

## THE MILITANT SUFFRAGE MOVEMENT

BY MARY WINSOR,

Chairman of the Pennsylvania Congressional Committee of the National American Woman Suffrage Association and President of the Pennsylvania Limited Equal Suffrage League.

An estimate of the militant suffrage movement should be based, not on mere study of books, but on a first-hand acquaintance with the movement itself in England. In 1913 during part of July, August and October, and in 1914 from May 27 to July 14, I was in London investigating the woman suffrage movement in all its ramifications, marching in processions and pilgrimages, speaking in meetings both peaceful and militant, indoors and out of doors (the street is a grand place to study politics, especially in England), attending tax resistance auctions, escorting deputations to the House of Commons, witnessing the brutality of policemen and appearing in the police court to testify to what I saw, following Sylvia Pankhurst and East End working men and women to the House of Commons, accompanying Mrs. Pethick Lawrence to jail, hearing Miss Nellie Hall and Miss Grace Roe interrupt the course of their trial as a protest against an unjust system of justice, and interviewing and conversing with dozens of suffrage sympathizers and workers.

In this brief paper it would be time wasted to criticise the militant methods—violence, destruction of property, etc.—as these methods have already been denounced more than sufficiently by the newspapers. I shall put the case somewhat from the standpoint of the militant suffragettes themselves, trying to give some idea of the philosophy and ethical principles underlying the militant propaganda and, above all, with the hope of making clear to American readers some of the radical differences between English and American conditions.

The militants hold that they are at war with the British government, basing their right to rebel on the axioms that governments derive their just powers from the consent of the governed, and that resistance to tyrants is obedience to God. As our colonial ancestors felt that a decent regard for the opinions of mankind should impel those in a state of rebellion to declare their reasons, so the suffragettes

have repeatedly endeavored to set before the world the grievances for which they are suffering. The grounds for revolt may be classified, roughly, as follows: The miserable status of English women; the impossibility of obtaining attention for, much less redress of, their grievances by constitutional methods; the historic precedents established by the use of force by the British people whenever the progress of freedom has been blocked by the British government; the insincerity and brutality shown by the present Liberal government in dealing with the women's agitation as compared with the leniency shown to male political offenders both past and present; the determination of the newspapers to stifle the movement by persistently excluding suffrage news and propaganda from their columns. I cannot take up all these points in detail; for some I shall give a list of references to enable the reader to form his own judgment.

In the United States, though the great majority of women are still disfranchised and many of the unjust laws inherited from England continue to disfigure our statute books, the suffragists are absolutely peaceful. We owe this, not to American women, but to American men. In every country it is the men who should be held chiefly responsible for the tone and conduct of the suffrage movement, as the government is in their hands, authority and power are theirs, and they are able to make the task of the feminist comparatively easy and pleasant. Englishmen have chosen to make it very difficult. In England the militant movement is like a slave insurrection; it presents characteristics of the uprising of a servile class; the bitterness of those who have been treated unjustly, the determination of the down-trodden to rise and at all hazards to themselves to conquer respect and consideration for their sex; and the arming of the one part of the community—women—against the other part. If the word "slave," applied to contemporary English women seems an exaggeration, let me say that our colonial ancestors considered taxation without representation tyranny. When Patrick Henry said, "Give me liberty or give me death," there were no fetters on his wrists, nor was he to be sold in the slave market. He merely referred to the fact that he was being taxed without his consent—a state of subjection so odious that death was preferable. Now, English women of today suffer not only from that grievance, but from many others. That the negro mother had no control of her child seemed to Abolitionists a potent argument for emancipation. Today the

English woman, if married, is not the legal parent of her child. The father is the parent and has the right to prescribe the child's education, religious training and medical attendance; he may take it away from the mother and may by will appoint a guardian without her consent. The position of a married woman is in many ways wretched: though her husband is supposed to support her, there is no legal machinery by which a woman can enforce this law; no husband is obliged to give his wife more than a bare maintenance, and may forbid her to pledge his credit; a man may disinherit his wife and leave her penniless with destitute children whom the law compels her to support. A life-time of unpaid service with possible destitution at the end is little better than slavery. The divorce laws are unequal, practically encouraging immorality on the part of the husband, as it is not a ground for securing a divorce from him unless coupled with cruelty or desertion. As for the industrial status of women, Miss Mary Macarthur, the secretary of the Women's Trades Union League, in giving evidence before the select committee on home work, estimated that the "average weekly wage of all women industrially employed, excepting only the most highly skilled, is 7 shillings a week." The government, as an employer, is one of the worst sweaters of women.

In America there is a spirit of justice and friendliness toward women, but in England the pressure to keep them down is four-fold, legal, political, industrial, social, and it might be added, religious. The militants do not think it strange that woman has rebelled, but that she has endured so long and so submissively. Perhaps heretofore the leaders and the inspiration were lacking. "Christabel" members of the W.S.P.U. have said to me with enthusiasm, "Christabel has given us a new ideal of womanhood." For centuries the feminine ideal has been semi-oriental. The world has thought that woman should purchase toleration for her existence and immunity from insult by making herself as inconspicuous as possible. The suffragettes have reacted from this silent, humble, Patient Griselda type to the extreme. They have not only been audacious enough to practise the militant virtues reserved to adorn the brows of man, but as the head and front of their offending, have claimed the right to exercise these virtues for the benefit of their own sex. As long as women were content to take part in man's revolutions, got up by men for the benefit of men, no matter how violent, how incendiary,

how murderous the feminine participants, they were considered heroines and patriots. When, for the first time in history, a revolution is organized by women for the benefit of women, though they are not murderous, merely violent and incendiary, they are considered not heroines and patriots, but vandals and viragoes. This is probably due to the lack of positive standards that prevails everywhere in church and state with regard to the ethics of fighting. Only one class has the right to condemn the use of violence by women, the Society of Friends, who have always condemned it equally in men and in women. The Quakers have never canted about brute force being noble and patriotic when used by men and abominable when used by women, but have said flatly that it was uncivilized, unchristian and degrading in any case. A study of the historic militant methods used by Englishmen, and still more by Irishmen, when struggling for liberty, prompts the suffragettes to ask embarrassing questions, such as, if it was praiseworthy for English people to cut off the head of Charles I when he tried to act the tyrant, why is it damnable for Miss Annie Kenney to break a window? If Henry VIII, in freeing religion from Rome, laid waste beautiful monasteries, and Cromwell stabled his horses in cathedrals and his troopers, for conscience' sake, broke imagery and stained glass, wherein do they differ from women who burn a church hoping thereby to rebuke the apathy and indifference of the woman-supported church of England? If Irishmen, who incited to riot, arson, cattle driving and even man-slaughter, were rewarded by gaining sympathy and assistance from Gladstone and the Liberal party, why are the women who, under great provocation, resort to much milder methods, treated like the worst of criminals and their just demands for the franchise waved aside?

Among the services the suffragists have rendered to society, not the least is that they have raised this question of the use of force, and compelled the world to face it from a new point of view. For the first time in history the male sex has been able, as it were, to get a long distance view of violence, to see how it looks when exercised by the opposite sex, with no chance of contributing to masculine vanity. Men have now seen a warfare in which all the courage, all the heroism has been shown by women, in which men have played the odious rôle of tyrant and oppressor. The suffragists have done much to establish a single standard of morals, and the international

peace movement will ultimately be strengthened by the search-lights they have turned on these questions, showing them all in a new and striking aspect.

### *The English Newspapers*

One of the greatest obstacles which the suffrage movement has encountered is the stubborn opposition of the English newspapers. Before the advent of the militants, it is said that the press boycott was absolute. Mrs. Pankhurst and her adherents claim that some of their most sensational doings were necessary to break down this boycott, and have been successful, at least in compelling the newspapers to notice women and their demands and to publish news of the suffrage movement which they had heretofore ignored. However, the attitude of the press toward the cause still leaves much to be desired. I made a careful study of the leading London newspapers, including *The Times*, *The Telegraph*, *The Morning Post*, *The Standard*, *The Daily Mail*, *The Herald*, *The Pall Mall Gazette*, *The Westminster Gazette*, *The Globe*, *The Chronicle*, *The Daily Graphic*, *The Daily Sphere*, *The Evening News*, and others. My method was to go to all the important suffrage meetings and compare the reports in these newspapers with my own observations as an eye witness, and also with the four weekly suffrage papers, *The Suffragette* (militant), *Votes for Women*, *The Vote* (mildly militant) and the *Common Cause* (Constitutional). The conclusions I came to may be summed up as follows:

Our American newspapers are far in advance of the London press in reporting the activities of women, their clubs, organizations, etc., including the woman suffrage movement. As far as the latter is concerned, English journalism does not seem to comprehend that it is world-wide, that millions of men and women are engaged in it and that its success is assured and may be near at hand. This inability to grasp the significance and extent of the woman suffrage movement is due to British insularity and to the deep rooted English habit of regarding women as inferior and subordinate beings whose activities are not important or of interest to the public. The English newspapers are essentially men's newspapers, got up by men for men, and largely devoted to party politics. The space given to women's affairs is meagre, and the general tone toward women is

hasty and contemptuous, or else of a deliberate and unctuous silliness, in short, the kind of thing one might expect to find in the local organ of a country town. None, with the honorable exception of Mr. George Lansbury's *The Herald*, is the advocate and champion of the cause. Some are lukewarm, the majority hostile, and their hostility is shown in the following ways: suppression and ignoring of important events; great meetings addressed by eminent speakers are briefly alluded to or passed over in silence; an exaggerated emphasis is laid on militancy, ignoring the work of the peaceful suffragists and the vast constitutional propaganda of the militants themselves; when acts of violence are reported an entire silence is kept as to the grievances from which women are suffering, so that the reading public is left in the dark as to the causes inciting to these acts of violence and must look on them as mere senseless outbursts of feminine devilry; facts are distorted and misrepresented in a way that I can only call deliberate. I noticed this with regard to the cruelty shown by the government in dealing with suffragette prisoners and by the police in making arrests. I interviewed three women, one an American, who were members of the deputation to the King and took down explicit and detailed accounts of the brutality, sometimes indecent, they had experienced at the hands of the police. Very little of this had been published by the newspapers. On the contrary, they described the women as attacking the police. Another subject much misrepresented is the supposed hostility of the public to the suffragist. In England a certain degree of importance is attached to the opinion of the "man in the street," and in a country where there is no initiative or referendum the behavior of the audiences at great political meetings affords an approximate estimate of popular opinion. If journalistic enterprise can make it appear that the "man in the street" is opposed to woman suffrage to such an extent that it is dangerous for suffragists of any kind to advocate their principles in public, not only is an important point scored against woman suffrage, but suffragists may be terrified into silence with all submission. To kill these two birds with one stone, editors have been willing to go to great lengths; some of them seem inspired by the hope of inciting the mob to use lynch law on women. Indeed, though it is incredible that the journalism of a civilized people should sink so low, some, not content with mere suggestions, have recommended this in plain words. Wish-

ing to test the truth of these reiterated assertions about the popular antagonism to suffragists, I spoke at various open air meetings and attended others as a witness. It is the general belief among all classes of suffragists (and my own experiences sustain this belief) that whenever suffrage meetings are broken up, it is done by a band of hooligans, always the same band, who are organized for that purpose. There are grounds to think that they are subsidized. Until these ruffians appear on the scene, the crowd, though sometimes noisy (as English audiences are apt to be), is, on the whole, interested and friendly.

Not even the extreme violence to which the suffragettes have gone is bad enough to justify the continued refusal of the vote. At least, I think this must be the opinion of the newspapers, for they seldom report even this kind of violence as it happened, but embroider on it. Take the case of Miss Ivy Bonn, who, on June 3, destroyed two valuable paintings in the Doré Galleries in Bond Street. According to some of the newspapers, she turned on the manager of the gallery and "rained blows on him with a hatchet." Of course, this is nonsense, for if she rained blows on a man with a hatchet, in a jiffy he would have been reduced to mince meat and she would have been tried for manslaughter. Moreover, it is contrary to the well-known policy of the W.S.P.U. to attack human life. This absurd and damaging fable appeared in many of the London papers and found its way into some of our own, so that Miss Ivy Bonn's name in two countries is now connected with an attempt to kill. She personally gave me her word of honor that she never raised a finger against the manager of the gallery, and that no one was hurt except herself. I cull out this incident from among a store of similar cases of misrepresentation with which the columns of the English press fairly swarm.

Volumes could be devoted to the short-comings of English journalism towards the feminist movement which has been hampered not so much by the doings of the suffragettes but by the stupid and unscrupulous manner in which the whole movement has been treated by the English newspapers.

Although the granting of the vote in America is delayed by the slow and cumbersome process of amending our constitutions, state or federal, still we are fortunate in the lack of sex antagonism and



in the sympathy and assistance of American men which have done so much to promote our cause. I would advise Americans who are not familiar with English conditions to suspend harsh judgments until they have had a chance to investigate on English soil the English movement and its peculiar difficulties. In default of such an opportunity, I recommend the following books and pamphlets which cover points that I have not had time to take up in detail in this paper:

*The Suffragette*, E. Sylvia Pankhurst. London: Gay & Hancock, Limited, Henriette Street, Covent Garden.

*Women's Fight for the Vote*, Frederick W. Pethick Lawrence. London: The Woman's Press, 156 Charing Cross Road, W.C.

*Way Stations*, Elizabeth Robins. London, New York and Toronto: Hodder & Stoughton.

*Mrs. Pankhurst's Own Story*. New York: Hearst's International Library Company.

*Prisons and Prisoners*, Lady Constance Lytton.

*Women: And the Unfair Position which They Occupy at the Present Time*, J. W. F. Jacques. London: National Union of Women's Suffrage Societies, 14 Great Smith Street, Westminster, S.W.

*The Duty of Tax Resistance*, Laurence Housman. London: The Women's Tax Resistance League, 98 St. Martin's Lane, W.C.

*The Legal Position of Englishwomen*. London: The Woman's Press, Lincoln's Inn House, Kingsway, W.C.

*Some Points of English Law Affecting Working Women as Wives and Mothers*, Mrs. H. M. Swanwick, M.A. London: Obtained from Women's Coöperative Guild, 28 Church Row, Hampstead, N.W.

*Annual Report of the Women's Social and Political Union, Year Ending February 28, 1914*. London: The Woman's Press, Lincoln's Inn House, Kingsway, W.C.

*Unfulfilled Pledges, Our Case against Mr. Asquith*. London: National Union of Women's Suffrage Societies, 14 Great Smith Street, Westminster, S.W.

*Custodia Honesta, Treatment of Political Prisoners in Great Britain*, Prof. George Sigerson, M.D., etc. London: The Woman's Press, Lincoln's Inn House, Kingsway, W.C.

*Militant Methods in History*, Joseph Clayton. London: The Woman's Press, Lincoln's Inn House, Kingsway, W.C.

*What Forcible Feeding Means*. London: The Woman's Press, Lincoln's Inn House, Kingsway, W.C.

*A Brief Review of the Women's Suffrage Movement since its Beginning in 1832*.



*Treatment of the Women's Deputations of November 18, 22 and 23, 1910, by the Police.* London: The Woman's Press, Lincoln's Inn House, Kingsway, W.C.

*The Life of Emily Davison,* G. Colmore. London: The Woman's Press, Lincoln's Inn House, Kingsway, W.C.

*The Women's Charter of Rights and Liberties,* Lady McLaren. London: Grant Richards, 7 Carlton Street, S.W.