



W. T. STEAD IN 1911

THE LIFE OF W. T. STEAD

BY

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IN TWO VOLUMES

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A wide variety of subjects were touched upon in these conversations, and they will furnish, here and there, valuable 'Footnotes to History' to some future chronicler of our times. I shall restrict myself, however, to the passages which bear directly on the friendship between the two men and on the hopes which formed so close a bond between them.

Nearly all their plans and hopes had root in that grandiose idea of a world-wide English-speaking Confederation which pre-occupied them from almost the first hours of their acquaintance in April 1889. The fateful pig-headedness of George III was often the starting-point for their debates. 'To think of the insensate folly of that man!' Rhodes began once at dinner at the Burlington Hotel, his favourite London home, almost as soon as he and his guests – Stead, Sir John Willoughby, Mr. Abe Bailey and two others – had taken their seats at table. 'To think of the insensate folly of that man! And two or three of his advisers were worse than he. But for George III war would have been unknown throughout the world to-day. The English-speaking race would have been reorganized as a unit, with its central Parliament meeting alternately in New York and London, and it would have given peace to the world. There would have been nothing more for Krupp to do or any of your cannon-makers. And to think of all that lost because of the insensate folly of that man!'

A beginning after Stead's own heart! 'Excellent!' he exclaimed, 'All political discussions concerning the Empire ought to begin with a formal anathema upon George III!'

On this particular occasion the talk drifted quickly into a quite different channel. The date was July 19, 1901. The war in South Africa was the burning topic of the moment, and Rhodes's next anathema was for Kruger and Krugerism. After the Transvaal came Rhodesia, and Stead learnt how the problem of religious education had been solved at Bulawayo – a Jew teaching in one schoolroom, a Protestant in another, a Salvationist in a third, the time for instruction being from 8 a.m. to 8.30, and children without a creed of any kind being given an extra lesson in geography. 'It would never do,' explained Rhodes, 'to allow a lad to run wild from 8 to 8.30, throwing up his cap and thanking God he was an atheist!' Whether the Jews believed in a future life, how South Africa could be federated, how soon Canada would become part and parcel of the United States, these and half a dozen other questions then came up in turn for

consideration. On the whole, it was not one of the most memorable, apparently, of the Rhodes dinner-parties, except for the presence of Mr. Abe Bailey, thenceforth a firm friend of Stead's. 'A very straight man,' was Stead's impression of him, 'Straight in face and straight, I should say, in character. His conversation was more interesting than that of anybody else, not even excepting Mr. Rhodes who had not so much new to say.'

The theme of Anglo-American world-predominance is treated of most fully in the first of the conversations, held in Stead's office at Mowbray House in February, 1891. We have seen in Chapter 18 how Stead came to convince himself that the centre of the English-speaking world must presently shift to the United States. He now broaches this bold theory to Rhodes.

'What do you think?' he asks. 'Should we not join the American Republic, the whole of the British Empire being reorganized on the basis of the American Constitution?'

Rhodes – Stead tells us – became rather excited for the moment, then replied:

'How our ideas grow! I take it – I take it! Our two minds are moving exactly alike. I understand you mean to say that if you secured the union of the English-speaking peoples, you would be willing to be annexed to the American Republic. So would I. Dear me, how ideas expand! I thought my ideas were tolerably large, but yours have outgrown them. Yes, yes, you are quite right. For the sake of that great need let us all join the Republic!'

One would have liked to ask Stead what his old father, by this time in Heaven, was disposed to think about the necessity for the proposed amplification of *Pax Britannica*. One cannot read about it without remembering the wise old gentleman's remark to his son, in the early 'seventies, about not encroaching too much on the province of God Almighty!

We need not follow this discourse of Rhodes' any further – it was merely an elaboration in detail of the doctrine implied in these opening sentences and summarized for us by Stead in the passages cited in Chapter 14. From the standpoint of what the two idealists held to be (undeniably) the 'elect race' it was a most inspiring doctrine.

Among the inferior races actually specified by Rhodes in this connection were the French, the Germans, and the Portuguese.

Thinking chiefly of the latter, whose presence in Africa was a perpetual vexation to him, he broke out: 'Do you mean to tell me that any part was left in perpetuity for the pigmies? That these regions have to be peopled by pigmies while a superior race stands multiplying outside? I do not believe it. Our people will never adopt the doctrines of Malthus. They will go on multiplying and probably in 200 years they will fill the whole world. That is what we have to look forward to.'

The Spanish were not mentioned, but one may assume that Rhodes held them in not much higher esteem than the Portuguese, certainly not higher than the French and Germans. And yet, as we have already learnt, it was to a Spaniard he went for inspiration in his chief project for bringing his dream into being – to Loyola. Indeed, even in his everyday life as a practical statesman at the Cape, he tells Stead that he had modelled himself on the Society of Loyola and Francis Xavier. 'In South Africa, I am a Dutchman, remember,' he declares; 'I am all things to all men, I am a Jesuit. As the Jesuits were Chinese in China, so I am a Dutchman in South Africa,' and he proceeds to tell of the University which he is anxious to create in Cape Town. 'Hofmeyr distrusts this,' he says, with a smile. 'He sees possibilities in it. I see possibilities in it also – certainties! I shall have my own rectors and professors, men who will be imbued with the true ideas, men who will widen the outlook of their students.' One can imagine the glow of humorous triumph upon Rhodes's face as he gave out these words. Rhodes's friends describe how, when he was particularly pleased with himself, he used to sit upon his hands and rock his body about like a great schoolboy. Cannot one picture him so now, exulting over his benevolent, but guileful, day-dream – his Jesuitical outwitting of the very estimable but exasperatingly hide-bound Dutch?

The talk concentrated presently upon the Secret Society – the Society of the Elect (Rhodes liked that word) who were to bind themselves to work for the British Empire in the way in which the Jesuits worked for the Church of Rome.

Hitherto, apart from Stead, Rhodes had confided his scheme only to Lord Rothschild and to 'little Johnston.'¹ He had actually made his will, bequeathing his wealth in trust to the former for use in

¹ The term almost always used by Rhodes (as mentioned before) in talking of Mr. H. H. Johnston, not yet Sir Harry.

connection with it. But he had grave misgivings in this connection. Lord Rothschild, he felt, was an excellent man, but entirely lacking in imagination. Rich men of the Rothschild type were to him an object of contemptuous pity. 'Look at the criminal in his cell,' he exclaimed to Stead, 'and at Lord Rothschild! It is hard to say which has the harder lot. The prisoner has some fun, at least, with the spiders and the mice, but look at Rothschild! Out of the 365 days, he spends 300 in turning over bits of paper and marking them. Look at the two men far enough off, so as not to see any difference in clothing, and it will be hard to see any difference between them. Think of that man and his millions – what could he not do with them!'

This by way of preface to what he was now coming to. Stead's *Review of Reviews* and 'Association of Helpers,' he went on, had made a good beginning for the work he had in mind: 'You have got all the ideas, but you require the funds.' In a year or two, the funds should be forthcoming – enough even to buy *The Times*, if necessary. But Lord Rothschild must not be left in sole control of the money. There must be a General of the Society, with powers like those of the General of the Jesuits, and there must be a Committee of three or so. 'You have the ideas, *you* understand, and little Johnston, *he* knows – what would you say to you and Johnston being associated with Rothschild in this Trust?' Stead feared that Johnston – the right man in other respects – would not be available, being generally away in Africa. Rhodes agreed. Very well, then, let the Trust be vested in Rothschild and Stead alone. Rothschild would not like that, Stead objected laughingly. 'When he reads the will and finds that I am in it also, there will be ructions!'

'Well,' said Rhodes, 'I don't mind. I shall be gone!'

And so it was left. Here, *verbatim*, is Stead's concluding paragraph:

'I telegraphed for Brett, who came two hours later and we had a long talk. The net upshot of which was that the ideal arrangement would be, so far as we could see at present: Rhodes, General of the Society; Stead, Brett, Milner, to be the Junta of three. After Rhodes, Stead to be General, with a third, who might be Rothschild in succession; behind them, Manning, the Booths, little Johnston, Albert Grey, Arthur Balfour, to constitute a circle of Initiates. The Association of Helpers to be developed. A College, say under Professor Seeley, to be

established to train people in the English-speaking idea. Brett thought that some money should be in at once – not much, but some.'

The sequel is told on May 5, 1891, Stead having had meanwhile a second talk with Rhodes and one with Milner, recently home from Egypt, who is 'filled with admiration' and full of enthusiasm for the scheme: Milner himself, it seems, had cherished a somewhat similar project for a band of Companions of St. George. Rhodes, before leaving for Cape Town, had looked in one evening at Mowbray House, whence, he said, he was going direct to his lawyer, Mr. Hawkesley, having altered his will, as he had said he would, and left the whole of his fortune to Lord Rothschild and Stead together – Stead to be considered by Lord Rothschild as the representative of his ideas, and the money to be utilized in accordance with Stead's views. But while thus providing for the possibility of his death, Rhodes declared he was 'very strong' and quite hoped and expected to be able to control his fortune himself. 'He seemed very well pleased with himself,' Stead records in conclusion; 'said he had seen everybody and had worked like a galley-slave.'

There we may leave the matter. All that there remains to tell about it has been told fully in Stead's book, *The Last Will and Testament of Cecil Rhodes*. From that last will Rhodes removed Stead's name because, as he said, of his 'extraordinary eccentricity,' a phrase covering Stead's two besetting sins in his friend's eyes – his pro-Boer partisanship, chiefly, but also, in some degree, his obsession with spooks.

The Secret Society was still-born. The Rhodes Scholarships idea, conceived at about the same time, shows every sign of immortality. Rhodes and Stead had often discussed it in the 'nineties, but it was not until April 10, 1900, that the provisions to be incorporated in the trust deed were finally decided on. Rhodes invited Stead to dinner – again at the Burlington – to discuss the matter with himself and his solicitor, Mr. Hawkesley. But Stead's account of that evening's conversation contains little that has not been told already a score of times, by himself or by Rhodes's biographers or by the actual terms of the Rhodes Scholarship Trust. We all remember how Rhodes approached the subject – his determination not to let the scholarships go to mere bookworms. The 'smug' element, as he called it (including Greek and Latin scholarship), might stand for four-tenths in the

selection of his scholars, but 'brutality' (by which he meant only manliness, with perhaps horse-sense) should stand for two-tenths. 'Then there is tact and leadership, again two-tenths. That makes up the whole. You see how it works?'

Stead urged that tact and leadership should count for more and scholarship for less, but both Rhodes and Hawkesley were against him. Eventually a compromise was agreed to, these two elements being made to stand each for three-tenths. It may be noted that when he was thus bequeathing his millions Rhodes had practically no ready money. Stead had called him 'the Millionaire without a sixpence.' 'Quite true!' Rhodes replied, 'I never have a bob. At this present moment my account at the bank is overdrawn £70,000. Never a bob! But my money is all right. Don't be afraid; it won't fail.'

While concerned mostly with problems and projects and big ideas, these talks turned of course upon persons now and again. Lord Milner's name recurs repeatedly, Stead condemning his South African policy, Rhodes defending and praising him. 'I have the greatest possible regard for Milner, but I have seen very little of him,' he declared that same evening. 'He said to me, "The less you and I are seen together the better." Hence I never invited him to Groote Schuur.' The war had been Milner's war, he added, not Chamberlain's – Chamberlain had been strong against it. This led to the usual wrangle, Stead deploring the war, Rhodes justifying it and accusing Stead of insubordination – the kind of insubordination, he complained, which he had always seen in the way of their Secret Society. 'Yes, insubordination,' he insisted. 'Now here we are, your three boys, Garrett, Milner and myself. We are all your boys and we are on the spot, and we all agree that a certain course is necessary and instead of your accepting our authority, we being on the spot, being your boys, nothing will satisfy you but to go off on your own line and oppose us!' If it had been a social question at home in which Stead had been interested, he, Rhodes, even if he had thought Stead quite wrong, would have said to himself, 'No, that's no business of mine – he says it is so,' and would have backed Stead up.

Here Stead tried to get a word in.

'Let me have my say!' Rhodes went on, 'I am going to get my talk in before you!' – but (so Stead describes him) quite genial and jolly and smiling and without a trace of bitterness. 'Take, for instance, America. I read your book on Chicago. That tells me what America