

# The Red Woman

Shortly after the war had ended, Phoebe bumped into her future husband: a former ILP colleague whose name was Albert Cusden.

Albert's father was a printer, the proprietor of J Cusden and Co in Castle Street, one of many small printing firms in the town with a speciality 'in neat and attractive trade-producing work such as Booklets, Folders, Letter Headings, Posters etc'. He was a staunch teetotaler, a Sunday School superintendent and an ardent winter bather: 'breaking the ice on Christmas morning, followed by breakfast, was something of a ritual', as Phoebe remembered.

Albert inherited many of his father's tastes. He too was a Winter Bather, (and later became closely involved with the British Workers Sports Association). He was as ardent a teetotaler as his father, and he later found an ally in Phoebe, although she was a publican's daughter.

In 1912 he went to Germany, and with his brothers Archibald and Victor opened language schools in various parts of the country. It was not an auspicious moment to be in Germany; they were arrested on suspicion of espionage, and in 1914 they were all interned, together with 4,000 other British citizens, in a PoW camp that was hastily opened at the Ruhleben racecourse near Berlin.

Ruhleben and the War had a profound effect on the Cusden brothers, fostering a lasting sense of internationalism in each of them. Archibald became League of Nations correspondent for the *Morning Post*; Victor joined the Consular Service.

Albert, an artist, returned to Reading to manage the family firm 'out of a sense of duty to his father', but he remained an ardent pacifist, internationalist and socialist all his life.

By late 1919, the relationship appeared to be blossoming. Albert, it seems, had offered to draw a portrait of the doughty young firebrand, but was somewhat backward in coming forward. In October, she wrote to thank him for offering to help her election campaign. 'The *Chronicle* has already asked for my photograph. See what a chance you've missed in not having drawn that

elusive portrait!'. Spurred into action, the artist got to work, and although the sitter does not appear to have been too impressed with the result – 'I (weakly) allowed my features to be mutilated by a person who delights in representing me as a hard-visaged, sour and sober suffragette!', she teased him – their courtship continued.

It was a working relationship and a relationship that worked. They shared the same passion, which was politics. They served on the Board of Guardians together, and went to events such as E D Morel's autumn school at Jordans in 1920 (Morel had been a prominent pacifist throughout the War, and one of Albert's printing clients withdrew his patronage because Albert chaired a public meeting in support of 'that E D Morel!'), although Phoebe doesn't seem to have shared his taste for winter bathing.

Jordans was a Quaker settlement, and when the couple finally married on 2 August 1922, they chose a Quaker ceremony. 'We had been to the Friends' Meeting House occasionally and it attracted me very much. We wanted a religious ceremony but we didn't want the pomp and ceremony of an Anglican service', Phoebe remembered. She was first drawn to the Society of Friends when the Church of England, in Phoebe's eyes, had disgraced itself with its thorough-going support of the War. Their peace testimony 'seemed more in keeping with Christian ideals', but it was many years before Phoebe actually joined the Friends.

Those who knew her in her later years were often mystified as to why she took so long to join them. The reason, probably, was that the Labour movement at that time provided her with all the spiritual sustenance she required.

'Organised religion has put to death our Lord and Master by a life of inaction of the principles He taught, but in the Labour Movement our Lord has risen again in a life of usefulness and hope', a contributor to the *Reading Citizen* claimed in 1926, when Phoebe was editor:

In the Labour Movement we have men and women whose soul is visible in their life's work for the uplifting of humanity to all that is beautiful and true, and the destruction of all that is ugly and false, and their one aim is a life of service to the whole world.

No-one embraced the Cause with more conviction than Phoebe and Albert. Their faith was in socialism, not communism, but in those heady days after the Russian Revolution it could have gone either way.

Albert and his brothers had been eye-witnesses to the much-forgotten German Revolution. They were liberated from the camp at Ruhleben by the camp guard, who rebelled against their officers and formed a Soldiers' Council. Albert retained a copy of their manifesto for years: 'Tell your countryman...that the former ruling classes are utterly powerless and the German

people has taken firmly the rule of Government in its hands.'

'On the 9th of November we knew that Berlin was in throes of revolution', he wrote to the *Reading Standard* on his return. 'The red flag was flying from all the official buildings and from the Imperial Castle.'

The German revolution was rapidly suppressed, but even in Britain there were ripples. In June 1917 a Provisional Committee of Workers and Soldiers' Councils had been set up. Its members included such well-known pacifists as George Lansbury, Ramsay MacDonald and Tom Quelch, whose magnificently-named brother Lorenzo was a leader of the Reading Labour movement.

Albert and Phoebe discussed the possibility of a Bolshevik-style coup in Britain, but without much enthusiasm: 'I am a pacifist and certainly do not favour a bloody revolution', wrote Phoebe to Albert, 'but I guess that it is not the ILP or Labour generally that will decide the issue'.

The communists were still strong in Reading. Harry, the other Quelch brother, had been national organiser for the Marxist SDF, but Lorenzo and his colleagues preferred the more pragmatic option offered by the Labour Party.

The Reading party was formed in April 1918, with Rabson as first chairman, but in the early years they were constantly heckled by the Communists. A year after the formation of the party, the leadership felt the need to call a public meeting at the Town Hall to expose 'Bolshevik Fallacies', at which Lorenzo Quelch derided the dictatorship of the proletariat as 'an absurdity...the Socialist Republic of the future must be based on political and industrial democracy'.

'In my young days I was regarded as a 'Red Woman' because I advocated changes which were obviously necessary,' wrote Phoebe to a friend near the end of her life:

It was a time when poverty, slums, squalour, preventable diseases and epidemics were rife. I like to think that our radical propaganda succeeded in arousing the conversion of people in high places and resulted in the development of our social services and the other movements which have practically abolished poverty.

Her first taste of public office came in October 1919, when she was appointed to the local Profiteering Committee, set up under that August's Profiteering Act to deal with the excessive profits that traders were making out of post-war shortages. The regulations expressly stipulated that both Labour and women should be adequately represented; and Phoebe had already made her mark by leading a protest march through the streets of Reading just before the previous Christmas, on a bitterly cold and wet day —

as the *Reading Worker* had reported. 'What is this procession coming along from the direction of the Butts? Ah! Women in front with a banner inscribed 'Hunger Drives!' and 'There are limits to human endurance'. The second speaker

is a young woman who, in spite of the weather, manages to raise her voice so as to reach the fringe of the immense crowd. Miss Blackall tells of the women of her class who have to leave their household duties to stand in queues for hours, only to be turned away unable to buy the necessary food for their families. She protests against such indignities being inflicted on her sex and class.

In 1919, Phoebe and Albert were both elected to the Reading Board of Poor Law Guardians, a body created by the 1834 Poor Law Act, and responsible for the grim Victorian workhouses. Originally, the Guardians consisted mostly of upright citizens who saw their duties primarily in terms of keeping down the Poor Rates by making 'public relief' as unattractive an option as they could. That view had been progressively subverted by the election of Guardians more sympathetic to the plight of the poor, a process which gained added impetus once the first socialists were elected.

By the time that Phoebe and Albert were elected, the Reading Board had evolved into a relatively benign organisation. In 1909, George Lansbury, the ILP pioneer, visited the Reading Workhouse on the Oxford Road and pronounced himself 'impressed' with what he saw. Eleven years later, the building was converted by the Guardians into an infirmary; the Workhouse Master was replaced by a Medical Superintendent, and Battle Hospital was born.

Phoebe was the first Labour woman to be elected to the Reading Guardians, and it was here that her opponents first called her 'The Red Woman'. She very quickly made her mark, specialising in the problems of poor children, for which she was well qualified through her work on the Children's Camps.

Soon after her election she was sent to represent the Board at a conference on Infant Welfare, and in 1920 became vice-chair of the Infant Poor Committee. It was her contention that 'the Poor Law must be administered in a spirit of brotherhood and humanity'. Relief must be paid at a rate that was not just adequate for adults but for children too, so that 'the children are not so stunted in their youth that they become a burden to themselves and the community when they grow up'.

Phoebe's service on the Guardians coincided with Reading's worst bout of unemployment between the wars.

In 1921 there were 4,000 registered as unemployed, including 1,500 ex-

servicemen. Unemployment benefit, paid by central government, was available to many workers, but only to a maximum of fifteen weeks a year. Those whose benefit had expired had to resort to the Guardians for assistance.

In December 1920 Lorenzo Quelch, seconded by Phoebe, convinced the Reading Board of Guardians to pay 'relief' money to the destitute unemployed. At first the relief scales were extremely low – 'insufficient to raise recipients above destitution level', Phoebe recalled:

The principle adopted was that 'relief' might not exceed what a man might earn when employed. I fought this principle and after much discussion we did manage to raise the scales – but even so they remained inadequate and there were many demonstrations against both the low relief scales and against the low wages of men in work.

The Board's Labour members found themselves caught between two stools. Many of the demonstrations were organised by the local Communist Unemployed Workers Committee, who accused Quelch and his colleagues of selling out, and demanded relief rates that Quelch believed they could never have wrung from the non-Labour majority.

Amongst the Liberal members of the Board was Mrs Stansfield, former suffragette and, according to Phoebe, 'a wonderful person. I always admired her immensely'. Mrs Stansfield maintained the official line and very nearly came unstuck, but, as she told her daughter, found an unexpected ally:

Mr. Q. opposed as usual and so did all the Labour members but Miss Blackall did it very nicely and expressed her admiration of me.... The crowd of unemployed had been outside making an awful noise and when I left I had to go through a hooting, swearing and threatening mob. I walked into it alone but almost at once Miss Blackall was by my side with her arm on my shoulder and we walked the length of Thorn Street followed by the crowd. Wasn't she a dear!.... Not a single man came to my help. It was left for an opponent and a young girl to walk with me.

It was a typically brave gesture, not least because Phoebe risked alienating herself from her own supporters, but the episode didn't harm her reputation. In February 1922, Lorenzo Quelch, penned her a midnight note:

my profound appreciation for the most excellent manner in which you presented the case of the unemployed at the Town Council meeting tonight. Nothing could have been better. You must pardon me if it sounds too familiar but I felt exceedingly proud of you.

Despite constant heckling and jeering from the Communists, the Labour Guardians persevered with their policy of pushing for small increases, until

