

# A FAMED BIOLOGIST'S WARNING OF THE PERIL IN VOTES FOR WOMEN

**F**OR man the physiology and psychology of woman are full of difficulties. He is not a little mystified when he encounters, in her periodically recurring phases of hypersensitiveness, unreasonableness and loss of the sense of proportion. He is frankly perplexed when confronted with a complete alteration of character in a woman who is child-bearing. When he is a witness of the "tendency of woman to morally warp when nervously ill," and of the terrible physical havoc which the pangs of a disappointed love may work, he is appalled. It leaves upon his mind an eerie feeling when he sees serious and long-continued mental disorders developing in connection with the approaching extinction of a woman's reproductive faculty. No man can close his eyes to these things. But he does not feel at liberty to speak of them.

In this way does that distinguished British biologist and student of physiology, Sir Almroth Wright, begin in the columns of the *London Times* an indictment of woman in the capacity of voter so sensational that it has plunged the entire suffragist camp of London into uproar. Sir Almroth admits that woman herself makes light of "these mental upsettings." She perhaps smiles a little, he says, at them all. None the less, he contends, these upsettings of her mental equilibrium are the things that a woman has most cause to fear. No doctor can ever lose sight of the fact that the mind of woman is always threatened with danger from "reverberations of her physical emergencies." It is with such thoughts, adds this noted scientist, that the doctor lets his eyes rest upon the suffraget, more particularly upon the militant suffraget. He can not shut his eyes to the truth that there is mixed up with the present woman's movement much mental disorder, and he can not conceal from himself the physical emergencies which lie behind.

First—Sir Almroth puts them first—come a class of women who hold, with minds otherwise unwarped, that they may, whenever it is to their advantage, lawfully resort to physical violence. The program, as distinguished from the methods, of these women is not very different from that of the ordinary suffragist woman.



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There file past next a class of women who have all their lives long been strangers to joy, women in whom instincts long suppressed have in the end broken into flame. These are, to Sir Almroth, the sexually embittered women in whom everything has turned to gall and bitterness of heart and hatred of men. Their legislative program is license for themselves or else restrictions for men.

Next, according to this authority, there file past the incomplete. One side of their nature has undergone atrophy. The result is that they have lost touch with their living fellow-men and women. Their program is to convert the whole world into an epicene institution—an epicene institution in which man and woman shall everywhere work side by side at the self-same tasks and for the self-same pay. These wishes can never, declares Sir Almroth, by any possibility be realized. Even in animals—Sir Almroth says “even” because in these at least one of the sexes has periods of complete quiescence—male and female can not be safely worked side by side except when they are incomplete. While in the human species safety can be obtained, it can be obtained only at the price of continual restraint. Even then woman, tho she protests that she does not require it and that she does not receive it, practically does always receive differential treatment at the hands of man. It would be well that every woman should be clearly told—and the women of the world will immediately understand—that when man sets his face against the proposal to bring in an epicene world he does so because he can do his best work only in surroundings free from suggestion and from restraint and from the onus which all differential treatment imposes. When a medical man asks that he be not made the yoke-fellow of a medical woman, he does so also because he would wish to keep up as between men and women—even when they are doctors—some of the modesties and reticences upon which our civilization has been built up. Now the medical woman is, says Sir Almroth, never on the side of modesty or in favor of any reticences. Her desire for knowledge does not allow of these.

Inextricably mixed up with the types which Sir Almroth thus discusses is the woman who is poisoned, according to him, by her misplaced self-esteem, who flies out at every man who does not pay homage to her intellect. She is the woman who is affronted when a man avers that for him the glory of woman lies in her power of attraction, in her capacity for motherhood and in unswerving allegiance to the ethics which are special to her sex. In the wake of these embittered women come troops of girls just grown up:

“All these will assure you, these young girls—and what is seething in their minds is stirring also in the minds of the girls in the colleges and schools which are staffed by



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unmarried suffragists—that woman has suffered all manner of indignity and injustice at the hands of man. And these young girls have been told about the intellectual and moral and financial value of woman—such tales as it never entered into the heart of man to conceive. The program of these young women is to be married upon their own terms. Man shall—so runs their scheme—work for their support—to that end giving up his freedom and putting himself under orders for many hours of the day; but they themselves must not be asked to give up any of their liberty to him, or to subordinate themselves to his interests. . . .

"There is also a quite fatuous element in the program of the militant suffragist. We have this element, for instance, in the doctrine that, notwithstanding the fact that the conditions of the labor market deny it to her, woman ought to receive the same wage as a man for the same work. This doctrine is fatuous, because it leaves out of sight that, even if woman succeeds in doing the same work as man, he has behind him a much larger reserve of physical strength. As soon as a time of strain comes, a reserve of strength and freedom from periodic indisposition is worth paying extra for. Fatuous also is the dogma that woman ought to have the same pay for the same work—fatuous because it leaves out of sight that woman's commercial value in many of the best fields of work is subject to a very heavy discount by reason of the fact that she cannot, like a male employee, work cheek by jowl with a male employer, nor work among men as a man with his fellow-employees. So much for the woman suffragist's protest that she can conceive of no reason for a differential rate of pay for man. Quite as fatuous are the marriage projects of the militant suffragist. Every woman of the world could tell her—whispering it into her private ear—that if a sufficient number of men should come to the conclusion that it was not worth their while to marry except on the terms of fair give-and-take, the suffragist woman's demands would have to come down. It is not at all certain that the institution of matrimony—which, after all, is the great instrument in the levelling up of the financial situation of woman—can endure apart from some willing subordination on the part of the wife."

In addition to the element of mental disorder and the element of the fatuous, Sir Almroth enumerates a very ugly element of dishonesty. The very kernel of the militant suffrage movement, he asserts, is the element of immorality—not only immorality in the ends in view, but in the methods adopted. "There is no one who does not discern that woman in her relations to physical force stands in quite a different position to man. Out of that different relation there must of necessity shape itself a special code of ethics for woman. And to violate that code must be for woman immorality." So far as Sir Almroth has seen, no one has laid a finger upon the essential point of the relations of woman to physical violence. It has been stated—and in the main quite truly stated—that woman in the mass can not, like man, back up her



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vote by bringing physical violence into play. But the woman suffragist here counters by insisting that she as an individual may have more physical force than an individual man. It is quite certain that woman in the mass can bring a certain amount of physical force to bear. The true inwardness of the relation in which woman stands to physical force lies not in the question of her having it at command, but in the fact that she can not put it forth without placing herself in the jurisdiction of an ethical law. The law against which she offends when she resorts to physical violence is not an ordinance of man, it is not written in the statutes of any state, it has not been enunciated by any human lawgiver. It belongs to those unwritten and unassailable and irreversible commandments of religion which we suddenly and mysteriously become aware of when we see them violated.

"The law which the militant suffragist has violated is among the ordinances of that code which forbade us even to think of employing our native Indian troops against the Boers, which brands it as an ignominy when a man leaves his fellow in the lurch and saves his own life, and which makes it an outrage for a man to do violence to a woman. To violate any ordinance of that code is more dishonorable than to transgress every statutory law. We see acknowledgment of it in the fact that even the uneducated man in the street resents it as an outrage to civilization when he sees a man strike a blow at a woman. But to the man who is committing the outrage it is a thing simply unaccountable that anyone should fly out at him. In just such a case is the militant suffragist. She cannot understand why anyone should think civilization is outraged when she scuffles in the street mud with a policeman.

"If she asks for an explanation it perhaps behoves a man to supply it.

"Up to the present in the whole civilized world there has ruled a truce of God as between man and woman. That truce is based upon the solemn covenant that within the frontiers of civilization (outside them of course the rule lapses) the weapon of physical force may not be applied by man against woman nor by woman against man. Under this covenant the reign of force which prevails in the world without comes to an end when a man enters his household. Under this covenant that half of the human race which most needs protection is raised up above the waves of violence. Within the terms of this compact everything that woman has received from man and everything man receives from woman is given as a free gift. Again, under this covenant a full half of the program of Christianity has been realized; and a foundation has been laid upon which it may be possible to build higher, and perhaps finally in the ideal future to achieve the abolition of physical violence and war. And it is this solemn covenant, the covenant so faithfully kept by man, which has been violated by the militant suffragist. . . .

"To take examples. A vote cast in favor of a Bill for the prohibition of alcohol—if we could find opportunity for giving a vote on



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such a question—would be a formal expression of our desire to apply through the agency of the paid servants of the State that same physical compulsion which Mrs. Carrie Nation put into application in her 'bar-smashing' crusades. And a vote which puts a Government into office in a country where murder is punishable by death is a vote which, by agency of the hangman, puts the noose round the neck of every convicted murderer. So that the difference between voting and direct resort to force is simply the difference between exerting physical violence in person and exerting it through the intermediary of an agent of the State.

"The thing, therefore, that is withheld from the noblest woman in England while it is conceded to the man who is lacking in nobility of character is in the end only an instrument by which she might bring into application physical force. When one realizes that that same noblest woman of England would shrink from any personal exercise of violence, one would have thought that it would have come home to her that it is not precisely her job to commission a man forcibly to shut up a public-house or to hang a murderer."

Peace between the sexes will, predicts Sir Almroth, come again. It will come when woman ceases to believe and to teach all manner of evil of man despitefully. It will come when she ceases to impute to him as crime her own natural disabilities and does not wish to work at his side.

To attempt, however, to measure the mental and physical capacities of women in Sir Almroth's fashion is absurd, according to that distinguished student of woman's life and work, Frances Forbes Robertson, whose reply to the eminent man of science delights the suffragets. We quote the version supplied by the *London Standard*:

"We must not forget, in taking a medical man's opinion, that we are taking a prejudiced one. His observations are solely turned upon abnormal persons—the sick and the hysterical—the diseased; never on the healthy. Nature did not build the female on the lines that so confound Sir Almroth. Hysteria and madness are the outcome of physical decadence caused by improper living; man's supremacy has, unhappily, caused his decadence. He has shut his women in close rooms, tied her ankles together, put a string round her waist, and encased her feet in absurd little shoes that she might not walk too freely. These things have become fashions, but we should not lose sight of their origin. They were enforced to hold the female from the too numerous male prowling without.

"The mental distress suffered by quite a small minority of women of middle-age is caused by the unnatural life they lead—a life based on an exaggerated idea of sex, and led in the house and in occupations which have never seriously interested their minds.

. . . But this mental illness and irresponsibility rarely occurs to the woman who has intellectual interests and occupations which command control over her nervous organization, and particularly those which take her among strangers, away from the petty domesticities which are, believe me, of little use to man or woman. The woman who



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earns her living and is decently paid does not become incapable at the change of life. There are thousands of school teachers, journalists, painters, actresses, hospital nurses, matrons, doing excellent responsible work between the ages of forty-five and sixty. But the doctor knows little about such women, since they do not require to seek his aid, being healthy and normal.

"The unbalanced mind is not common only to the female. Statistics show us that more men commit suicide than women, and more young men under the influence of love commit murder and crime."

With all deference to Sir Almroth for his brilliant work in a chemical and bacteriological laboratory, another noted London physician, Dr. Herbert Mills, writes in the *London Times* that the biologist's words betray a terrible ignorance of the class of women, rank and file, who work in the suffrage movement. To cite as typical certain pathological perversions of a normal function, which in the great majority of women has no disabling effect whatever, is absolutely and hopelessly not scientific. And the distinguished authority upon medical themes, Sir Victor Horsely, puts in his word of protest. He considers that Sir Almroth Wright's statements are "most repulsive in the debased picture they present of woman in her relation to man." He holds that the "perverted ideas of the relations of the two sexes" are physiologically and neurologically untrue, and he imagines that few medical men will have read the passage with reference to the "incomplete woman" without disgust:

"Certainly all those who have worked for years in the mixed committees or in the Metropolitan Branch Council of the British Medical Association will join in protesting against Sir A. Wright's suggestion that 'when a medical man asks that he should not be the yoke-fellow of a medical woman' it is because such cooperation can only be obtained 'at the price of continual constraint' on the part of the man. . . . Sir A. Wright has also insulted his profession and his sex. In truth, his statements and allegations are essentially pornographic, for to medical practitioners in consultation 'modesties and reticences' have no existence, save to a prurient mind. The women medical practitioners have shown the world what is real modesty, and have always stood for a single code of moral conduct which should ennoble the lives of men and women alike.

"Sir Almroth Wright complains that the 'incomplete women' wish to convert the world into an 'epicene institution in which men and women shall everywhere work side by side at the selfsame tasks and for the selfsame pay.' Why does he attribute to women alone this aspiration for common justice and social reform? The equality of the sexes in work, and the equality of their pay for the selfsame work, is the fundamental principle of his own profession."

The point which Sir Almroth overlooks, in the opinion of the suffraget ladies generally, is the question of efficiency. Is human efficiency increased or decreased



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by participation of the sexes upon an equal basis in the world's work? The well-known organ of the cause, *Votes for Women* (London), insists that statistics vindicate the suffragist contention and disprove every point alleged by the famed biologist.

# CURRENT OPINION

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