

Sermons in Stones by Elizabeth Robins

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SERMONS IN STONES.

ELIZABETH ROBINS.

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SERMONS IN STONES.

THE great majority of Suffragists of all societies are lovers of peace. They believe in peace not as merely a humane sentiment, but as the only sound political economy.

Those who are not taken in by the fallacy that physical force is the basis of civilised Government, are more anxious than the most scandalised official that the evil example of men in revolt should be avoided by women. That is not to say that the most fanatical peace-lover is necessarily blind to a fact which only sentimentality can ignore: the fact that women are quite as human as men. Women are liable to be pleased and won by fair promises; women are liable to be angered and antagonised by betrayal.

Why not? Hath not a woman eyes? Hath not a woman hands, organs, dimensions, sinews, affections, passions? Fed with the same food; hurt with the same weapons; subject to the same diseases; treated by the same means; warmed and cooled by the same winter and summer, as her brother is?

The answer should bring us close to thankfulness that, in spite of provocation, women so far have not, in their struggle for freedom, emulated the more violent deeds of men. Nevertheless, the so-called militant Suffragists have succeeded, in the words of the *Times*, in bringing about "the marked and profound change which has taken place in public opinion, *which formerly treated the agitation with tolerant amusement.*"

Since that is not only a great achievement, since to do away with tolerant amusement is precisely what the forward party set out to effect, no one can be surprised that the tactics of that party should have roused a passion of opposition never accorded to the milder propaganda. The so-called militant tactics are those which have most seriously embarrassed the opponents of Woman Suffrage. They are the tactics which have rallied the greater numbers and the larger financial backing to the Cause. They are tactics which have breathed new life into the very societies which denounce militancy.

To defend the anti-Government by-election policy, or the interruption of Cabinet Ministers' meetings by persons unable otherwise to record their strong convictions on matters of public importance, would be too easy a task. Let us, therefore, consider those actions

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yet more bitterly denounced, actions held in many quarters to be not only unpardonable, but inexplicable, as coming from reputable educated women. Looking first at one of the immediate effects of the militant acts, is the most casual critic not given pause by reflecting that the great body of respectable women who compose the Social and Political Union have not repudiated these tactics?

Anyone who wishes to know the sort of women who support the Union has only to look down the columns setting forth the subscribers to the funds. Such examination will show that the sinews for this moral war were provided by working wives and mothers, by doctors and nurses, by painters, musicians, teachers, domestic servants, "great ladies," and a number of the first men in England. The few hundred who are punished and held up to obloquy for doing the militant acts are sustained by the ever-growing army which stands behind, supporting and, if not rejoicing in these deeds, sympathising with the state of mind of which they are the outcome. That would be a superficial power of analysis which should set down this support to delight in lawlessness. In all communities women form the law-abiding section. Exceeding men as they do in most populations—in all prisons, in every reformatory, women are in the minority.

If respectable wives and mothers, girls from the Universities and girls from the mill, stand firm behind the individuals who do the inconvenient and (for themselves) dangerous acts, it is because they understand—as their critics do not yet understand—that although the sum of good-will now in the world is probably greater than it ever was before, good-will is ineffectual until it is applied. The need for its "operant power" must be made manifest before it will move. Not active opposition—apathy is the arch-enemy of Reform.

At a heavy price (and one does not mean the sum of the plate-glass bill) apathy seems to have been broken.

But by stone-throwing! You shrink from that. Especially you shrink from the thought that the act was committed by women of repute. You may not quite comfortably despise it whatever your creed or temper. And for this reason: no one can deny the close relationship between a deed and the motive for that deed. The motive here (however mistaken you may judge it) was no ignoble motive. You cannot dissociate character from its expression. And the "character" of these women is held in respect wherever it is best known.

I shall not deny that, from the first, the stones have been stones of stumbling to many a good Suffragist. Some soothed their dismay by saying, what is perfectly true, that this movement has grown too big to include only women of philosophic temper.

By its universality of appeal to women who know life it has attracted to it, the apologists said, certain reckless spirits, impossible to keep within bounds. And after all (though some of the women who were most disturbed by the stone-throwing) we know that the need for the Reform is so much greater than anyone of us has been able to say, that if it is not to come by quiet means, come it must, even if it comes with tumult. Is it not as well, such women ended by asking themselves, that the mass of men (who are still so ignorant of the movement) should be given this sign? Many better things have failed. Perhaps this cruder means will be better understood.

There was this in the way of the first stone-throwing being understood. It was the work of only a few isolated cases, people said, of that well-known feminine malady "hysteria." The first stone-throwing had no more significance for most men than any other unrelated instance of disagreeable eccentricity. But when the continued inaction of Suffragist Members of Parliament multiplied these instances of eccentricity by hundreds, there were found at last to be enough of these "departures from the norm" to form a class. Enough to mean something. What it meant was held by certain women as well as by certain men to be very terrible.

No more here than elsewhere does any act stand unrelated. Let us glance for a moment, then, at a sequence of events which I have scant space to recapitulate, but of which too many are ignorant. I mean the woman's movement of the forty years prior to 1906. After the Liberal leaders' betrayal of the women in 1884 (when it was chivalrously decided that "the women must be thrown overboard to lighten the ship"), the Suffragists of those days fought patiently, quietly, a losing battle. They kept it up for ten years longer, losing ground little by little till, in 1894, men who were opposed to such share as women had won in local government, seeing the Suffrage Cause had so declined, felt it was safe for its enemies openly to show their hands. And it was safe. When the new County Councils were formed, women were shut out of them. Women were turned off the Education Boards. If, in consequence of all this, women made any protest against such injustice, their protest was not of such a nature as to be heeded or even to be heard. The fact was that most of those women who had worked longest and most faithfully had now lost heart. The movement languished, and by the general public was forgotten. In the autumn of 1906, at Ladybank, the present Prime Minister, then Chancellor of the Exchequer, when asked what were his views upon the Suffrage, could say publicly that it was a question in which he had formerly taken some interest, but he had not thought about it for fourteen years. Strange as such an utterance would sound now from any

Member of the Government, no one felt in 1906 that it probably in the least overstated a responsible Minister's undisturbed indifference to the greatest and most fundamental reform in the history of civilised states. This was the condition of affairs that confronted the younger generation of Suffragists six years ago. They saw how the spirit of the older women had been broken, and they knew in pursuit of what policy this result had come about. They saw that the cause was not only not going forward, it was going back. The older Suffragists had long been at the end of their resources. For they had tried in vain every "constitutional" means. And there seemed no other.

But there was.

To understand how women justified to themselves the adoption of these other means, it is necessary to recognise that those who knew most about the condition of working-class women and children, not only believed in woman suffrage as a general proposition—they were convinced of the urgency of the reform.

To recognise (if only for argument's sake) this urgency, places those who care to understand the movement, at the women's point of view. Now, if you believe that you are fighting, not only for the oppressed, but for the final triumph of civilisation, you are ready (for the achievement of ends so momentous) to make some sacrifice. There are women who would even sacrifice a few panes of glass, if the crash of that breaking would break the spell that has bound men under the Upas tree of an evil tradition.

Remember, that in attempting to break this spell women were confronted by an even more difficult task than for long they realised. Among other discoveries by the way, women found to their astonishment that men, whether by nature or training, are the less reasonable sex, the more superstitious, the more helpless before custom. Every generation of schoolboys exemplifies this afresh. Whether it is woman's commerce with the child that has kept the great mass of women close to reality and common sense, I do not pretend to know. But it would seem that being called on to answer the child's eternal "Why?" her recurrent need to give a plain and rational account of conduct to minds as yet untampered with, as yet unmuddled—this necessity may have kept her own mind clear of much of the rubbish that has been misnamed knowledge, may have kept her sense of proportion true to the great primitive facts of life and love, of suffering and death.

The man, relieved of the necessity constantly to re-envisage life in its simpler, more fundamental aspects, has always tended to make idols of word-spinners. He hypnotises himself with what he calls Philosophy of Life and Science of Government, and is

the bond-slave of outworn forms. Even in the new republics he makes a fetish of that which should be the simplest, plainest vehicle of justice, namely, the common law. Clogged as it is by all manner of antiquated mummery, man accepts without misgiving, and without humour, this abracadabra of ancient forms and ceremonies. He educates a special hierarchy to administer the rites. He will talk to you in the 20th century of indentures and of seals, though no indenture is now made, and in lieu of wax is a pinked round of scarlet paper. If such matters are trifles, the same cannot be said of other survivals. In trying those grossly misunderstood cases of infant murder, the Judge retains the hideous mummery of the black cap and the solemn death sentence, though he does not any longer expect to have the unhappy woman killed. But the effect upon the victim of social injustice and puerperal mania may be imagined by women, if not by men.

Again and again we have seen how in Parliament an authentic account of gross injustice has left the legislators' calm unruffled. But if, in her desire to get redress for some intolerable evil, a woman, as actually happened about three years ago, comes unbidden on the floor of the House of Commons, legislators are stirred to their depths by the breach of decorum. The woman is harried out of the place as though she were some unclean wild animal. One gentleman, reporting the disgraceful scene for the Press, said: "Before anyone had presence enough of mind to stop her, the woman had almost reached"—the reader may well hold his breath and wonder, "reached" whom, or what holy of holies?—"she had almost reached the sacred mace." Yet the woman had come in the name of that which the mace typified. She brought the spirit, and on that occasion bore sole witness to the sanctity of the symbol which, lacking that, is so much silver-gilt.

But one woman's crossing the floor of the House, horrible as was the spectacle, might have been due to mental aberration. What seems to have unnerved the authorities is the idea that not merely one hysterical woman but hundreds should, not only offer to the Government that disrespect which it had earned, but should offer violence to property. Men who know the horrors of real war, and in cold blood prepare for it, are unspeakably revolted at the idea of women using what men call "force"—of no matter how innocuous a character, or in any cause, however worthy.

Now, these things are very significant. They give women fresh food for thought. Obviously, a great many men are not at the beginning of an understanding of whereabouts women are in this matter. Yet we see that historians and statesmen, looking at

the great issue of political liberty steadily, see it whole when it applies to their own sex. Mr. Gladstone's words in this connection have been often quoted. In 1884, in defence of Mr. Chamberlain's threat to march 100,000 men from Birmingham to London in support of the Franchise Bill, Mr. Gladstone put his views on record in these terms: "I am sorry to say that if no instructions had ever been addressed in political crises to the people of this country, except to hate violence and love order and exercise patience, the liberties of this country would never have been attained."

"I am not," said Burke, "of the opinion of those gentlemen who are against disturbing the public repose. I like a clamour whenever there is an abuse. The fire-bell at midnight disturbs your sleep, but it keeps you from being burnt in your bed. The hue and cry alarms the country, but preserves all the property of the province."

When dealing with women's application of these truths, the judicial sex shows lack of a sense of proportion.

The Press, last November, dwelt in a paroxysm of horror upon the fact that, among the women fighting for their freedom, one sent a stone through the window of the Westminster Palace Hotel, where—oh, enormity beyond belief—a Bishop was dining!

The Bishop was quite unhurt.

But, a Bishop—! And at dinner, too.

As a Minister of the Crown has reminded us, when men wanted votes they did not interrupt a Bishop's dinner. They burnt down his Palace.

Those in authority who, instead of concentrating their energies upon furtherance of a World-Peace, devote their high training, their experience, their influence to the formation of new army schemes and vaster naval programmes; these people, actively engaged in preparation for war, are amongst those most outraged and aghast if a woman breaks a window. Nevertheless, the woman's act was of the same nature as the breaking of the glass-case, which you must do before you can ring the fire-alarm. It is the accepted preliminary to warning people of a danger that threatens the community. Precisely so the stone. Not to injure anyone, but by way of sounding an alarm. A thing done to draw attention. How well the women aimed is proved by the result. The stone succeeds where all the other means have failed. Reason, right feeling, statistic array of facts, an amount of constitutional propaganda beyond that at the service of any other franchise reform—proof of these gets no further, if so far, as the porches of the officials' ears. The stone cuts them to the

heart. The very armament-providers profess a detestation, and they actually feel a great fear of even the symbol of women's rebellion—the symbol being all that women have as yet shown in this agitation.

No creature was hurt by any of those stones. No one was intended to be hurt. In comparison with the measures adopted by men under less provocation, women are still pursuing a policy of pin-pricks, hoping still that a prick, after all, may rouse the men of the nation.

But no one in authority seems yet to have set himself to find out whether behind the awful disorderliness of window-breaking there might be a desire for a better order. At present all that men can see in it is violence pure and simple. And apparently from the armament-provider to the jingo "mafficker," your apologist for war will insist that women shall not only stand for peace—they shall stand for his idea of peace. He excuses his own pre-occupation with preparations for the slaughter of human beings on a vast scale by saying that all this is done in defence of the home. Women answer, with truth, that the one and only aim that could have brought the woman's movement to its present proportions is protection of the home. It is woman's discovery (calling, in truth, for no profundity) that the most obvious objection to armies and navies is that they do not, and can not, "defend the home" from any of the worser evils.

They are useless allies in that conflict in which uncounted thousands yearly suffer and die. They die for lack of proper housing; for lack of uncontaminated milk; for lack of segregation of contagious diseases; through the absence of State-trained midwives, through the dangerous trades. In the sweat-shops are the struggling legions who do worse than die—they breed disease. And there is the legion who do worse than die in unspeakable dens of infamy. Innocent childhood and honourable old age, the Holy Places in our pilgrimage—to rescue these from the Unbeliever is the goal of the New Crusade.

Among the friends and supporters of the Women's Social and Political Union, not all can submit themselves to a struggle with the police. They see that there are many ways to work for this reform. Each must do the part which nature and training have made "her part." Not in this field, any more than in the fields of business or of art, are we all fitted for the same service. If we would not suffer that warning pain, characterised by Charlotte Brontë as "the result of estrangement from one's real character," we must act in accordance with our individual nature and qualification. The women do that who help in the less heroic

ways. The women who encounter public pains and penalties are accepting the heavier burden. They will have their public reward in the end as well as, meanwhile, the unfaltering justification of their own conscience and the grateful devotion of their comrades.

For it must not be supposed that, of the Suffragists who stand outside the physical conflict, all are pluming themselves upon finer feelings, or a dignity any more sensitive than those who fling themselves against the cordons of Westminster police. It may be that some of the women who feel they cannot do that know that they would not come out of the ordeal as sane and as unsmirched as we know these other women do. Of such as refrain there may be those who recognise that something of the horror of physical struggle would stain the memory for ever, blurring the good they sought; something of degradation survive a conflict which they lack the power to spiritualise. Not all of us can take it simply enough. Perhaps we are too far away from the worser evils.

Yet such considerations make a poor foundation upon which to rear a sense of superiority. Those who justify themselves for not bearing a share in the public struggle will not easily justify themselves for making no effort to understand these others who, at such personal cost, are fighting the battle in their way. Unnerving as are the particular scenes under consideration (even to think about), there is in them an implication more unnerving still. For we have here hundreds of women ready to accept the disapproval (and all that may involve), not only of the powers that be, and not only of the general public, but of their dearest friends and staunchest followers—if by that single sacrifice, or any other, they can break through the apathy that makes men and women permit the greater evils that afflict the world.

To speak, in conclusion, of the founder of the Militant Union, she is not in search of martyrdom. So little is she enamoured of sacrifice, that it is her impatience before the useless sacrifice women make which goads her into protest. She would seem to be an economist in means. She will advocate, or herself do, only as much as is necessary to fulfil the end she has in view—that of compelling attention to matters long unregarded. If you should talk to her of “dignity,” is it not conceivable that, thinking still of women broken, and of girls defiled, she would turn upon you with: “Whose dignity?”—and so make my dignity or yours cut a sorry figure weighed in the balance against that womanly dignity she cries out unceasingly to see established on the earth.

Persons of this temper can do without approval. Yet allies they never dreamed of are found upon their side—a philosopher as grave and decorous as Emerson, for instance, with his assurance that “every project in the history of reform, no matter how violent and surprising, is good when it is the dictate of a man’s genius and constitution.”

Very probably Emerson, as well as Burke and Mr. W. E. Gladstone, might hesitate to include women among mankind.

The Creator seems not to have hesitated.

ELIZABETH ROBINS.

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A biographical note: I point out in my biography of Robins, p. 205, that Robins recorded in her diary that *Contemporary Review* solicited the article. It forms a trio of recorded statements Robins made in support of stone throwing and broken glass. Especially when Robins received many letters objecting to her stance articulated in a letter to the *Times*, she began to retreat from the extreme militant position, eventually seeing the Pankhurst leadership of WSPU as autocratic.

JEG