



MARION CRAIG WENTWORTH

**“Notes for Women”**

ELIZABETH ROBINS' GREAT PLAY  
BY SPECIAL ARRANGEMENT WITH THE AUTHOR

# WOMAN'S SUFFRAGE

## THEME OF LONDON'S STRONGEST PLAY

MRS. WENTWORTH ANNOUNCES AS AN IMPORTANT SPECIAL ADDITION TO HER REPERTORY OF THE PRESENT SEASON, THAT SHE HAS SECURED THE PLATFORM RIGHTS TO MISS ROBINS' REMARKABLE PLAY IN THREE ACTS, "VOTES FOR WOMEN." SHE THUS IS ENABLED TO OFFER TO AMERICAN AUDIENCES THE EXCEPTIONAL OPPORTUNITY OF HEARING WHAT WAS NOT ONLY LONDON'S STRONGEST PLAY OF LAST SEASON, BUT A PLAY WHICH EMBODIES FOR THE FIRST TIME IN VITAL DRAMATIC LITERATURE A PLEA FOR THE EMANCIPATION OF WOMEN

"What do you call the greatest evil in the world?" says the inquiring woman in "Votes for Women" to the thinking woman.

The answer is, "The helplessness of women."

This play is the most important, most vital, and most interesting modern work now visible on the London stage. It is by Miss Elizabeth Robins, an American woman who has lived for many years in London, who wrote, among other things, those two good novels, "The Open Question" and "The Dark Lantern," and who was one of the first English-speaking actresses to assume the characters of Ibsen.

"Votes for Women" is of course intensely local and timely in its application, but like most plays which are that, its appeal is, or ought to be, universal. It has the tang of Shaw, without his brutality, and that insight into the heart of woman which is Pinero's greatest gift. There is the rigorous Greek quality in her construction, the entire action transpiring between noon of a Sunday and six o'clock in the evening of the same day.

The piece bears, of course, upon the "suffragette" movement that has recently been if not convulsing, at least extremely vexing England. The papers have been full of it, and many bitter and some ridiculous things have been said. The thread of story upon which Miss Robins hangs her statement of the case is simple and conventional enough, but it serves all her purposes. Here the treatment is everything, and Miss Robins' treatment is vivid, searching, and vigorous. Her first act is incisive, conversational, her second blazes with honest human passion, and her third is feminine psychology. That second act, a wonderful piece of craftsmanship, as well as of clear, sharp, strong writing, is a unique thing in modern dramatic literature. The germ and inspiration of it are to be found in the forum scene of "Julius Caesar." Cat-calls from a group of idlers and four long speeches by woman's suffrage advocates make up this act, which holds an audience to a painful tension, and leaves them tired out with laughter and with the struggle to keep from crying.

Never was material less dramatic made to produce effects so remarkable. Last evening, when the present writer saw the play, there was almost as much laughter, cheering and emotion on the spectators' side of the footlights as there was on the actors' side, and the same demonstrative now of silence, now of respectful attention, now of sympathy and of grief, that the leading players in the scene commanded from the mimic mob, they also commanded from the people in the auditorium. It ceased to be play acting and became life. The heart suffered with the eager, earnest men and women pleading with the mob for a hearing, and, in the same breath, the sense of humor was roused and tickled by the rough, rich drollery of the mob's comments.

But first a bare outline of the story to give point to description and allusion. A young woman visiting at a country house in Hertfordshire is disclosed as that familiar figure of English problem drama, "the woman with a past." She has loved, been ill-used, and suffered, and she has come through the fire, not unscathed, but stronger. Her story is vaguely known to certain women of position, who helped her in her trouble. The man in the case has "passed out at her life." She has made her mistake a means to spiritual grace.

The man, son of a noble house, has won a place in politics. The two, long separated, meet at this country house. A quiver of eyelashes makes known to the audience their recognition, and later in the act a more overt betrayal—a trifle of craftsmanship in which Miss Robins' touch is very ingenious—gives the girl who is betrothed to the politician her first vague suspicion of the relation that may have existed between him and the strange, ardent creature in whom she has found the first genuine inspiration of her life.

After a great deal of pungent conversation on social questions—not dogmatic, tedious stuff, but good, meaty, gripping thoughts on things that people ought to think about,—this girl determines to accompany her new and wonderful friend to a Sunday afternoon mass meeting in Trafalgar Square, where there are to be speeches on the question of female suffrage and on the recent failure of efforts of the suffragists to gain their cause a hearing in the House of Commons.

That meeting is the second act, and at it the young woman of position is made a convert. Incidentally there is further betrayal of her betrothed's secret, and the curtain descends on her progress through the mob to the base of the Nelson monument from which Vida Levering, the philanthropist and reformer, and her associates have been speaking. She will be henceforth not only Vida's friend, but her ally in the work of ameliorating the condition of the "shelterless women" of London.

In the third act the convert breaks with the politician and demands, for the sake of his own self-respect, that he shall make what reparation he can to Vida Levering for the wrong he did her years before. He is shamed into acquiescence, and he makes the offer. Vida Levering is not, however, the kind of woman to whom a loveless marriage with a man whom she had been for years trying to forget would mean either expiation or rehabilitation. She is greater than that.

By speeches of exquisitely subtle self-analysis, of mournful retrospect, and of spiritual revelation, that fact is made clear, and the deepest springs of the man's nature are touched. A pure, fresh stream of nobler purpose than he has ever known gushes forth. Vida Levering has said to the girl that loved her that "the man who served one woman, and God knows how many more, very ill, shall now serve hundreds of thousands of women well." In a word, she will enlist him in the cause which looks to the amelioration of what she has called "the greatest evil in the world,—the helplessness of women."

The best instincts of the man of the world and the successful politician are roused. The nature of the statement he is to make charms his inherited conception of chivalry and appeals to his newly quickened moral sense. He will do it, he will do it! We

wonder how long his purpose holds out and whether it takes him. We never know. The curtain falls. Vida Levering has stood a moment behind him with her hand on the door. He has not seen the look in her eyes,—the look that tells what men usually do miss. All the sorrow of womanhood is in it. It is the long gaze of pity, of yearning, of aloofness, of hope, of solicitude, of wistful anticipation that some good will come of resolute new-born, of aching fear that nothing shall be brought to pass. Women bear more than children into this world; they people men's hearts with high purposes—and then they see them die.

If this bald survey of Miss Robins' play leaves out all impression of the grip of her "drama," that is not her fault, but the fault of her reviewer. She has taken material that might be made intolerably prosaic, banal, and didactic and she has breathed a warm humanity into every line of it. Her Vida Levering is a character of monumental dignity, and she is defined with a stately decisiveness that suggests a figure hewn from marble. Her pride; her calm bearing of a personal grief, coupled with her passionate ardor in the cause of other women; her faculty for clear thinking and her skill in straight speaking; her infinite tenderness; and her tremendous courage, her reticence, her honesty,—all combine to give her singular loveliness and interest.

She could be a martyr, but never a fanatic. She makes fine and gracious a cause that has been made ludicrous through the espousal of it by cranks and eccentrics. She is strong and gentle, very sorrowful and very winning. She is a new figure in the long procession of "women with a past," and, considering her as an intellectual and spiritual force in modern life, she is a representative of those people who are (in her own words) "grappling, very inadequately, of course, but still grappling, with the big questions of the day."

They ask her what she was doing when, clad in shabby raiment, she went at night among "the shelterless women of London." "I was on a pilgrimage into the underworld," she replies, and adds,— "Ah, you'll never know how many things are hidden from a woman in good clothes."

The Trafalgar Square scene—the scene that has made the play the sensation of London because of its passionate veracity and its amazing stagecraft—is peppered with good lines and it throbs with great acting. The curtain rises on the grim base of the black old monument. A crowd of Sunday strollers fills the stage,—beggars, soldiers, newsboys, casual passers-by whose curiosity has prompted to pause. Every face in the throng is an etching, every participant, even though his lines be limited to cat-call or a mutter, is obviously a trained actor. This mob is alive. It never recedes from or drops out of the picture. Everything it does, every surging movement, every cry, every murmur, every ribald jest, every gush of sympathy, every token of respectful attention that is wrung from it by the fiery speakers,—all are fused and blended and toned into a perfect semblance of life.

Compared with this mob, Mansfield's mob in "Julius Caesar" becomes a pale blue. Not even the mob in "The Weavers" was so veracious as this mob that every American stage manager ought to come to see and study until every detail in its amazing richness and fidelity is etched into his memory for the rest of his professional career. This mastery act gave the writer the old deep thrill that he hadn't known in the theatre for years, and it drove home deep meanings, too. It would perhaps be too much to say that that stirring half-hour made him a suffragist, but it made him understand and respect the suffragist's point of view. That was something.

"What's politics?" cried a gaunt, grave-faced woman speaker, representative of the decent element in the lower class. "Why, it's 'ousekeepin' on a big scale. The government's in a muddle because it's been tryin' to do the 'ousekeepin' without the women."

Some say a woman ought to stop at 'ome an' mind the 'ouse. Don't you know that a third of the women in this country can't afford to stay 'ome? They've got to go out an' 'elp earn the rent."

Once in the course of her speech a querulous voice in the crowd leered, "You go 'ome an' nuss the baby." The woman searched out the man with her eyes, and in them there was something of honesty, something of Madonnas. Her voice broke, and was gentle but proud when she said: "I do nuss my baby. I've nussed seven." An instant's hush fell upon the throng. Some of the men looked down ashamed.

The next speaker was Vida Levering, impersonated by Miss Edith Wynne Matthisson, whom we in America remember for her glorious interpretation of the poetry of "Everyman."

She began Vida's speech to the mob in faltering tones, her voice often breaking. She related some incidents illustrating the woes of the homeless children and shelterless women of London, and the substance of her plea was that such cases, often involving drastic legal penalties instead of charitable ministrations, should be adjudicated by women.

At first they were abashed, then receptive, and at last a great awe fell upon them, and their faces, as they gazed up at the beautiful woman, who often brushed tears from her eyes and pressed a nervous hand to her trembling lips, grew gentle. She wrought upon them with the spell of pity and of reason, swaying them and holding them, making them think and making them be sorry. The play ceased to be a play and became sermon, oration, hymn,—a kind of twentieth century "Song of the Shirt,"—but sounding a bigger note, and asking questions that England and the world must answer some day.

One went away with a woman's answer to the old question as to what might be the voting woman's—the citizen woman's—obligation to bear arms in time of war ringing in one's ears.

"Women give life: men take it. No one will pretend that ours isn't a dangerous profession."

JAMES O'DONNELL BENNETT.

London, May 15, 1907.

ADDRESSES FOR TERMS, DATES, ETC.  
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