

CONSPIRACY AT MEERUT

by

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Preface by

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TO
MY MOTHER

“Wee are all conceived in close Prison; in our Mothers wombes, we are close Prisoners all; when we are borne, we are borne but to the liberty of the house; Prisoners still, though within larger walls; and then all our life is but a going out to the place of Execution, to death. Now was there ever any man seen to sleep in the Cart, between New-gate and Tyborne? between the Prison, and the place of Execution, does any man sleep? And we sleep all the way; from the womb to the grave we are never thoroughly awake; but passe on with such dreames, and imaginations as these, I may live as well, as another, and why should I dye, rather than another?”

DONNE, *Sermons*

PREFACE

THE Meerut trial, in which the author of this book was one of the leading figures, is a grim incident in the history of British India. Men were torn from civil life for long years whose only crime was to carry out the ordinary work of trade union and political agitation after the fashion of everyday life in this country. Not merely socialist opinion in Great Britain recognized that it was a prosecution scandalous in its inception and disgraceful in its continuance. If the responsibility for undertaking it lies at the door of a Tory viceroy, that for its continuance belongs to a Socialist Secretary of State. It is difficult, granted their very different outlooks, not to feel that the responsibility of the Socialist Minister was the more heavy; for, if the Viceroy acted with harshness, the Secretary of State sacrificed courage and conviction to *raison d'état*.

Mr. Hutchinson's reminiscences have great interest. It is not everyone who can emerge from an experience so profound as his and preserve a sense of humour and of proportion. The reader will find nothing here of that bitterness which, in the circumstances, would have been amply intelligible. He will find a straightforward account of how a young man, to whom ideas of social justice seemed important, became involved in conflict with the vast apparatus of governmental oppression in India, and of how nearly he was sacrificed (along with others as guiltless as he) to its insatiable appetite for power. If it is said that, at long last, a grave judicial wrong was, for some, at least, of the prisoners, righted, the answer is that years in their lives were unnecessarily wasted to placate an ignorant and relentless machine which, if it had been capable of elementary common sense, would never have dreamed of undertaking the prosecution. A government capable of such folly ought at least to have compensated its

victims. But, no doubt, a government capable of such folly is thereby fundamentally incapable of insight. We cannot expect it to be generous when it does not know how to be just.

I hope that Mr. Hutchinson's book will awaken some part of British public opinion to the sense of what is done in their name in India. A government which acts in this fashion indicts itself. It acts in fear; it operates by terror; it is incapable of that magnanimity which is the condition for the exercise of justifiable power. The Meerut trial belongs to the class of case of which the Mooney trial and the Sacco-Vanzetti trial in America, the Dreyfus trial in France, the Reichstag Fire trial in Germany, are the supreme instances. Because they are foreign, we regard them with pious horror. If we learn of what our government is capable, perhaps we shall learn also that we must refrain from criticism unless we are willing to prevent the occurrence of similar injustices amongst ourselves.

HAROLD J. LASKI

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