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WOMAN'S MOVEMENT

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Among the influences making for international understanding, the Woman's Movement has been reckoned by its supporters to be one of the strongest. This was before the war. The latest International Congress held by the Suffrage Alliance, in Budapest, 1913, had not only impressed all who followed its deliberations by its numbers, enthusiasm, and unanimity, but also by the intensity of feeling with which many of the most brilliant speakers sought to enlist the women of the world in *la guerre contre la guerre*.

It is true that the passion for peace—the horror of war—was expressed by continental and rarely by British or American delegates. This fact only served to remind the latter of the grim reality of the war problem in countries like Germany and France, and perhaps to create the feeling that our own interest in it might not always be so academic as to most of us it persisted in seeming. Certainly one of the inspiring motives of the Congress was the hope that an international movement like that represented by the Suffrage Alliance, which brought together in a common hope the women of America, Asia*, and Europe, must tend to create the good feeling which in its turn makes for peace. Delegates were reminded that women know the suffering of war without its glory; that its horror and its sacrifices come to them shorn of the glamour with which men have surrounded it; that it destroys all they hold dear and all they have created; that they have nothing to gain by it and everything to lose. A speech made in this sense by the most eloquent woman there—Mme Marie Vérone—brought her audience to its feet in a frenzy of enthusiasm, clapping, waving and cheering, while those fortunate enough to be on the platform precipitated themselves upon the orator with cries of enthusiasm, and kissed her on both cheeks with an *abandon* somewhat surprising to the more stolid British delegates. It was evident that there was no doubt in the minds of these enthusiasts as to the attitude of the Woman's Movement towards war.

Conviction was deepened by the great chapter on "Women and War" appearing in Olive Schreiner's "Woman and Labour". Expressing with a noble idealism the right attitude of women towards war, Olive Schreiner gave to an emotion its philosophy. Women, she said, were not only the worst sufferers from war: they were by nature the guardians of life. Conservers of the race, mothers of its children, war must be to them the worst of all catastrophes. As a sculptor would cast into the breach any stone rather than that which he had wrought into a statue, so women, when the gulf opens between the nations, would cast in anything rather than the men they have made. "No woman who is a woman," writes Mrs. Schreiner, "says of a human body, 'It is nothing'". This phrase, like the whole chapter in which it

* No Asiatic delegates were actually present at Budapest, but a Chinese Suffrage Society applied for affiliation, and was admitted. The Chinese women sent a banner to the Congress inscribed, "All of one mind, helping each other."

appears, became a classic of the Woman's Movement. It was believed to express the true, the inevitable attitude of women as a sex, whether in or outside the progressive ranks. It was assumed to be so "natural" to them, that to put power into their hands was to forge a weapon against war. It was not denied that they might feel that war might in some cases still be a national duty; but it was believed with conviction that women, from their very nature, would approach the question with an unspeakable reluctance, that war should appear to them in all its naked horror, shorn of glory, that they would be free from the "war fever" to which men so easily fall victims.

In support of this view, it is to be borne in mind that women's internationalism on the whole broke down less conspicuously than men's, two international congresses being held after the war began, and both representing women. It is probably also true that among working people the desire for peace is still stronger among the women than the men. On the other hand, the belief that women are innately more pacific than men has been severely shaken, if not altogether destroyed. It is now very evident that they *can* be as virulently militarist, as blindly partisan, not as the soldier, for in him such qualities are generally absent, but as the male non-combatant, for whom the same cannot always be said. Among women, as among men, there are extremists for war and for peace; pacifists and militarists; women who are as passionately convinced as Bernhardt that war is a good thing, women who accept it as a terrible necessity, women who repudiate it altogether. All these views they share with men. There appears to be no cleavage of opinion along sex lines. Nor perhaps should we have expected it. History shows no war averted by the influence of women; none against which women, as women, have worked, or organised, or offered more than here and there a sporadic protest. Queens have been no more reluctant than kings to look on the dead bodies of men and say, "It is nothing." The fact that war brings to women personally no glory, but only suffering, is empty of significance; they are well accustomed to vicarious glory and well accustomed to suffering. The appeal to their loyalty comes with irresistible force. "We cannot fight," they say; "let us at least be willing to suffer."

Not what is noble only, but what is ignoble in women, is enlisted easily in the service of war. The importance of fear as a factor in war-making cannot be overlooked, and can hardly be over-estimated. Any politician can play on panic when he wishes to stampede a people into war. The fear of being attacked enables him to blind them, and makes them an easy tool for a war which is really one of aggression. And in the creation of panic a sex trained to timidity is hardly likely to play a restraining part. Personal courage is the one quality held indispensable in a man: it has not been extraordinarily admired in women, and since fear is the mother of cruelty, it should not surprise any of us if those who never have been expected to be brave should sometimes outdo the men in vindictiveness. That so many women remain untainted by fear should rather give us hope. Nevertheless, it is reasonable to remember that so long as fear plays a part in the making of wars, women are hardly likely as a sex to be more uncompromising in their desire for peace than men.

It should, therefore, have surprised no one (though, in fact, it surprised many of us) that women throughout Europe have accepted war as an inevitable evil, or even, in the earnestness of their loyalty, as a spiritual good. Nor does their attitude towards war in general, or the last war in particular, prove those wrong who have believed that the Woman's Movement is one of the great influences making for peace. It is true that its effect will not be so direct or so immediate as had been supposed. The mistake has been rather about the nature of its influence than about its ultimate effect. Women may, when they have the power, no more "vote against war" than men; it remains a fact that every woman who is working for the advance of the Woman's Movement is, however martial she is herself, however profoundly she may mistake the meaning and the foundation of her work, working against militarism. She is for ever asserting a principle of which war is a perpetual denial. One principal must, in the end, destroy the other.

The Woman's Movement in all its aspects, but especially, of course, in its political one, is an assertion of moral force as the supreme governing force in the world. If its adherents are wrong, and it is physical force which is "the ultimate appeal," then the militarist is right, and the physically weaker sex, like the little and weak nation, has no claim that may not be set aside. The weak have no rights in a world governed by brute force; they have only privileges, which may be granted, revoked, or withheld. It has been the fundamental principle of the Woman's Movement that it claims rights and duties, but never privileges. By what right, however, do those who are inferior in physical force ask to share, equally with their superiors, in government, if government rests on physical force? Such a claim could not be entertained. And women, recognizing this, have rightly based their demand on the great principle that government rests upon consent, and that the use of physical force is not "the ultimate appeal," but a confession of failure.

Argument has raged round this vital question, and in consequence the women's position—and that of the opposition to it—has been again and again defined. The "physical force argument" was put forward with great effect and with an enthusiasm no Bernhardt could exceed by notable Anti-Suffragists.* In their writings and speeches the conviction that women could have no right to self-government while they lacked physical strength to enforce it has been expounded in terms which almost grotesquely resemble the expositions of "Prussianism" and the treatment of "little nations" which have burned themselves with such horror into our memories to-day. "The State is Power," says Treitschke; "there is something laughable in the idea of a small State." What power? Certainly not moral power, for there may be a greater moral power in a little State than a big one. But physical power, in which the big State must be superior. "There is something laughable" in the idea that a little State, a people wanting in sheer force of numbers and arms, should dream of independence, of freedom, of developing along its own lines its own civilization. "Something

* See especially "The Physical Force Argument against Woman's Suffrage", by A. McCallum Scott.

laughable"! There is also something obscene in such laughter—something unimaginably brutal. The same brutality (though we had not learned to call it "Prussianism") found something laughable in the idea that women, who are inferior to men in muscle, should claim as "rights" what could (if allowed at all) never be more than privileges in a world ruled by brute force. Certainly if the world is so ruled the claim does become laughable. Herein lay the weakness of the militant movement, which appealed to a principle which the whole Woman's Movement was concerned to deny. But even here, regardless of logic—or perhaps conscious of a deeper logic than their policy suggested—the women who resorted to violence frequently argued that they did so only to prove the utter failure of violence used against themselves. Nor can any misunderstanding on the part of Suffragists of their own position destroy the fact that it rests upon a principle which militarism denies. The strife between the two is internecine. Militarism and the Woman's Movement cannot exist together.

As militarism waxes or wanes so, in inverse ratio, does the Woman's Movement. In France, a country once "militarist" to the core, but now no longer so, the Code Napoléon remains, the legacy of the arch-militarist, Napoleon; but the higher level of civilization reached to-day reflects itself in the improved actual (as distinct from the legal) position of French women. In Norway and Sweden, countries so earnest in their desire for peace that their division into two kingdoms under separate sovereigns was actually effected (though with some soreness and jealousy) without a war, women early achieved political freedom. In America women hold a high position and are constantly improving it. In Great Britain both the friends and the foes of their movement illustrate the same truth.

There has been—perhaps still is—a section of public opinion in this country which believes that the British Empire is held together by the sword. It has even been stated that India is "held at the point of the bayonet." The fact that for a long time our mighty Empire was seldom without its "little wars" somewhere along its vast frontiers gave colour to a belief which otherwise seems actually grotesque. And it is significant that the opponents of Women's Suffrage were largely drawn from the ranks of this school of imperialist thought. Their argument was developed along two lines: one, that women could take no part in the business of holding the Empire by the sword, the other that they could not "think imperially." The latter argument was frequently put forward by women so obviously capable of performing the duty whose possibility (to other women?) they earnestly denied, as to remove its sting and its effect. The former was the real line of defence, and as long as this Jingo school of imperialism remains so long inevitably must there be an irreconcilable party of opposition to the Woman's Movement in this country. Its wane and the rising of a nobler conception of Empire has coincided with the gathering strength and power of that movement. Both spring from the same root—the belief that government, whether of a nation or of an Empire, must rest upon consent, or confess its failure; that moral force is not nobler only but stronger than coercion; that an Empire "held at the point of the bayonet"

must fall to pieces at the first shock of danger, while one in which there is freedom for the least as well as the greatest of its members stands "whole as the marble, founded as the rock." We do not imagine to-day that New Zealand, with its population of two or three millions, has less right to the free development of its own type of civilization than we with our fifty millions. We do not call that right a "privilege," or find "something laughable in the idea of a small State". We do not assume that there are no rights where there is not power to enforce them. On the contrary, we know that such rights can never be violated except at fearful cost to the violator. Not only does the act of injustice brutalize his conscience, but it vindicates again the principle which must at last react against him. Nations have assumed the right to act solely in their own immediate interests so far as they have the power to do so; but no nation can always be the strongest, and the time will come when another stronger arises, or many strong ones find their common interest against the violator, and then the old insistence that might is right destroys what it had set up.

In a deeper sense also the strong stand to lose by a violation of the rights of the weak. Mr. Lloyd George, in one of the noblest passages of a great speech at the beginning of the war, spoke of the debt owed by humanity to the little nations who brought to its lips some of the "choicest wines". And we would add that even those little nations who have no specially glorious history, no radiant names, have yet enriched the civilization of the world by their difference and variety of type. To crush out all those who have the right to exist but not the power to enforce that right is to commend to one's own lips, not the "choice wine" of humanity but

the bitter dregs of woe

Which ever from the oppressed to the oppressor flow.

The spirit which disregards this danger and despises this loss to civilization is "militarism"; and those who assert that rights remain rights even when they cannot be enforced, and that the moral law violated by physical violence vindicates itself in the end by the destruction of the destroyer, are fighting against militarism, whether they desire it or not. The Woman's Movement is based on belief in the moral law. It is concerned to assert the supremacy of moral force, and it can show that wherever the rights of the weak are set aside there enters into the State an element of bitterness and hostility on the one side, of brutality and moral stupidity on the other, which lowers its standard of strength and effectiveness as well as of moral nobility.

It is true that although the principles of militarism and feminism are fundamentally opposed many people do not know it, and—since we are not a peculiarly logical race—many Englishmen and women who were genuinely shocked at Prussianism as expounded by Bernhardt and applied to Belgium, have themselves expatiated eloquently in the same vein when the question was of classes or sexes instead of nations. There are militarists who believe themselves feminist, and feminists who are undoubtedly militarist. And, after all, since we are most of us perfectly aware that "logic is not a science but a dodge," we must beware of dismissing a paradox merely because it involves

an *apparent* contradiction. When, however, the contradiction is real—when the opposition between two principles is fundamental—the human mind cannot for ever hold them both. One must drive out and destroy the other. Those feminists who had most closely thought out their position had already grasped the issue. When war broke out, and ordinary political activities were necessarily suspended, it seemed to them as inevitable that they should take up the task of combating the real enemy of women (and of civilization)—militarism—as it was that they should take their share in the relief of the physical miseries and material burdens of war. There was no question of opposition to the war itself within the great Suffrage organizations, since the vast majority of their members believed that war had been forced upon us and was, on our part, a battle against a militarist ideal. But there was a deep consciousness that the spirit of militarism is very hardly separated from the fact of war, and that this spirit is immovably opposed to the feminism which rests its whole claim on the supremacy of spiritual force. War, indeed, has its spiritual passion ; but the fact that this must find its expression in the crudest forms of violence tends to exalt the latter at the expense of the former. Women can do no greater service to the world than to increase the healthy scepticism of violence as a method of imposing ideals which the history of religious persecution has already created.

War may claim for itself the power to destroy and to clear the ground. It can never construct or create. It is not the means by which ideals are imposed. There is ultimately no way of combating a wrong idea but the setting forth of a right one. Whether they are right who believe that moral force is “ the ultimate appeal ” against which coercion is vain and violence merely a counsel of despair, or they who see in physical force the real basis of government, let time show. One thing at least is certain—that as the Woman’s Movement embodies the one creed and “ militarism ” the other, so these two must be in eternal opposition. The victory of one is the defeat of the other. Women, whatever other claim may be made for them, are not equal to men in their capacity to use force or their willingness to believe in it. For them, therefore, to ask for equal rights with men in a world governed by such force is frivolous. Their claim would not be granted, and if granted would not be valid. But if moral power be the true basis of human relationship, then the Woman’s Movement is on a sure foundation and moves to its inevitable triumph. Its victory will be an element in the making of permanent peace, not because women are less liable to “ war fever ” than men, or more reluctant to pay the great price of war, but because their claim and its fulfilment involves the assertion of that which war perpetually denies.

PAMPHLET

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