

The Feministe Movement in England by Elizabeth Robins

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THE FEMINISTE MOVEMENT IN ENGLAND

OPPOSITION TO IT HAS DEVELOPED MOST OF THE ARGUMENTS IN ITS FAVOR

By ELIZABETH ROBINS

See the end of this file for source text and images of the full page as it appeared, three columns across bottom of page 20.

This document corresponds to Sue Thomas Bibliography Entry, 171 in Miscellaneous Articles,

<https://victorianfictionresearchguides.org/elizabeth-robins/miscellaneous-articles/>

Elsewhere, I have pointed out that "feminist" was likely a word that was at this time, so uncommon in English that Robins used the French spelling. –Joanne E. Gates

Notes within this transcription point out major differences between this printing and that anthologized in *Way Stations*.

Prepared for the Robins Web at JSU,

<https://www.jsu.edu/robinsweb/>

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I AM one of those who, until comparatively recently, was an ignorant opponent of woman suffrage. I felt that what we needed was more education, more discipline, rather than more liberty, not realizing that the higher discipline can come only through liberty.

I was not alone in my error. It turns out that not only have men a great deal still to learn about women, but that women have a great deal to learn about themselves. I have been prosecuting my education in this direction almost daily since a certain memorable afternoon in Trafalgar Square when I first heard women talking politics in public. I went out of shamefaced curiosity, my head full of masculine criticism as to woman's limitations, her well-known inability to stick to the point, her poverty in logic and in humor, and the impossibility, in any case, of her coping with the mob.

I had found in my own heart hitherto no firm assurance that these charges were not anchored in fact, but on that Sunday afternoon, in front of Nelson's Monument, I learned a new chapter in the lesson of faith in the capacities of women. Talking about it afterward with a well-known London editor, I found him sorrowfully admitting the day was coming when the vote could no longer be withheld from women. "But when they get it," he asked, "won't we find they've lost more than they've gained?" He spoke of the deteriorating effect of the public life on men. If it bore so hardly on the stronger masculine fibre, what effect must it have on the delicate, impressionable nature of woman? How shall she preserve what is best in character after tasting the intoxication of political victory or the humiliation of political defeat?

No Debaters to be Found

"I am ready to believe you," he said, "when you tell me these Suffragists can rule and sway the London crowds. But isn't it very bad for women, all this publicity and concentration of attention on themselves?" I answered that I was perhaps not so bad a person to put that question to, since I had spent a good part of my adult existence under conditions where I could see the effect on character of just these fierce tests, save that in the theatre they operate innocent of political significance.

In common with many others of my old craft, I had seen how the actor's necessary preoccupation with things of the imagination may divorce him from the larger realities of life. His necessary concern about himself tends to impoverish his intellectual life, narrowing down existence till for him all the world's a stage in very truth, and all men merely "parts." But the great difference, in the common effect on character, between doing work on the stage and doing it in the political arena, seems accounted for by the difference between the ambition that is obliged to concern itself with the advantage of other people.

If I am to judge by the women I see working to win the suffrage in England, there is something civilizing, ennobling, in giving up your life to a great impersonal object. When women such as these stand up in public to talk reform, their high earnestness, their forgetfulness of themselves, lends them a dignity that made my answer to the question of the London editor as easy as it was honorable to the disfranchised sex.

We have come to a point in England where there is little need, and indeed little opportunity, to combat

argument. But where the opponents of woman suffrage own, with engaging frankness, that their prejudices against the innovation are irremovable, if these obstructionists are not too old in years or in spirit they will presently be advancing to the stool of repentance. If, however, their prejudices are indeed irremovable, they themselves are not. Those who, in the natural order, are to take their place will see the matter otherwise, for the future is on the side of woman's freedom. So keenly is this felt that in the hundreds of meetings, public and private, held throughout this country for the ventilation of the subject the prime difficulty encountered of late in getting up a debate is to find anybody who can be induced to oppose the notion. It has been discovered that all the telling arguments, witty or wise, are on the side of the reform.

The old-fashioned opponent with his jargon about "short hair and the shrieking sisterhood," sees all his poor little dingy rags of ridicule blown to the winds of heaven, and he can find nothing new.

It is one of the signs of the reserve force behind the movement is that everything ministers to it. The police magistrate sends groups of unknown women to Holloway Gaol. They come out public characters, hot with tales of abuses in the prison system and the crying need for matrons and women inspectors. The authorities try to avoid repeating their error by making all such inconvenient prisoners thereafter first-class misdemeanants, and thus ensure their seeing less and having less material with which to stir the public conscience. But the public are quick to detect the fear behind the seeming leniency of the authorities.

Then again, at a later stage of the agitation, the police magistrate, in trying a fresh batch of prisoners, endeavors to rouse public indignation against the leaders of the movement by sternly rebuking them for allowing a mill girl of seventeen to come up from the provinces to assist in a London

demonstration, in the course of which the girl was arrested, that being nothing less than what she had come for. She was a Lancashire delegate, representative of hundreds more who could not come themselves. The magistrate was full of a noble rage at "the cruelty of turning a girl of such tender age loose in London," as he expressed it. He seemed to count on setting men's hearts aflame at the bare idea of a young girl in the streets without her mother. That she should be in the London streets to testify to her interest in the laws governing women's honest work, that was indeed shameful!

"Why, this child," he said, "should be at school!" And the outburst of wise and manly tenderness was reported in every paper in the land.

The working women opened incredulous eyes. They are so used to hearing their own ignorance urged against their claim to vote, that they were stark amazed to find how strangely benighted are these great London gentlemen about the conditions governing the lives of women they make laws for. School at seventeen? Why, this girl, like many more, had been earning her living in a mill since she was twelve, rising in the dawn and tramping, cold and half fed, to her work and returning wearily through slums whose haggard realism left this prematurely old "hand" of seventeen little to learn from London, even if she had no friends here, which of course is not the case. No woman, however lonely, who joins the English suffrage movement but has friends.

[This *Collier's Weekly* essay version has three additional paragraphs, likely omitted in the 1913 reprint as they were used, nearly verbatim, in the immediately preceding section, ER's speech at the Suffrage Prisoners Banquet, <https://www.jsu.edu/robinsweb/waysta/way02tpb.html>.

Note that in the printed version of the Prisoners Banquet rendering, page 35 of *Way Stations*, Achéto-Tinneh replaces Kilsilraet, and this replacement name for the dialect group most closely matches "People Dwelling in the Shelter" in the paragraph on Wikipedia that describes the South Slavey subset of the Athabaskan Language (from a region of the Great

Slave Lake on the Upper Mackenzie River). See note 8 of paragraph on South Slavey, Slavey Language, <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Slavey_language>. No internet match for Kilsilraet exists.]

While it seems obvious that women will presently obtain the right to vote upon the same terms, as the phrase goes, as that right is, or is to be, enjoyed by men, I am far from sure (though here I speak for myself alone) that the right will be much enjoyed by the women who are called on to pay the heaviest price for it. It is an argument for haste that should the suffrage be granted to-morrow the world may still have to wait for the generation that is to grow up in the exercise of public duty before women can take the personal satisfaction in it that some men do. It is well to emphasize this, since the issue is overlaid with cheap charges of notoriety- hunting and of hysteria.

For the Good of Granddaughters

MANY of us believe self-control to be the highest expression of civilization, but we believe no less that only a sense of duty and a resolute self-mastery could bring women of the character of those who have done most for this cause to face the misunderstanding and the hideous discomforts that they have been called upon to bear. Every fair-minded person must realize it is very hard for women to face these things. It was George Eliott, I believe, who spoke with envy of those who could lead what she called the sheltered life. When women consider their own dignity and satisfaction alone, it is the shelter they choose. I am reminded of that happy tribe in the inclement North called the Kilsilraet, which being interpreted out of the Eskimo tongue, is "the people who live out of the wind." Envidable folk these, for in the North it is not the still cold, but the wind that kills. The vast majority of us women would belong to the Kilsilraet if we could with honor, though some of them tell me that it is because of our defective training.

But we may believe that the women of the future, brought up in the exercise of public duty, may find it, not duty alone, but pleasure as well new. For this generation, the fighting and the sacrifice. But Richard Cobden's great-granddaughter will be able in the coming days to say with the poet: "Low How deep the corn along the battlefield."

[The most accomplished of Richard Cobden's daughters, Anne Cobden-Sanderson (b. 1853), was known as one of the more prominent among the first group of suffrage prisoners to whom Robins paid tribute. See the earlier entry, "The Prisoners Banquet" in *Way Stations*, where a version of these final paragraphs also appeared, <https://www.jsu.edu/robinsweb/waysta/way02tpb.html>.

According to a family history now at the *Way Back Machine*, <http://www.hurleyskidmorehistory.com.au/julia-sarah-anne-cobden.html>, two of Anne's sisters were present at the banquet. Bernard Shaw and Millicent Garret Fawcett wrote letters testifying to her character. In the same year as this publication, 1907, Anne Cobden-Sanderson would read her speech "Why I Went to Prison," at Bryn Mawr's first lecture hosted by the campus's newly founded chapter of the College Equal Suffrage League. Eleven decades later, in 2017, her prison diary was published, discovered to have been confiscated by her jailer. The original is held London School of Economics in the collection of prison administrator Joanna Elizabeth Kelley, 1842-1980.]

[End of transcribed text of

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See following pages for images of source text and links.]

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as well as I, I have set my hand to the plow, and must finish the furrow; or, more aptly, I have taken the rick, and must plow it to the end of the run."

He passed, and there was a moment's silence. Mrs. Wetherell did not break it, and Blair seemed to be busy with his thoughts. He no longer looked at her, but toward the window, with a dreary expression foreign to the presidential dignity. Again she noted the weariness of his face in repose, the hollow temples, the smokes nostrils, the pallor of the lips; if he had changed, from the youth of his mind, it was indubitably true that age had crept prematurely upon his body. When at last he spoke it was in a different voice, a voice in which the querulousness of old age was strangely intermingled with the fire of his passionate youth, saved at so much cost. For once he dropped the mask of which the strings had been loosened by the sight of the woman he loved.

"I am weary," he said, "weary of myself and of all these things among which I live. What do they all matter? There are so many beautiful things in the world, and I have seen so few of them! For a quarter of a century—the best years of my life—I have been chained to a corpse, slave to a phantom of duty. In reality, I have not lived those years; in reality Richard Blair, the man, has been in a trance since that evening, more than twenty-five years ago, when he parted from you at Shadow Cove. Do you remember that evening, Ripple?"

He turned to her with flashing eyes, and she met the look steadily, a little puzzled.

"I remember it—after a fashion," she answered. "Yes," he said, "that is how you would remember it. But I remember it as though it were yesterday. You were to leave for the city the next morning, and I asked you to go canoeing with me on the Bay, at sunset. There was no wind, nor any cloud in the sky; the water of the Bay was like glass, and the sun was a ball of fire, throwing crimson light that turned to purple and mauve as it sank. We were alone together on the Bay, you and I, and nothing had gone wrong, and there was a slight touch of autumn in the air—just that tinge of sadness necessary to complete the beauty of

the scene. All was silent around us; we were too far from shore to hear the faint lapping of the water on the beach, and the canoe moved noiselessly save for the slight rippling at the bows, and the drip from the paddle-blade. It was one of those rare times when Nature calls to man and woman, and the man and the woman are there to answer Nature's call. I added my call to Nature's. You understood, and could have loved me then, but you were afraid. You dared not take the risk. Ah!—he struck his hand sharply against the chair arm—"one does not get things by being afraid, by refusing to take risks!" He stopped for a moment, then finished more quietly. "Since then I have not advanced. Life has given me little more than this; the memory of that evening, and dreams—dreams."

The last word fell lingeringly from his lips, and afterward there was silence for some moments. Then he rose, and moved restlessly about the room, touching an ornament on the mantel, pushing a chair into place against the wall. Mrs. Wetherell also rose and walked to the window. He joined her, and they stood side by side for a few seconds looking out unseeing into the night; then, with a slight inclination of the head, she crossed the low sill, stepping out on to the little balcony beyond, and he followed.

The front of the hotel, facing Heath Street and the corner of the University Campus opposite, was garishly lighted, with strong contrast of shadows, by the arc light on the corner. Its balconies, above and below the one occupied by Mrs. Wetherell and Blair, were lined with parties of Commencement guests, driven to the outer air to escape the heat within. For the noise the University owned the town, and though it was Sunday night the festive gaiety of spirit was not greatly dampened. The street below was thronged with the crowds released from evening service at the churches, reinforced and interspersed with groups of errant collegians, graduate and undergraduate, clad in violent clothes of a fantastic cut, suitable to the irresponsibility of the occasion. Other groups, from those to them emerging from the comparative darkness of the Campus, added themselves spasmodically to the pro-

cession, talking, laughing, pushing goodnaturedly, enjoying themselves in general, and doing nothing in particular. As one such section, perhaps a dozen strong, crossed the street, its leader, glancing up at the front of the Ware House, chanced to recognize in the glare of the electric light President Blair. The glamour of graduation and the June nights was upon him and his fellows. They formed a cluster in the middle of the street, and one saw the leader raise his arms with a jerky motion, heard him cheer this, snappily. Then the long University cheer broke and rolled forth from the group, with as much volume and velocity as a dozen pairs of brass lungs could give it, and with the name "Blair!" thrice repeated, explosive and ignorant of prefix, tacked on to the end for good measure.

There was a momentary slackening of pace among those on the sidewalk. A number of passers-by stopped, and craned their necks to see what the "rah-rah boys" were cheering about. But to the majority the occurrence possessed the triviality of the commonplace. The University cheer made no unusual sound on Heath Street, especially at that season. Moreover, the president was invisible to those directly beneath, and as for the authors of the cheer themselves, they scattered about their business immediately after the effort, apparently a trifle ashamed of the enthusiasm of their outburst, coming on the Sabbath evening. So it chanced that no one save the woman beside him saw clearly the changing expression of Richard Blair's face, and she with all her acquired calmness turned away her eyes.

When she looked again the mask, unsmiling, harsh, ghastly in its significance, had been resumed, but before she had time to break the tension with some everyday remark, there came to them through the clear air the sound of the Blaisdell Chapel chimes, borne from the farther side of the Campus by a southerly wind. First came four sweet singing notes, then followed nine insistent strokes marking the hour. Blair's lips—the lips of the mask—opened stiffly.

"The call for Ebrlequin," he said.

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For the Good of Granddaughters

MANY of us believe self-control to be the highest expression of civilization, but we believe so less that only a sense of duty and a resolute self-mastery could bring women of the character of those who have done most for this cause to face the misunderstanding and the hideous discomforts that they have been called upon to bear. Every fair-minded person must realize it is very hard for women to face those things. It was George Elliot, I believe, who spoke with envy of those who could lead what she called the sheltered life. When women consider their own dignity and satisfaction alone it is the shelter that they choose. I am reminded of that happy tribe in the inland North called the Kikilraet, which, being interpreted out of the Eskimo tongue, is "the people who live out of the wind." Envious folk there, for in the North it is not the still cold, but the wind, that kills. The vast majority of us women would belong to the Kikilraet if we could with honor, though some of them tell me that it is because of our defective training.

But we may believe that the women of the future, brought up in the exercise of public duty, may find it, not duty alone, but pleasure as well. For this generation, the fighting and the sacrifice. But Richard Cobden's great-granddaughter will be able in the coming days to say with the poet: "Lo! how deep the cost along the battlefield."