

A while ago the Minister hoped to escape from his difficulties by setting up a system of "alternative service" for conscientious objectors. The Defence Amendment Act of 1912 provides that a youth who can satisfy a magistrate that he objects to bearing arms on the ground that it is contrary to his religious belief may be granted exemption on condition that he undertakes to perform some non-military "alternative service," to be arranged by the Government. The Minister thought these privileged lads might be put to tree-planting or road-making. A very few lads obtained the exemption, but the alternative service has not yet been arranged. He refused in 1912 to place the "conscientious objector" on the same footing, because it is obviously open to every objector to claim to be acting on grounds of conscience. But the events of 1913 forced the Minister to reconsider this decision, and he went so far as to ask some of the passive resisters if they would be willing to perform alternative service. They refused, because they saw that their consent would have rendered it easier to administer the Act, and thus they would have become co-operators with the authorities in administering conscription. The Quakers and anti-militarists upheld them in their refusal. The Minister told the House on July 12th that "it seemed almost hopeless to attempt to solve the problem of providing an acceptable equivalent service." Thus the administrator of a system of compulsion was brought to the point of bewailing his inability to provide something "acceptable" to those whom it was his special function to coerce, and the offer which was at first withheld because everybody would jump at it was at length laid aside because nobody would look at it.

In this open bankruptcy of coercion, the

Minister obtained as little help from his friends as he did from his opponents. He moved on July 17th to set up a committee of both Houses of Parliament "to consider the amendments made in the defence legislation by the Act of 1912 in relation to military custody, punishment, alternative service and such other matters as the Minister of Defence may refer to it." The Committee was duly appointed and was directed to report within twenty-one days, but seven weeks later, on September 3rd, the Minister mentioned that it had not yet sat. Newspapers up to the middle of October contain no further news of it. Perhaps its members felt that conscription (which all of them had supported) was not in a condition to stand investigation. Private advices show that it began at length to take evidence, but no report is yet available.

The end is not yet. The October "Repeal" tells of a new outbreak of prosecutions. Doubtless the Government, under military guidance, will try every possible resource of coercion before they admit defeat, for, as Lord Roberts wrote to Colonel Allen Bell, of New Zealand, "If you fail there, it will mean we shall not get it here." The Passive Resisters of New Zealand are fighting consciously for the freedom of their own country, but they are fighting also for the freedom of ours. A handful of lads—mostly working lads—out there, on the other side of the world, are daring, enduring, suffering, in order that English boys may still be free. It is not too much to hope that their final victory will come in time to help destroy that base and foolish conspiracy which would rob England too of her birthright of liberty.

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