2

Jews, “Blacks,” and the Promises of Radical Conservatism, 1919–1925

Only by rigidly guarding his frontiers, and by restriction of immigration, can he preserve his race purity and save himself from extinction.¹

The violence and upheaval of the Great War seemed to continue even after hostilities between Britain and Germany ceased in November 1918. Frontsoldiers returned home in a violent frame of mind. “All was not right with the spirit of the men who came back,” Philip Gibbs wrote in 1920 of the veterans.

Something was wrong. They put on civilian clothes again, looked to their mothers and wives very much like the young men who had gone to business in the peaceful days before August of ’14. But they had not come back the same men. Something had altered in them. They were subject to queer moods, queer tempers, fits of profound depression alternating with a restless desire for pleasure. Many of them were easily moved to passion when they lost control of themselves. Many were bitter in their speech, violent in opinion, frightening.²

In January 1919, returning soldiers rioted all over England; in June 1919, soldiers waiting to be demobilized attacked the Epsom police station and killed the station sergeant; in July, ex-servicemen rioting in protest against having been excluded from the ceremonies that marked “Peace Day” in Luton destroyed the town hall, resulting in 100 casualties. Rathbone’s fictional protagonist Joan, who went to work in a War Pensions Committee office after the war ended, observed that “to refuse a man his claim was a detestable task, and was often to provoke his
fury . . . . All the men seemed to be nervy, and some definitely unhinged. Doubtless they would settle down in time, but their release from the military machine was not, at the moment, beneficial to them." The Vote, a feminist paper, reported in May 1919 that "certain disquieting features marked the demonstration of the Discharged Soldiers and Sailors last Monday afternoon." It especially noted, with deep concern, "the animus . . . displayed against the women conductors on the omnibuses as they passed the procession," and the attempt by "a party of demonstrators" to drag "a young woman off a service car in which she was driving an officer who, by the way, did nothing to assist her." In 1920, an article in Time and Tide lamented the fact that as a result of the Great War "many people have become . . . mentally and morally unstable, and that in consequence crimes of a certain class are to-day alarmingly common over the entire country. Among these crimes is that of child outrage."3

Accounts of sexual attacks upon women filled the columns of newspapers. Gibbs reported that "the daily newspapers for many months have been filled with the record of dreadful crimes, of violence and passion. Most of them have been done by soldiers or ex-soldiers." He was struck by the brutality of passion, a murderous instinct, which have been manifested again and again in . . . riots and street rows and solitary crimes. These last are the worst because they are not inspired by a sense of injustice, however false, or any mob passion, but by homicidal mania and secret lust. The murders of young women, the outrages upon little girls, the violent robberies that have happened since the demobilizing of the armies have appalled decent-minded people.

The Vote, explaining "Why Carriages Reserved for Women are Needed," reported that "a young soldier, described in court as a desperate and dangerous man, was charged with assaulting a girl, aged 16, a domestic servant, in a railway carriage . . . . he sprang at her and caught her by the throat . . . . the accused said . . . he would have 'done her in.' "

Gibbs blamed "the seeds of insanity in the brains of men" on the "abnormal life of war" and on women who gave them venereal disease. In this version, the war and women become confused. "Sexually [the men] were starved," he argued.

For months they lived out of the sight and presence of women. But they came back into villages or towns where they were tempted by any poor slut who winked at them and infected them with illness.