother

Jones advised them to bring their babies. They set off for gaol, and she told the mothers to sleep all day and sing all night. "Say you're singing to the babies!" she counselled. The sheriff's wife tried to stop them, but failed. He sent for Mother Jones.

"I can't stop them!" she said. "They are singing to their little ones. Telephone the judge to order their release."

Complaints poured in from private houses and hotels.

"Those women howl like cats!" said a hotel keeper.

"That's no way to speak of patriotic women singing lullabies to their little ones!" she replied. The judge, she remarked, was a narrow-minded, irritable, savage-looking old animal, and hated to do it, but he had to order their release.

On several occasions she prevented the murder of miners. Once she walked up to a machine gun and placed her hand over the muzzle till the miners had walked by, disregarding the abuse and threats the guards, who had been firing wildly. Here she had to wade up a creek, to the meeting, for all the land round was private property, belonging to the coal company. She was arrested during a period of coal company terrorism and held a solitary prisoner, guarded by soldiers, night and day. Then she was tried by a military court and sentenced to twenty years in the State Penitentiary. She refused to be represented at this trial because it was unconstitutional. In the Senate it was represented that this "grandmother of agitators," as she was called, was detained in a pleasant boarding house. But she succeeded in smuggling out a telegram, which another senator read, giving the facts. At this time she was 84 years old. Later she was imprisoned for 26 days in a cellar under the courthouse. Of this she said:—

"It was a cold, terrible place, without heat, dark and damp. I slept in my clothes by day, and at night I fought great sewer rats with a beer bottle. 'If I were out of this dungeon,' thought I, 'I would be fighting the human sewer rats, anyway!'"

She could have had her freedom any time by promising to leave the strike field.

During the steel strike, in 1919, Mother Jones had another clash with the company authorities. She was put in prison, and while there a group of officials came to see her.

"'Mother Jones,' they said, 'why don't you use your great gifts

and your knowledge of men for something better and higher than agitating?"

"There was a man once," she said, "who had great gifts and a knowledge of men and he agitated against a powerful government that sought to make men serfs, to grind them down. He founded this Nation that men might be free. He was a gentleman agitator!"

"Are you referring to George Washington?" said one of the group.

"I am so," said she. "And there was a man once who had the gift of a tender heart and he agitated against powerful men, against invested wealth, for the freedom of black men. He agitated against slavery!"

"Are you speaking of Abraham Lincoln?" said a little man who was pecking at her over another fellow's shoulder.

"I am that," said she.

"And there was a man once who walked among men, among the poor and the despised and the lowly, and he agitated against the powers of Rome, against the lickspittle Jews of the local pic counter; he agitated for the Kingdom of God!"

"Are you speaking of Jesus Christ?" said a preacher.

"I am," said she. "The agitator you nailed to a cross some centuries ago. I did not know that His name was known in this region of steel!"

"They all said nothing and left."

Mother Jones lived to be an old woman, and a great one. She never allowed the early freedom-loving traditions of America to be forgotten if she could help it, and, before a Commission of the Senate, she recalled what had been done in America to help the Fenian movement. She knew victory and she knew defeat. When a strike crashed, after months of sacrifice, she bade the miners hope on, for the white light of freedom was still burning in men's hearts. Her last written words were that the future of the world was in Labour's strong rough hands.

Her life—spanning a hundred years—was an epic of struggle and sacrifice which waves like a banner over the dark days of the past. She was absolutely fearless and absolutely loyal. Scientists say there is no such thing as absolute, but they must make an exception for Mother Jones. She never stepped down to Labour, but she raised Labour to the heights of her own nobility and courage. She found workers broken, ignorant, misled, terrorised. She gave them laughter, dignity, serenity and an invincible perseverance. The mighty army of Labour marches

on. And she is dead. But, as James Stephens said about the rebel leaders of 1916: "Nothing is wasted. Not even brave men. They have been used." We may say the same of Mother Jones.

To Mother Jones the slaves of the mines and factories, in rags, dirt and ignorance were immeasurably higher than parasites in fine clothes and royal purple. Their cause wore the shining diadem of truth and gleamed with the colours of humanity and hope.