

A True Lancashire Lass!

I was in the women's suffrage procession in London last Saturday, and went into the succeeding Exeter Hall meeting.

Many others besides myself were astonished and thankful at the determined, unafraid attitude the women of that platform and of that great audience had evidently taken up. At that gathering of all the English women's suffrage societies, Women's Liberal Association, British Women's Temperance Association, some trade unions of Lancashire, and of the men willing to help them, the vital point discussed was how to enforce the demand for the women's vote.

Mrs Eva McLaren, the well-tryed and faithful suffragist, declared, as a Liberal woman, she would not come outside the party to demand the vote, and was greeted with cries of "Come out!" come out!"

Mrs Henry Fawcett spoke of a male friend who had been in favour of women's suffrage for 30 years, but who was now alienated and revolted by the tactics (as partially described in the Press) of the militant women of the Women's Social and Political Union (WSPU); and her answer to the objector's wife was that his present opposition should be as passive as his support had been those 30 years – never a half-crown given to the work, not a petition signed, not a speech given, not a paper at a literary society, not a pledge asked for. There has been much so-called support of that kind. Let us look at what, on the other hand, the fighting women's resolute and determined action has achieved. It has lifted the question out of the slough of indifference.

Instead of women's suffrage being one of the stodgiest, deadest of subjects, the reports of the central suffrage society's great meetings, boycotted by the Press, this is now one of the most leading questions, the most watched, the most debated, the best copy for the Press, and during the year 1906, however much the fighting women have been personally ridiculed, the cause they fight for has been dealt with right seriously by the great reviews.

The women of the orthodox suffrage societies, who have steadily, for years, in their own best way, pushed their propaganda, are recognising the service the militant women have contributed in the women's common cause. As Mr Israel Zangwill said, the hopeless circle is that women's claim to votes does not seem likely to be recognised in parliament until women have got votes to claim its recognition there, or until women are there themselves. How does the matter stand with the Government's row, this present Government with the acknowledgment of the women's equal rights to citizenship noted at convenient times?

From the Prime Minister's clear and careful summary, May, 1906, of women's present legal disabilities, the opinion in the Liberal Cabinet declines in vigour of support to Mr Winston Churchill's plain statement on Monday February 4, in Manchester, that he was not in favour of any such bill enfranchising women. Thus no member of the Cabinet moves in it. What does a faithful worker like McLaren propose to the 80,000 members of the Women's Liberal Federation to do to arm their movement, to give it force, and the necessary discomfiting pertinacity?

At the Exeter Hall meeting, referring to Mrs McLaren's statement that they were determined to remain Liberals, Mr Keir Hardie said that with this Liberal Government in office, and 420 members in the House of Commons pledged to support women's suffrage, what indication was there from any member of the government that it intended to deal with the matter during the present Parliament?

In the expression of opinion on desired legislation from Liberal members in the "Tribune" only one referred to the enfranchisement of women. "If the question was advanced today they had to thank the tactics of the fighting brigade. No reform had ever been won by trusting to party."

Determined and general applause from this moderate women's audience greeted Mr Hardie's statement. I am not a Liberal woman, but I stand in a similar relation to my own party. I am a socialist, and I believe in the socialist claim with all my heart and soul, but while the men of the Labour Party do not or may not make the demand for equal rights of citizenship for women a chief plank in their platform, the women are forced to stand out and make as much of it as they possibly can themselves.

Always other reforms first, but this Women's Suffrage Bill is to be passed, thanks to the efforts of the Socialist women backbone of the WSPU and all other women and men of the three parties who believe in this principle forming the great demanding body of the claim. After 50 year's of women's agitation, so easily able to be ignored up to 1906, this is the first sharp-edged, serviceable tool women have had.

This may be, we believe this is, the psychological moment of this movement, and the leaders are found in the day that needs them. The heroism of the determined women will win the bill. Few people know what real heroism has been. The women are forcing this to the front in face of insult, sometimes of the vilest; and in face of danger. How many people know why Miss Billington used a dog whip to defend herself at Northampton? The Press, while it has ridiculed the women to please the unthinking crowd, has been silent on these facts.

WT Stead (November 1906), in the Review of Reviews, states that at a recent meeting of Mr Lloyd-George's, at Birmingham, a woman was carried out by the stewards with her legs in the air; later the woman told me that she and another were sent there to ask Mr Lloyd-George why he had received a deputation of "ladies" about women's votes and had ignored one from "working women." There have been two indecent assaults on protesting women when secured, detained and taken out of the meetings. A plain statement of what happened to the three women who protested at Mr Churchill's statement on February 4 at Manchester would be sickening.

These women have to go through with their insistence, driven by their intense faith in their cause, and their bill can and shall be carried now ; naught will stop them.

The more indignity they suffer, the more the country will comprehend their loyalty to a cause most thoughtful men acknowledge good and just. This open protestation and witness is only one small part of their work. They have 10 at least women leaders of extraordinary ability – for platform or organisation work – all aglow with inspiration for this raising of the status of women for the whole good of the race. And at the back of the most sensational protests, it is their speeches and meetings with which are doing a wonderful education work.

We know that our bill, the bill Mr Hardie is so firmly standing by, is but an imperfect measure. So was the first Factory Act; so is this first Feeding of School Children Bill: but if the men have to be thankful to get reforms conceded thus, why not the women?

The thing is that all women and all women's education in politics will be taken more seriously when women are citizens and potential or actual electors. Is it not time those questions in politics equally vital to men and women, such as housing, education of the children, poverty, drink, infantile death-rate, and women's labour laws were opened to women, so that they may have equal power and responsibility in dealing with them. Are these women's questions, where her divine wisdom of motherhood should be of use to the nation, without any legal bar? This will be no battle of sex against sex if the men who are pledged to the principle will help the women in this hour of need: moreover, the MPs of the three parties will realise that to prevent the women fighting the women's battle is not for them.

Nay, is it not that any firm staunch support given, such as Mr Hardie is giving to the women at this time, will never be forgotten by women who have rendered much service in the past, and who are soon to be more powerful in politics than they are now.