

4. NO SURRENDER!

Before long I heard the sounds of force feeding in the cell next to mine. It was almost more than I could bear[;] it was Elsie Howey, I was sure. When the ghastly process was over and all quiet, I tapped on the wall and called out at the top of my voice, which wasn't much just then, "No surrender" and there came the answer past any doubt in Elsie's voice, "No surrender."—Constance Lytton¹

In the months after Constance Lytton and her companions were released from Holloway, the mutual ill will between the suffragettes and the Asquith government grew even more intense. In late June of 1909, after the government declined to support a suffrage bill that included some votes for women, another group of WSPU supporters attempted to see Asquith. As before, members of the delegation were arrested and sentenced to prison despite their claim at trial that they had a constitutional right to petition the government for redress of their grievances.²

They also made their case at St. Stephen's Hall in the Palace of Westminster, where a WSPU member, Marion Wallace-Dunlop, stamped a message on the wall which read: "Women's Deputation. Bill of Rights. It is the Right of the subjects to petition the King, and all commitments and prosecutions for such petitioning are illegal."³ The last sentence was a quotation from the 1689 English Bill of Rights.

A judge sentenced Wallace-Dunlop to prison for causing ten shillings' worth of damage to St. Stephen's Hall.⁴ When she arrived at Holloway to serve her sentence, Wallace-Dunlop told the prison governor that unless he gave her the privileges and relaxed regimentation accorded prisoners

of conscience, she would not eat. When he refused, she began a hunger strike. Staff left a special tray of delicacies in her cell to tempt her but she remained steadfast.⁵ Concerned about her increasing weakness, a prison doctor came to check her regularly. She always met him with a smile. "What are you going to have for dinner today?" he asked one evening. "My determination," she replied. After having fasted for ninety-one hours, she grew weak and the prison governor set her free, even though she had more than three weeks left on her sentence.⁶

News of what Wallace-Dunlop had done spread quickly. Upon their arrival at Holloway, other suffragettes told the prison governor that they, too, would begin hunger strikes unless he treated them as political prisoners—the way Irish nationalists and socialists were treated. He allowed them to keep their own clothes but warned them that when a committee of magistrates visited the prison, he would charge them with mutiny. The women repeated their request in petitions to Herbert Gladstone, the home secretary, but received no response. When the magistrates arrived, they sentenced the women to solitary confinement for violating prison rules. True to their word, the suffragettes began fasting. After several days, they, too, were released.⁷

Hunger strikes gave the suffragettes a way to reduce the length of their imprisonment, if at great cost to themselves. This only lasted a couple of months though. In September of 1909, prison officials began responding to a hunger striker by overpowering and restraining the suffragette, forcing her mouth open with a wooden or steel gag, jamming a long tube down her throat, and pouring liquid nourishment into the tube. To regain the upper hand, Gladstone had decided that "for the present these women must be treated like prisoners with defective minds who [were] not amenable to the prison regulations."⁸

By then, Constance Lytton had recuperated from her stay at Holloway and was traveling around the country for the WSPU, speaking at meetings and rallies in England, Wales, and Scotland. In October, Emmeline Pankhurst, the charismatic leader of the WSPU, took Lytton to visit a nursing home in Birmingham where some of the first force-fed hunger

strikers were recovering. As had happened when she first met suffragettes who had been imprisoned at Holloway, Lytton felt guilty about not having contributed more herself. By the time she left, she had made up her mind to join the hunger strikers in prison.⁹

A few days later, Lytton and another suffragette destined to become well known,¹⁰ Emily Wilding Davison, waited by the side of a road in Newcastle where they thought a car carrying Chancellor of the Exchequer David Lloyd George would be passing by.¹¹ Lytton threw a rock at a wheel of an official-looking vehicle, careful not to hit the chauffeur or any passenger. Wrapped around the stone was a message to Lloyd George that read: "Rebellion against tyrants is obedience to God." Two police officers in plain clothes arrested her immediately.¹²

At her trial, the authorities made every effort not to convict her but she insisted to the judge that she had intended to be disorderly. He found her guilty and sentenced her to a month in Newcastle Prison with several other suffragettes.¹³

When she arrived at the prison, Lytton and another prisoner—Jane Brailsford, the wife of a prominent journalist—were housed in a separate part of the prison and given privileges not granted to the other suffragettes. Prison officials put the others in punishment cells upon their announcing their intention to fast and had them force-fed. Lytton and Brailsford began hunger strikes to protest the treatment their colleagues were receiving and were released in a couple of days without having been fed against their will.¹⁴

Suffrage supporters charged the government with having a double standard. Brailsford's husband wrote to the *Times*, saying that if force-feeding was too horrible for some, it was too horrible for all.¹⁵ George Bernard Shaw also wrote to the *Times*, congratulating Gladstone on his decision not to feed Lytton by force and suggesting that he treat the other suffragettes the same way. If he declined to do that, Shaw invited him to enjoy a banquet at which "[t]he rarest wines and delicacies shall be provided absolutely regardless of expense" but on the condition that "Mr. Herbert Gladstone shall partake through the nose."¹⁶

Gladstone responded to critics concerned about the health of force-fed suffragettes by assuring his colleagues in the Commons that a physician carefully checked every woman who was force-fed for evidence of heart disease. When asked about Lytton and Brailsford's early release from Newcastle Prison, he denied that the government treated suffragettes with political connections any differently from other citizens, saying, "[T]here is not the slightest ground for the insinuations which are being freely made that Lady Constance Lytton was released because she was a peer's sister. She was released solely on medical grounds."¹⁷

Lytton came up with a way to test the government's claim that it treated all suffragettes equally and was blind to issues of social class or political influence: she decided to get imprisoned while disguised as an ordinary seamstress. When she learned that Selina Martin, one of the suffragettes she had met at the nursing home in Birmingham, was imprisoned in Liverpool and likely being fed against her will, she arranged with WSPU organizers in Liverpool to lead a group to the jail and call upon the governor to release the suffragettes.

After attending WSPU events in Manchester, she put together her disguise. She had her hair cut short in early Victorian style and purchased an entire working-class outfit, topping it off with an unfashionable cloth hat she bought at an inexpensive dry goods shop.¹⁸



Fig. 11. Jane Warton (Constance Lytton)

When she approached the jail in Liverpool, Lytton was taken with the thought that prison staff might be force-feeding Selina Martin at that moment, writing later: "I felt so feeble, had so little faith in the utility of what I was about to do, yet I was athirst to do it."¹⁹ When the women arrived on the prison grounds, Lytton threw some stones over a hedge into the governor's garden. Two policemen seized her and took her to the nearest station. Although she had planned to go to prison alone, two other women broke a window of the governor's house so they would be arrested and could accompany her.²⁰

One of the women was released, but the judge sentenced Lytton (under her pseudonym, Jane Warton) to Walton Gaol for a fortnight and the other suffragette, Elsie Howey, for six weeks. Upon arriving at the jail, Howey politely advised a wardress that they would refuse all food unless treated as prisoners of conscience. She explained: "We are sorry if it will give trouble; we shall give as little as possible; but our fast is against the Government, and we shall fight them with our lives, not hurting anyone else."²¹ After being placed in her cell, Lytton wrote a quotation from Thoreau's *Duty of Civil Disobedience* on the wall with a slate pencil: "Under a Government which imprisons any unjustly, the true place for a just man (or woman) is also a prison."²²

After she refused food for a couple of days, prison officials had Lytton put in a punishment cell. Two days later, the senior medical officer and five wardresses came with feeding equipment. Wardresses grabbed Lytton's arms, legs, and head while the doctor forced her mouth open with a steel gag, rammed a plastic tube down her throat, and poured a mixture of milk, egg, and brandy into the tube. Lytton immediately threw it up all over her hair and clothes. As the doctor left, he slapped her on the cheek. Before long, she heard a clamor in the cell next to hers. She was sure it was Elsie Howey being force-fed. Once it was over and quiet returned, she tapped on the wall and said, as loudly as she could, "No surrender!" Soon, Elsie's reply came back: "No surrender!"²³

Despite Gladstone's assurance that a doctor carefully examined each prisoner before she was force-fed, Lytton wasn't examined until

she began to shiver uncontrollably while being force-fed for the third time. The doctor who was feeding her summoned another doctor; he put a stethoscope to her heart briefly and exclaimed to his colleague, "Oh ripping, splendid heart! You can go on with her!"²⁴

After being overpowered and fed six times, Lytton was a broken woman. She longed for death and felt she could take no more. Remembering her pact with Elsie Howey, though, she made herself get up from her bed and walk around her cell until she recovered her resolve.²⁵

In the meantime, rumors began to circulate that the prisoner in Walton Gaol wasn't a seamstress named Jane Warton but Lady Constance Lytton. Her sister Emily received a telegram from the *Daily News* meant for Lord Victor Lytton, asking whether the rumor was true. She called the prison at once and quickly put the pieces of the puzzle together. Prison officials arranged for Emily to pick her sister up the next day. When Emily met with the prison governor, he told her he had never seen such a bad case of force-feeding, and that Constance had been almost asphyxiated every time.²⁶

Constance Lytton returned home to recover, having lost about twenty-five pounds in the ordeal.²⁷ Victor Lytton requested that the Home Office investigate her claims that she hadn't been examined before being fed by force, that the senior medical officer struck her, and that the examination finally made by another doctor had been cursory. A Home Office official replied that the doctor had felt her pulse before force-feeding her for the first time and hadn't slapped her but had just patted her cheek to comfort her. The official also claimed that the symptoms of heart defects like hers varied from time to time and were difficult to detect.²⁸

In a letter to the *Times*, Victor pointed out that the same person, when known to be Lady Constance Lytton, had been judged to be too ill to be force-fed, but when thought to be Jane Warton, had been force-fed eight times and that prison officials only stopped when they discovered she was actually Lady Lytton.²⁹

While Constance Lytton was going through her ordeal at the Walton Gaol, Henry Brailsford, the husband of her companion in Newcastle Prison, was putting together a group of MPs from all political parties who supported women's suffrage. Ever since the Liberal landslide in the 1906 election—which brought in 200 new Liberal members and 29 Labour members, most of whom had never sat in Parliament before—a clear majority in the House of Commons supported some type of women's suffrage.³⁰ They disagreed, however, on what form it should take. Some preferred a moderate approach, enfranchising only single women and widows; others supported giving the vote to women, regardless of marital status, on equal terms with men; a third group wanted to radically expand the franchise to include all adults, regardless of gender.³¹

Encouraged by the prospect that an all-party group of MPs would be able to put together a women's franchise bill that could become law, on January 31, 1910, Emmeline Pankhurst announced that the WSPU was suspending all militant actions for the time being.³² Within a few months, the group of legislators—which became known as the Conciliation Committee because it was working to reconcile the diverse viewpoints of its members—reached agreement on a moderate bill that would enfranchise about a million women.³³

The bill won a comfortable 109-vote majority when it came up for its first vote in July of 1910. Bowing to pressure from his cabinet ministers—a majority of whom favored the enfranchisement of women—Asquith agreed to provide the bill with time on the legislative calendar as the committee requested.³⁴

The following November, Edward Grey announced that the government wouldn't be able to provide time on the calendar for the Conciliation Bill when Parliament reconvened.³⁵ This ended the truce. Eight days later, Emmeline Pankhurst led 300 suffragettes on a march to the Palace of Westminster. Police were brought in from London's East End who were used to handling working-class men and women with violence. On what came to be known as Black Friday, they assaulted the marchers, kicking and punching them and grabbing their breasts.

Although the police arrested 115 women, government officials dropped all the charges the next day.³⁶

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By the time the Conciliation Bill came up for another vote in May of 1911, the committee had revised it in response to concerns some opponents raised. The second bill fared even better than the first, the majority having grown to 166 votes. It had become a true all-party bill, securing majority support from members of all four parties.³⁷ Despite the resounding majority, the government declined to afford the bill any more government time in 1911 but agreed to provide it with all the time it needed during the next session.³⁸

A month after the vote, 10,000 women marched in a seven-mile-long procession to Albert Hall in support of the second Conciliation Bill. Constance Lytton walked at the front of the parade with 616 other women, all of whom were dressed in white and carried silver staves. Each had served time in prison for the cause; Lytton and 86 others had been hunger strikers. Both of Lytton's sisters and a brother joined the march. Her other brother, Lord Victor Lytton, spoke at Albert Hall after the rally.³⁹

It was beginning to look as though the hundreds of meetings and rallies, the Black Friday assaults, and the hunger strikes hadn't been in vain. "With sure and certain steps the cause of women's suffrage is marching to victory," read a story in the *Daily Chronicle*.⁴⁰ Two days after the march, London's evening newspaper the *Star* predicted: "Nothing can prevent the triumph of the cause which behind it has such reserves of courage and conviction."⁴¹

In years past, women's suffrage supporters assumed that the passage of a franchise bill by the Commons would only be the preliminary skirmish to a more forbidding battle in the House of Lords, the stronghold of anti-suffrage sentiment.⁴² In August of 1911, though, the Lords lost a dominance struggle with the lower chamber and bowed to the king's threat that if they didn't approve passage of a bill removing their ability

to veto legislation passed by the Commons, he would appoint enough Liberal peers to ensure its passage.⁴³ From then on, the Lords would only be able to delay any suffrage bill for two years, not veto it altogether, bringing success even closer for suffrage supporters.

In early November, Asquith announced that the government would introduce its own bill to enfranchise the four million men who weren't eligible to vote under the existing franchise laws. WSPU leaders saw this as a ploy to undermine the Conciliation Bill. They weren't alone. The *Evening Standard and Globe* said: "We are no friends of female suffrage, but anything more contemptible than the attitude assumed by the government . . . is difficult to imagine."⁴⁴ The *Evening News* predicted that the government's bill was so incompatible with the second Conciliation Bill that it would blow the Conciliation Bill to smithereens.⁴⁵ Asquith's chancellor of the exchequer, David Lloyd George, admitted that was the goal, bragging at a Liberal meeting later in November: "We have torpedoed the Conciliation Bill."⁴⁶

Relations between the suffragettes and Asquith, already strained, deteriorated even further. Two weeks after Asquith's announcement, the WSPU began its "broken windows" campaign.⁴⁷ Equipped with bags of stones and hammers, suffragettes smashed windows in government buildings, offices of the Liberal Federation, and West End shops.⁴⁸ The next month, matters spiraled even further out of control when Emily Wilding Davison set three mailboxes afire by dropping burning linen into them.⁴⁹ The Post Office worked to turn public opinion against the suffragettes by delivering the charred fragments of mail to the addressees in special envelopes, which explained the reason for the damage.⁵⁰

Shortly before the second Conciliation Bill came up for another vote in March of 1912, the WSPU organized two more window-smashing campaigns in London.⁵¹ A friend wrote a cheerful letter to Lord Cromer, an anti-suffrage leader, saying he was sure supporters of the Conciliation Bill had lost ten votes for every pane of glass the suffragettes broke.⁵² When the bill came up for a vote in the Commons, the 166-vote majority it had gotten ten months earlier turned into a majority of 14 votes against

it, a reversal Martin Pugh attributed to the backlash against the WPSU's "broken windows" campaign.⁵³ Majority support for the enfranchisement of women, gained little by little through decades of patient work, had been quickly lost. Then the militancy became even more extreme: suffragettes began planting bombs, setting buildings afire, and slashing paintings in museums.