



THE BOOK *of the* MONTH

Why Suffragettes Go to Jail

By Elizabeth Robins

Author of "My Little Sister," "Come and Find Me," etc.

EDITOR'S NOTE: *In her new book, "Way Stations," Miss Elizabeth Robins treats of many phases of the world-wide fight of women for votes. Miss Robins, whose novels, "My Little Sister" and "Come and Find Me," created a deep impression because of their delicate yet masterful handling of the social evil and white slave problems, is herself an ardent suffra-*

gist though not actively identified with the militants. In view of the fact that nearly four million of our women in ten states—including Illinois, where women vote for Presidential electors—now have the ballot, the passages quoted below (which are used through the courtesy of Messrs. Dodd, Mead & Co., the publishers) should hold a special interest for American readers.

IN regard to those parts of America longest settled and supposedly most enlightened, we were informed a few short months ago, the Woman Suffrage Cause had been killed. But the latest advices (through the non-partisan Press of Boston) tell how two thousand Suffragists stormed the State House during the legislative hearing of the Julia Ward Howe Bill. That staid and most conservative of New England papers, the "Boston Transcript," called the occasion "the biggest Woman Suffrage demonstration which Boston has ever seen." The "American" said: "Never had such a scene been witnessed on Beacon Hill." The daily papers devoted columns to description and comment; and persons who succeeded in gaining the much-coveted admission to the hearing, report the same sort of change in the latter-day treatment of the question which has been remarked in the House of Commons. In the Boston State House, too, the same opposer who for years has made his speech the occasion for ventilating

a cheap facetiousness, spoke last month for the first time with gravity and decorum. The late proceedings are admitted on every side by the American Press to mark a notable advance for the Cause in the Eastern States.

And what of England! Just as truly as the body sitting at St. Stephen's is accounted the Mother of Parliaments—just so truly may the Woman Suffrage agitation in England be called the Mother of the world-wide New Movement. The late-born corporate spirit among women (taking its hundred different aspects according to character and opportunity)—this new inspiration lifting up the women East and West—had its birth in England. To England the people look for its highest expression.

Not only from afar off may the Signs of the Times be read. Look down the columns of our paper, at the notices of meetings to be held and of those which have taken place within the week, but do not forget that the reported meetings represent less than a tenth of those that are held. British

Suffrage Unions and Societies of every political complexion spread like a network over the kingdom.

But, looming high above all the other Signs, standing out like "a great sea mark," is the fact that something like 400 women have gone to prison in their determination to make as clear as voteless people can that they will not patiently endure their present outlawry. While you read these words more than thirty women of character and standing are living the life of the second-class prisoner in Holloway Gaol. And this has come about through the endeavour of those women to help the authorities to interpret, and to take to heart, the most significant of all the Signs of the Times. But those who, seeing "*a cloud rise out of the west, straightway say, 'There cometh a shower,'*" are not able, it would seem, to discern the meaning, or gauge the elemental force, that lies behind this cloud of witnesses.

So little weatherwise are the political prophets they even think that prison as a means of protest has been weakened by repetition and robbed of its significance.

But going to prison has not lost its poignant significance to those who suffer the ordeal, nor to those who do not blind themselves to what that ordeal involves.

There are people who think the Suffragette is pleased to "advertise" her hardships, and that she gets her reward out of "posing as a martyr." But the truth is, there are few things rarer than to find a Suffrage ex-prisoner exhibiting any readiness to dwell upon what she has suffered. I have sometimes felt that the comfortable people, who "take it out" in criticising, are not so much to blame. Perhaps they ought to be given a better opportunity to realise what imprisonment means. But, no; your Suffragette is both too proud and too busy. Also, she is terribly afraid of seeing the Suffrage Movement side-tracked on to prison reform. "No," she says; "keep to the point"—in spite of semi-asphyxiation, disgusting food, the aching misery of plank beds, damp cement, midsummer days of choking airlessness and winter nights of graveyard chill—"keep to the point! The point is Votes."

We must remember that the primary concern of the practical reformer is: How shall people be made to give this matter a fair hearing? All the comparatively easy ways are tried first. Women's appeal was in the beginning made to reason. You

know the result. In America the result was once epitomised by President Roosevelt's saying he was lukewarm about the Suffrage because women were lukewarm. In England politicians say they were warmly in favour till women became so hot. On this side the Atlantic feminine fervour cools the generous ardour of the legislator. On the other side it is the absence of warmth in the Suffragist that left that President cold. I do not think it is American partiality that makes me imagine Mr. Roosevelt showed himself a better weather-prophet than the authorities here. Whatever we may think about his statesmanship or his love of abstract justice, we must admit he read aright *The Signs of the Times*. Here at home your political weather-prophets are like those who, when they "see a cloud rise out of the west, straightway say, 'There cometh a shower';" and so it is. And when the south wind blows they say, "There will be heat; and it cometh to pass." But as in the old days, these who "can discern the face of the sky and of the earth," cannot discern "the signs of the times."

Why Prison Penance Pays

IN the symbol offered them by the woman who goes to prison, the political weather-prophet can discern no meaning.

"We were a little stirred as well as shocked at first," they tell you. "But we are no longer stirred, and hardly even shocked."

And because they are able to deaden what human sympathy they have—because they can look on unmoved while women suffer—the public, too, they think, is equally indifferent.

But they are wrong. The public is anything but indifferent. And this is why.

To the toiling millions prison is *real*.

In the great body of the electorate there are people who realise that going to prison is a ghastly business.

Justice is the stepmother of the poor. The poor know the heaviness of her hand. Few great aggregations of the populace where there is not someone who has been caught in our clumsy municipal machinery—someone who has suffered and been torn. Those who have not first-hand knowledge *have heard*. Prison for them is not a thing to shrug the shoulders at; neither lurid legend nor queer anachronism, scarce credible as an accompaniment of modern progress.

Prison is *real* to the poor. In the person of some relation or friend it has been a horrible fact. No danger of their sharing the illusion of the middle-class woman, entrenched in her comfortable ignorance, leaning back against her cushions and saying: "Holloway can't be so bad, or the Suffragettes could never get so many people to go there." Strange forgetfulness of the fortitude possible to the human soul!

Anyone who doubts this has only to watch the electric effect of the coming of a relay of newly released prisoners into the field during a by-election. Easy enough to denounce their appearance as "a cheap electioneering dodge." If it were really so "cheap," if it were not in truth very costly, it would not have its invariable effect upon the voters. The reason it is so potent is, as I say, that in the great mixed crowds that gather round the public speakers at election time are always these *people who know*. Even for them—at no time used to much creature comfort—even for them, hardened to harsh treatment and sordid environment, some of them—(enough to make actual the women's sacrifice)—*know* the fierce pinch of prison days. The effect of that sacrifice upon the masses is enormous. It is incalculable. They look at these delicate women and say, "She knows! Very few of the gentlefolk know. That woman standing there in the wind and the rain, *she* knows! She was under no compulsion to share the heavy knowledge of the hard-pressed. She must be buoyed up by some strange power unknown to the petty offender. What power? Let us listen and find out."

By going to prison the Suffragette has done two things. She has proved her faith to those who know the harsher side of life; and she has brought herself through suffering into more direct relation with the masses than she could have done by all the academic eloquence in the world.

The perhaps too common silence of the Suffragette as to the price she has paid does not here make for misunderstanding. These people have seen the cowed and beaten look many another sort of prisoner has brought out of the same sort of experience; they know all about the strain on the nerves and the courage, the unconquerable sickness at sight of the food, the windows that cannot admit air.

Who that heard will ever forget the tone and haunted look of that prisoner who once admitted the acid-like corrosion wrought

upon the "warder-voice." And she excused the warders—"not their fault," she said, "that the only people who may speak to you have a *special* voice for prisoners. A voice that isn't human, a voice of iron." Such kindness, as, in spite of all, creeps into the relation must be hidden like a felony.

Can You Interpret This Sign?

DOES it tell men nothing that some of the Suffrage prisoners before they tried going to Holloway had grown grey working among the poor and the lost? And some of the prisoners are young—full of a generous fire as illuminating as experience, lighting up the Wrong that could never touch them, but which they have pledged themselves to banish out of the world. A few weeks of prison! Can you not realise that the woman bearing that may see in herself a type of the Immemorial Woman—the burden-bearer of the world?

Prison? What evil there can visit her that will not pale by the side of what evil women bear outside those walls?

One seems to hear the prisoner in her darkest hour reproach her heart as the Greek hero did: "Endure, my heart, far worse hast thou endured."

She comes out smiling, do you say? Yes. Her smiling is a symbol of her faith. But you may believe that, as she sits alone there in her narrow cell, . . . "tears are in her eyes; and in her ears the murmur of a thousand years."

I do not ask on behalf of those women what they do not ask for themselves. They do not ask for sympathy. They went to prison for "a sign." The question is: Can you read it? Can you even discern the two strange and unexpected things that have come out of women's going to prison in the cause of Suffrage?

First: a fact not easily given its due weight—the fact that through their suffering and voluntary acceptance of the badge of humiliation, they have come close to the poor.

Second: most difficult, most precious gain of all, the poor have come close to them.

In a democratic country this is a circumstance of the first magnitude. Well may the most astute statesman be given pause when he reflects that there is no body of educated men in Europe to-day in such close touch with the hard-pressed, disinherited millions as the women who have gone to prison for the Vote.

(Read Edwin Markham's Book Reviews in our Advertising Section)

Hearst's Magazine

Vol. 24

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Cover Drawing by Charles Dana Gibson

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Published Monthly by World Review Company

Trade Mark Registered
Printed by the Charles Schweinler Press

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HEARST'S MAGAZINE, 119 West Fortieth Street, New York, N. Y.
Entered at the Post-office at New York as second-class mail matter.

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This *Hearst's Magazine* excerpt from *Way Stations* as the magazine's feature in their Book of the Month section roughly matches "Signs of the Times," ER's speech in *Way Stations* (delivered at Queen's Hall London and printed in *Votes for Women*, March 1909). In book form, it comprises chapter 7 of *Way Stations*. Reproduced elsewhere on the Robins Web, <http://www.jsu.edu/robinsweb/waysta/way07sig.html>

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Corresponding to pages 486-9 and the table of contents for September.

Sue Thomas' bibliography lists this with Non-Fiction Books, as it is an extract from *Way Stations*. Item 106 for the book and Item 109 for this extract.

This is slightly cut and some references to Robins' original British audience and to President Roosevelt are altered as he is of course now the former president. Alice Paul's newsworthy displays of demand for suffrage began with the pre-inauguration march of Woodrow Wilson, March 1913, the month of publication of *Way Stations*.