WOMEN AT HOME AND BEYOND THE SEAS

AN ANOMALY

BEFORE dealing with certain War-aspects and probable Peace-aspects of Woman Suffrage in this country, some reference to the United States will not be out of place. If for no other reason, because the object-lesson afforded by that country was quoted as supplying a sound practical reason for the formation of the first Anti-Suffrage Society in England. Owing, we were told, to the exertions of a similar body in America, the Suffrage Cause there was dying, or already dead.

During the late Presidential Election, for the first time, all the great political parties in the United States officially endorsed Woman Suffrage.

Each party vied with the other in its appeal for women's support.

'*I am fighting with you*,' President Wilson declared at Atlantic City, where for the first time the head of the American Government attended a Woman Suffrage Convention. As a Democrat, Mr. Wilson advocated continued advance along the 'State by State' lines.

The rival Presidential candidate, Mr. Hughes, seemed in his initial pronouncement to go much further. For he advocated nothing less than an Amendment to the Constitution.

This, at first blush, seemed a notable advance. It *was* a notable advance to have the prospective President taking such a position.

Yet even in the enthusiasm and heat of the campaign Suffragists did not forget that they are under a special duty towards this great issue. They may not, because a powerful person is on their side, ignore his reasons for being there; nor, having elicited those reasons, shrink from forecasting the logical results.

Mr. Hughes's reasons satisfied no thinking Suffragist. He had too late and too little taken the trouble to inform himself about the issue he presumed to stand for. Owing to his admittedly great preoccupations in the past and to a certain

inelasticity of mind he had not come close enough to the subject to be able worthily to stand sponsor for so great an issue. Particularly in the West, where he was weakest and Suffrage was strongest, he gave the impression of knowing infinitely less about the merits of the measure than did the people upon whom he was academically urging it. His advocacy was unlit by any moral conviction of its urgency, or any discoverable perception of its constructive value to society. He 'sanctioned' suffrage, like a lawyer whose mind turns towards technical equities and like an administrator who knows the time and temper to be saved in getting rid of needless friction. He gave publicly as his reason for endorsing the amendment that a continued denial of voting rights was tending to exaggerate feminism and to poison the relationship between men and women. He implied, in short, that whatever they might do with the vote, women could not be so inconvenient, as they inevitably would be, if the vote were longer withheld.

This was hardly an attitude to inspire enthusiasm. It cast doubt upon Mr. Hughes's disposition (should he be elected) to press the Federal Amendment upon a preoccupied Congress. Few women could convince themselves that, but for electioneering exigencies, Mr. Hughes would trouble himself about the matter more now than he had done in a past singularly inactive in all matters touching the enfranchisement of women. Another Republican mistake was that neither Mr. Hughes nor his party managers showed throughout the campaign any realisation of the use they might make of their women supporters. Those who could and who would have worked with good effect for the Republican candidate found their hands tied, their way blocked.

To the non-party suffragist there seemed less and less, as the campaign went on, to choose between the candidates. Democratic Suffragists, hot for State Rights, were safe to vote for Mr. Wilson. Many others, leaning towards the Republican or the disbanded Progressive party, found a reason apart from home politics in voting for a re-election of the Democrat whose utterances, moreover, on the subject of Suffrage were, from the Democratic point of view, eminently satisfactory.

It may be urged that although these facts show a considerable vitality in that issue which had been reported dead in America, little light is shed upon conditions on this side of the Atlantic. And yet not so. For no thinking person can any longer maintain that the votes of women do not already affect International relations, when we know that the President of the United States is called Wilson instead of Hughes because that is the will of a sufficient number of the four million enfranchised women in the 'doubtful' West.

The truce declared in this country in August 1914 has been loyally kept by the great bodies of English Suffragists. Instead of lobbying, instead of working in any way for their own enfranchisement, they have worked for men in hospitals, at home, at the Front—as far afield as Serbia, Russia, Rumania, and Egypt. They have worked in English offices, in English fields and factories, and on hospital ships, in all the seas. Tens of thousands have given their strength; many have given their health. Not only Edith Cavell has given her life.

It is true that, in this interval of Suffrage Truce, preoccupation with the immediate conduct of the War has not been so great but what pressure has been brought upon Parliament to effect a revision of the voting Register.

But this pressure was not brought by women.

Remembering the praises showered upon women for their war service, one might think a proposed Revision could be nothing else than a move on the part of men to show, in deeds as well as in fair words, that their praise of women was not insincere, nor their 'gratitude' a sop. But the proposal to revise the Register was not made in order to include women.

It was a happy thought of gentlemen at home who imagine that the hideous discomfort and hourly peril of trench life leaves men and boys (many between seventeen and twenty) in a state to consider and decide questions of home politics.

Whether the idea is that only soldiers fighting in France and Belgium are fit to vote, or whether Mesopotamia, Egypt, and India should be ransacked, certainly the women at home were not included in the proposed measure.

But since men have not only urged in the Press a Revision which would add great numbers to the existing Register, but have discussed the measure in the House of Commons; and since, as a result of this agitation, the project has been made the subject of a commission presided over by the Speaker, women find themselves forced to consider this question which they had agreed might be dropped for the period of the War.

They are considering it.

Unlike those astonishing Rip Van Winkles who rub their eyes and say 'Why, yes, women actually *can* do this and that,' women themselves did not have to wait for the great War to know the enormous reserves of energy and potential wealth awaiting release in the more hampered half of mankind.

It is not the suffragist—and many of us feel that this point is not sufficiently realised—it is not the suffragist who is heard saying that because of anything women have done since August 1914 they should have the vote. Yet the need for that safeguard

is given such fresh proof in these days as no *ante-bellum* suffragist ever thought to see.

To the old unanswerable arguments are added new ones daily. To-day the echo of the former cry 'Woman's place is the home' seems to sound out of some far dim past. Many a one who had been admonished to go home and darn stockings has been yet more impressively invited to abandon the needle and betake herself to the plough. Far from her 'place' being exclusively the home, she finds herself bidden to take the place of men on railways, and in the engineering shops. She is to leave fireside and go topping and tailing in turnip fields. She is to go to yet further fields, and work on hutments in France. She is sent to make munitions in Scotland, and to nurse wounded men in Malta and Egypt.

The German authorities have been saying the same sort of thing, and saying it sooner, to German women. German women are working in the mines, and are building the new subway system for Berlin. English women are standing twelve hours at the lathe, are loading steel billets on lorries. They are running the risks of poisoning in the oxy-acetylene process, and running the proved greater risks of handling, and of being where others handle, high explosive.

Is all this grown a commonplace of British life? Yes, in one sense too much a commonplace. Its bearings are lost to sight.

If there is present danger to the health, the liberty, the life of unrepresented women performing these new tasks, greater danger threatens in the future. Not so much from the tasks themselves as from lack of power to control the conditions under which the tasks shall be performed. If the War has not taught suffragists either women's need or their capacity, undoubtedly the War has brought certain changes in the general thought and life of the nation. Some of these changes have brought light where was darkness before, and women are grateful for that. But with all the new light, men in the reconstruction days will need all their perspicacity and all their strength to deal with the problems that are more specifically their own.

Instead of wishing to show women how to direct and perform their share in the great national rebuilding, men should be the first to recognise that their burden may, mercifully, be halved.

We agree with the writer who says

> Women must do their own thinking. They must think for the children as well, and they must be prepared to take their share of responsibility as citizens at a time which will be one of the most critical and difficult in all our history.

Apart from any question of abstract justice, England *cannot afford* to shackle and maim the service of half her population.

Even if the governors of England were such poor patriots and worse arithmeticians as to think such a course would pay at any time, they dare not, in the crucial days before the Empire, rob the impoverished Mother Country of so much service and so much wealth.

To seek to do this would be more than ever a betrayal when Great Britain is seeking closer relationship with lands (not all of them Colonies) where the woman-power is being set free, or has been freed so long as to prove its indisputable value. An ironic destiny indeed if Great Britain, who should lead in Freedom, were to be in this great matter no longer a leader but a belated follower. Already her record induces soberness of mind. Great Britain, at her supreme crisis, begins tentatively, wastefully, to introduce a handful of women into national industry after the German Government has an army of women doing war work in shops and factories. The British Government refuses the aid of British medical women in military hospitals, and only after being shown the way by Belgium and France does Britain recall her rejected helpers to serve the land of their birth.

What if this general tendency to make use of the unmined possibilities in women were accelerated after the War? What if other countries, not alone those friendly but those competitive or openly hostile, were, as seems highly probable, to turn the freed power of their women to national account, and turn England's waste of it into a formidable economic weapon against her?

The *New York Times* (December 29, 1916) says truly:

> The nation that will really win the War will be the one that can recover quickest from its effect and the quickest resume its place in the race of industrial competition after the War.

It is a Judge on the English bench whose reason in favour of Suffrage is 'the selfish and sensible one, that it is good business to make use of every human power for improvement that the State possesses.'

> This notion [says a correspondent of the *Cambridge Daily News*] that a State can afford to leave millions of its people outside its political system and still obtain their best service, is one that has long been abandoned by those nations and communities that have felt the need of strengthening themselves.

An Imperial Council (deserving the name more nearly than any body ever convened) is about to advise on questions of War, Peace, and a far-reaching system of Inter-Relation.

A basis of common duty and common service will be arranged by the chosen representatives of great communities of people never before drawn so close together, and, because of their union

at the council board, never before so powerful, whether in the field, in the cities, or on the seas.

Such a council will represent a vaster assemblage of human forces than with such an aim has ever met before. Certain of these 'Representatives' deserve their name. They are men who owe their power to the votes of men and women. Through their own chosen mouthpieces British women beyond the seas will be sharing in the deliberations of the Imperial Congress. We congratulate the British women beyond the seas upon their ability to save the great Representative Council from the stigma of including no one who has the smallest right to say he speaks for women belonging to the Empire.

But what women will be thus represented?

Those who stand closest of all to the problems raised? Those who were called to help to win the War? Those who, in any case, have borne the heaviest burdens and paid the heaviest price?

The women of Great Britain will have no spokesman at the board.

In what are the women of Australia, New Zealand, and Canada so much better fitted to have a voice in public affairs that they should deserve to be heard while their British sisters are to sit like little children at school? What inferiority resides in the British woman that her menfolk should wish to see her in this position?—that British men should find it tolerable?

As a traveller and a student, I say the British woman is without a peer.

We hear high praise of France. We know that she deserves all that has been said of the thrift and practical ability of her women of the *bourgeoisie* and the peasant class. But I maintain that no country is so rich as England in the equipment, mental and moral, of her educated women.

There is no nation whose women, despite their political handicap, are at once so self-disciplined and so public-spirited. The ideal of public service has come to the women of other lands with all the heady excitement of a new discovery. It is an old and natural pre-occupation with the women of Great Britain. Before the political woman was heard of elsewhere as more than a freak—a tolerated oddity in some favourite of minister or king—a critical interest in politics was for generations a share of the inheritance of British women. Any history of social life, and almost all memoirs, reflect this characteristic. It is strikingly absent from the records of any other country known to me, with one possible exception. Even in France, the *salon* was less political than literary. Whether in or outside such circles, was little or none of the English woman's interest in political issues *apart from personalities*.

To us who have watched her at work or have worked with her she seems strikingly to share in the administrative gifts of the men of her nation. Such women, as well as the million devoted and able manual workers, must be used, or England will be poorer than she need be.

These British women who are held less fit to serve the State than women of other lands had, according to Board of Trade returns last July, released 66,000 men for the Front in agriculture alone, and since July the number has greatly increased.

Mr. C. R. W. Adeane, new President of the Royal Agricultural Society, has said that 'agriculturalists are actually cultivating the same areas of land as before the War, though 40 per cent. of their best men had gone to the Front. They could not have done that unless they had got the help of the women.'

'The help of the women' had already a year ago furnished 250,000 accepted volunteers for military nursing—without whom, as the Director-General said, the vast burden of the wounded could never have been carried.

Apart from the greatness of the numbers now making munitions, these British women are the kind whose nerve and courage elicited a Special Order of the Day to British troops in the trenches of France. The Commander-in-Chief desired, he said, that the soldiers should have an illustration of

> the spirit animating British women who are working with us for the common cause. One night recently a shell burst in a shop at a filling factory, in which the great majority of the workers are women. In spite of the explosion the work was carried on without interruption, though several women were killed and others seriously wounded. The remainder displayed perfect coolness and discipline in dealing with the emergency. As the result of their gallant and patriotic conduct the output of munitions was not seriously affected.
>
> The Commander-in-Chief feels sure that the Army will appreciate and be inspired by this splendid example of the loyalty and determination with which their comrades in the munition factories are helping towards victory.

Sir Douglas Haig said further in a message to British working men :

> The workers have done splendidly in the past; we look for even greater efforts in the future. If the men and women workers at home and the troops in the trenches pull together, the triumph of our cause is certain.

Mr. Asquith is one of the many for whom the fierce glare of the European conflagration was needed to light up the question of woman's place in the world. On the 14th of August 1916, in the House of Commons, Mr. Asquith, then Prime Minister, said :

> The moment you begin a general enfranchisement on these lines of State service you are brought face to face with another most formidable proposition. What are you going to do with the women? I have received

a great many representations from those who are authorised to speak for them, and I am bound to say they presented to me not only a reasonable but I think from their point of view an unanswerable case. They say they are perfectly content, if we do not change the qualification of the franchise to abide by the existing state of things, but that if we are going to bring in a new class of electors, on whatever ground of State service, they point out—and we cannot possibly deny their claim—that during this War the women of this country have rendered as effective service in the prosecution of the War as any other class of the community. . . .

They are doing the work which the men who are fighting had to perform before, they have taken their places, they are the servants of the State, and they have aided, in the most effective way, in the prosecution of the War. What is more, and this is a point which makes a special appeal to me, they say when the War comes to an end, and when these abnormal, and, of course, to a certain extent transient, conditions have to be revised, when the process of industrial reconstruction has to be set on foot, have not the women a special claim to be heard on the many questions which will arise directly affecting their interests, and possibly meaning for them large displacements of labour? I cannot think that the House will deny that, and I say quite frankly that I cannot deny that claim.

The present Secretary for Foreign Affairs, Mr. Balfour, writing to Lord Sydenham on the theme 'Women War-time Workers,' said:

No words of mine are necessary to recommend the objects for which the [Mansion House] meeting has been organised. Those objects must assuredly appeal to all who realise the splendid manner in which women munition workers are helping in the War. . . .

There are those who think that women ought to show themselves more content with all this appreciation.

Such people have little idea of the sober sense of the women who have done the things that are so praised; little idea of the personal dignity that is restive under the implied patronage of the sounding epithet.

What they want is fair dealing.

Lord Claud Hamilton told a deputation, at the House of Commons, on the 9th of November: 'As far as the conduct of women was concerned, they were entitled to the franchise—they had been magnificent, self-sacrificing, and had shown a noble example to men. . . .' But Lord Claud had doubts about going so far as to give these noble creatures votes. He thought it was not right to ask the present Parliament to give a decision on such an important matter!

Women doctors are lauded to the skies. They are given the honorary military rank of major. What they want to be given is the rank of citizen.

It would be a very bold man [says Sir F. E. Smith, the Attorney-General] who would deny that experience during the War might reasonably be said to have modified many prepossessions and prejudices as to the position of women in this and other communities.

But Sir F. E. Smith quickly recovers himself in order to take up his old attitude of barring the road against women. He has modified his prepossessions and prejudices, but when it comes to admitting them to the Bar, Sir F. E. Smith's prepossessions (apt term!) save him from such a lapse.

There is also the Minister of Munitions speaking in Committee of Supply:

> It is not too much to say that our armies have been saved and victory assured largely by the women in munition factories. Without them it would be impossible for progress to be made, but with them I believe that victory can be assured.

Set them free!

The motto on the certificates issued by the Board of Agriculture and the Board of Trade to women who have completed thirty days' service on the land reads:

> Every woman who helps in agriculture during the War is as truly serving her country as the man who is fighting in the trenches or on the sea.

Set her free!

The late Chancellor of the Exchequer, Mr. McKenna, wrote:

> We all realise the splendid work women are doing in nursing the wounded and in the manufacture of munitions, but only those who have been connected with the organisation of the great patriotic efforts such as the War Savings campaign, know the extent to which the success of these movements is due to the voluntary work of women. It is from settlements such as that at Birmingham that the nucleus of this body of workers has come, and it is their training and example which have inspired and guided so many others. Please tell the women workers of the Birmingham Settlement how deeply grateful I am to them and to their comrades throughout the country for their invaluable services.

Set them free!

Sir Arthur Conan Doyle, after inspecting munition works last November, declares:

> We can never beat Hindenburg until we have beaten Krupp, and that is what these laughing khaki girls of Moorside and elsewhere are going to do. Hats off to the women of Britain! Even all the exertions of the militants shall not in future prevent me from being an advocate for their vote, for those who have helped to save the State should be allowed to help guide it.

Do something to set them free!

The present Prime Minister said on the 12th of January:

> I want to appeal to the men at home; yes, and to the women. The women have done their part nobly in this War. A man who has been Munitions Minister for twelve months must feel a debt of gratitude to the women for what they have done. They have helped to win the War, and without them we could not have done it.

Women can make shift to do without gratitude. They cannot do without the vote.

Let it, above all, be borne in mind that this chorus of praise has been won by women's sheer *adaptability*. The world in general knows less than little of her power of prolonged concentration, or the results which may be looked for were she given the grounding in apprenticeship men have without seeking.

Certainly during the War (the period which has produced this flood of approval) there has been no time to train women in the old thorough sense in which men have been trained. So when woman is praised in these days she is praised for this one quality out of all—adaptability. Not even her misprizers will pretend that adaptability is all she has to commend her.

As to her demand for equal opportunities with her brothers, there are both women and men who, having followed political history in this and other countries, are convinced beyond reclaim that votes will be given to women only out of fear of consequences should votes be withheld. If this view were to be justified, such a basis for negotiation would be full of dangers. Among others, the shortness of memory among politicians constitutes a danger greater in the case of England than in any that we know. Greater because no people have suffered more, if so much, as the women of Great Britain from that same shortness of political memory. British women have suffered more because, their political consciousness being more alive, being a less temporising perception, its demands have had to be met in some fashion. Politicians have felt constrained to throw sops to Suffragists, to make them promises more and more definite. The record of these broken promises constitutes an unsafe platform for any future politician who, being charged with the solution of the problem, shall shilly-shally with the expectations of British Suffragists.

To prevent a rude awakening on the part of those who may think the War has conquered women's concern about the vote; to prevent a recrudescence in more unmanageable shape of the old irritations and shames, one or two facts must, by those who value internal Peace, be from time to time recapitulated and set afresh before persons whose shortness of memory constitutes a public danger.

There was in 1913 a Suffrage measure before the House known as the Conciliation Bill. It acquired this name because of its powerful backing in all three parties: Conservative, Liberal, and Labour. Among the long array of Suffrage Bills no one had ever stood half so good a chance of passing. This was the Bill which the present Prime Minister said publicly he had torpedoed. Women have not forgotten Mr. Lloyd George's own explanation of that hope-destroying act—an act more than singular on

the part of a Minister who said of himself 'I have long been a convinced advocate of woman suffrage and am now firmer than ever in *supporting it*.'

The best chance any Suffrage Bill has ever had of becoming law in Great Britain was killed by Mr. Lloyd George because it was not democratic enough. It would have enfranchised too few.

That was four years ago.

The Prime Minister has now a chance to introduce the wider electoral reform which is so near his heart.

For the rest, let him take courage. It is no forlorn hope that he will lead. The little body of anti-Suffragists, who say the House of Commons has no mandate for this measure, forget that the House of Commons has no mandate for annulling any of those ancient rights recently abrogated, but *has* precisely a mandate for the introduction of a measure to give women political representation. They forget that the House of Commons stands, moreover, in the attitude of debtor to a singularly patient creditor.

Apart from the support of the majority in the House, apart from the avowed readiness for equal suffrage of Town Councils and too long a list of public bodies to find place here, apart from the strength of the Suffragists themselves, ever on the increase, Mr. Lloyd George has heard this strange belated chorus of those to whom the War has revealed the true character and capacities of the women of their race.

Set them free!

Not out of gratitude to women, out of love of England, out of a sense of that service to mankind which is her mission to the world.

. . . . . .

And if, after all, this long-overdue act of justice is refused?

It is no part of a lover of England, or of Liberty, to disguise the fact that the Truce has not put out the old fire, but only covered it for the night.

ELIZABETH ROBINS.