

# Women's "Rights"

Dora Marsden

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The War—still the War—has brought the wordy contest about Women's Rights to an abrupt finish, and only a few sympathetic words remain to be spoken over the feminist corpse. Two parties were quarrelling about the validity of the one party's claims to "rights," and without any warning preliminaries both parties, with the rest of the world, stand spectators at a demonstration in the natural history of "rights." To "rights" in their maturity we have all been accustomed. Men as well as women had become so implicated in their matured existence that all were inclined to forget that "rights" had an era of birth and consolidation, as well as a period of maturity. The "Women's Rights" agitation was working industriously on the assumption that rights were conferred by ordination, and could be allowed by goodwill and favour, when the War arrived to shatter it. Incidentally it clears up a confusion between "absolute rights" and "courtesy rights": a confusion which has already addled not only the "Women's Rights" agitation, but also the proletarian agitation, and was within measuring distance of placing the German Emperor in the position of schoolmaster, authorised by divine right to enlighten the world as to the difference. The confusion has arisen out of an assumption that ultimate authority lies in words; that every difference can be settled amicably if only it is argued earnestly enough; that courts of arbitration are final; that the legislature is the fount of power. The Legislature, as merely the channel of power, has seemed a contradictorily, illogical, perversely inclined institution to the vast body of opinion which starts out on its reasonings from the base that "In the beginning was the Word." Accordingly the "rights-claiming" women were only one band of a company of humanitarian, pacifist, proletarian, Christian believers, to whom the regarding of words as secondary phenomena, addenda attaching to forces with function merely to describe, assist, disguise and defend such, as circumstances might require, was simple blasphemy. As they now stand spectator to the birth-throes of revised order of rights, horror at the blasphemy is the substance of their mutterings against the forces which have compelled the revision. Their curses do not spare their eyes the spectacle all the same; the forces take their course, leaving the verbalists to put what interpretation they please on them, since interpretations are as little germane to the forces as straws are to the force of a torrent which sweeps them along. What *would* be germane to the forces would be an exercise of force like their own; short of such exercise, words have the value—and no more—of the detonation of the combatants' guns: they have effects which impress the timid and the simple.

At present, in the greater part of four continents, all “rights” are suspended, and if, owing to favourable situation of locality, and the force of long habit, the effect of possessing rights still continues, it can be regarded only as an accidental escape. In the countries at war the inhabitants are entitled to the rights of the inhabitants of Louvain, or to those of two aviators fighting in the air—*i.e.*, to what they can get. Civil rights, as well as courtesy rights, circumstances have called in, pending a settlement of fundamental rights, the rights which tally with the arbitrament of might when exhaustion compels one body of combatants to ask for terms. Those terms will be the “absolute right” at the moment of settlement, and will be the foundation and the ultimate authorisation of all subsequent civil or permitted courtesy rights, both of which species of right those who control the armed forces of a community can abrogate whenever they see fit. The granting of civil rights, in the main, follows a tendency dictated by the nature of settlement with absolute rights: those in Control granting rights to those who appear capable of making serious trouble if they are not granted. Might even in these deluding times still forms nine parts of most laws; the tenth part is the “scrap of paper” to correspond: the ocular evidence of might constituting a “right.” Should the nine parts vary the tenth will rapidly vary to correspond, the flux of rights being only the outer evidence of the inner spiritual flux of might. Might is spirit; there is no doubt of that. All great military commanders, and the commonest observations of ordinary men, agree in that spirit translates itself as might—physical superiority—a simple phenomenon of the spirit which verbalists seek to cover by labelling—in a hybrid lingo—spirit as morale. The great charters embodying new rights have all been given in response to actual or threatened insurrections in might—*i.e.*, in spirit—of those who desired them, and as such they fall into harmony with the spirit of the absolute rights actually established at the sword’s point. Between such rights and the courtesy rights which men have conferred on women there is a swing almost to an opposite; a sweep of difference, bridged to a certain degree by what may be called “bluffed rights”—rights conferred by astute politicians with an eye to popular favour in response to agitations too utterly feeble ever to put their issue to the test of any tribunal other than that of words and intrigue. It is a highly pernicious process, because it misleads and subdues spirit, and it is to this increasing vogue of ultra—modern political institutions that the “Woman’s Rights” agitation is largely due. Such a vogue existing, women, naturally, who have to obtain most of their material requirements by “courtesy” means—by request and persuasion—could not be expected to believe that there existed anything obtainable on terms of talk which men might obtain but which women might not. Hence a “movement” founded in confusion: a confusion which women may truly say they became immersed in only when men themselves had become lost in it, and out of which, intellectually speaking, it has been left to the women themselves to make clear a way.

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Women’s ready acquiescence in the humanitarian belief that, back of all things, stands the “Word” (translated into practice that means that all powers flow from laws), led them to make the request—acidulated later into a demand—that they should be allowed to participate in the making of the laws. The request’s refusal led to the reviewing of woman’s status in the community, and it was the evidence brought to light in the reviewing which became in its turn accountable for an increasing acridity in the “request.” For the first time women became aware in a general way of their secondary position—a realisation which, unaccountably as it may seem to men, came as

a genuine shock to their pride, the reason for the surprise being that women, since men became articulate, have been the pleasedly persuaded victims of men's flattery. Women's actions, of course, flattered men; they were not sufficiently articulate to flatter them in words. Men, on the other hand, flattered mainly by words and women, believed in the superiority which men ascribed to them. The women who have an unshaken faith in the actuality of the lofty status ascribed to "woman" by the penny novellette far exceed in numbers those who have, at any time, followed the banner of the "Rebel Women." Hence the unpalatableness of the "facts," and the determination to alter their character at the first opportunity: hence the determination of "advanced" women to ladle out to themselves "rights" from their primary source—as they imagine, the legislature. Hence the "Votes for Women" agitation.

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A slightly increased power of observation in women made them aware that, while they were competent to secure for themselves every kind of material advantage, there existed a species of initiatory power, over and above all material wealth—and in fact the source of it—into touch with which their existent competence seemed powerless to bring them. They had the power to draw to themselves the results of the initiatory power where they found themselves belonging to men whose initiatory activity was satisfactory: they had no difficulty in securing their own aggrandising with every form of wealth and comfort. They were the passive recipients on whom men—the active members—heaped their spoils. Physically weak, their men protected them as valuable property; mentally slow—and unimaginative, men could win them by the evidence and results of their own mental alertness and imaginativeness, as they could keep them pleased and content with the flattering interpretation they placed upon the relationship. Men called them their "property" only when annoyed—their "own" was the more passionate and poetic—they were the masculine complement, and the better half at that; the stable passive element which was always reliable—and always there like the house and the farm stock. In short, women found that the only thing which put men out was, not extravagance or graspingness, but a desire for activity beyond a circumscribed limit. Women's extravagance and irresponsibility has been regarded, in fact, always with indulgent eye as a very venal foible; but any enlarging of the sphere of activity was frowned down as "dewomanising," showing a break-down in fundamental womanly instinct. The whole weight of man's imagination, his "idealism," his pictured desire as to what women could mean for him was, is, set directly against it. Women imagined that "an appeal to reason" would win them their point (such as they vaguely conceived it). Off-hand they soothed themselves that their powers had failed in the particular direction for lack of insistence: lack of laying claim to it. Later, they found that by claiming it they had put themselves further off from its attainment than they would have been by quiet requesting and patient waiting for its conferment. The more they sought to strengthen their claims with reasons, the easier it became to frame opposition against it. They failed to appreciate that the appeal was silenced in advance by the counter-assault on vanity and pride; and where women are concerned vanity is man's main feature. It is the pride of possession which has made it a comparatively easy task for women to turn men into toiling, hard-pressed, monotonous money-grubbers; and it is a most delicately ironical fate that confused observation should have led women into an attempt to carry the assault against men's vanity, when at the same time they proposed increasing the pressure on men's responsibility.

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Confused observation is the only explanation of the trend which has been set to the “Woman’s Movement” during the century and more which constitute its first stage, and to which the war has now affixed the term. For instance, only confusion could account for women’s umbrage at being “property,” while at the same time they insist on retaining and augmenting those protective advantages they are possessed of, just because they are property. Property is that which, being a non-initiatory body, can offer no self-defence, and becomes, automatically, the possession of those who can best defend it. This does not mean to say it has no value:—its value increases with the power of its owner; one may not cast a glance awry at the smallest possession of the very powerful, but its value is to its possessor, not to itself. “Property rights” is a misnomer: accurately they are “property-owner’s rights,” just as it is “property-owner’s responsibility.” The property itself can have neither rights nor responsibilities. The rights of the owners work out at an agreed claim to accord and receive neighbourly assistance in the work of protecting the hold over one’s property, and are based on reciprocal claims that each owner shall prevent his property from becoming a nuisance, either from allowing it to “run wild” or fall into such decay as to affect the well-being of his neighbours. Thus women, being property, have no rights beyond “courtesy” permitted ones; but their owners have responsibilities towards them, which at their minimum they must fulfil because of the demands of their fellow-owners, and at their maximum in order to gratify vanity in the pride of possession, and to increase that attraction between women and their owners, which is at the root-cause of men’s assumption of responsibility.

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The stronger, therefore, the call for protection, the stronger is the implication that the responsible one is the owner and the protected one the property; and as it is the “advanced women” who have pushed the claims of masculine responsibility to hitherto undreamed of lengths, the fact that it is they also who make the outcry against women being “property” invests the movement with the element of uproarious farce: the more so because they themselves remain sublimely unconscious of any element of humour. This explains why by comparison with the “advanced women,” the “womanly” women look the more intelligent. Actually there is, at present, no difference between the main objectives of either: they both seek to augment their status through the obliging acquiescence of their menkind, but they differ as to the means. Both want advantage in material affairs by civil means: that is, by avoidance of an appeal to physical force to which a male subject class would have to resort if it wished to carry an insurrectionary point, but the “womanly” women have the sense to see that such a procedure can only be put through by “courtesy” means. The desire for heightened status which is embodied in the “advanced” women’s demands to share in initiatory power, of course puts the “courtesy” attitude for them out of the question: they feel they must needs demand because power is their right. A vague instinct that power must be self-bestowed is perhaps behind their “fight” for parliamentary enfranchisement. They imagine when they have laid hands on voting-power they will be at the source of initiatory power: that they will then be “free” (i.e., powerful) to help themselves. While this struggle for voting power has been proceeding, there has been too much heat engendered for the women to become aware that the reviewing of their position, which has revealed so much to them, has likewise been bringing into full consciousness in men’s mind a realisation of women’s position which was only subconsciously realised before. It is ceasing to be regarded as an unquestionable, divinely-ordained law of the universe that men should be “responsible” for their women kind: it is apparent that if

responsibilities are undertaken they are so only in consideration of privileges in lieu. The day when women can invoke the responsibility, while denying the privilege, draws to a close after a brief noon. It is becoming clearer what, in the way of freedom of activity, women must needs renounce if they proceed with the one species of feminist propaganda, i.e., unrestricted entry into the labour markets, payment of wives, and the like; and equally clear, on the other hand, what responsibilities they must be prepared to take on their own shoulders if they press the opposing feminist shibboleths: “free” love, equal claims to divorce, and so on, is becoming clear. The two brands of the propaganda, though springing from the one source, are heading in opposite directions; but neither is aimless. One is the instinct towards the emoluments and conferred status which goes with “property”: the other is towards the self-responsibilities of “freedom” which, being interpreted in its only useful sense, means “power.” The question is whether women *have* the power, the genuine self-supplying power, and not the bogus counterfeit of conferred power. Because if they have not, by assuming heavy and unaccustomed responsibilities, their ambitions are leading them towards disaster, just as inevitably as every Englishman believes that German ambitions, backed by over-rated powers, are leading their nation to disaster. For instance, every form of self-responsible power demands—not last, but first-capable physical self-defence. One might venture to say it would be impossible to find in these islands any “advanced” woman who has not felt herself made into something of a fool by the unequivocal evidence as to the position of women presented by the war—not merely in the countries actually devastated by the war—but here in England. They find that they may busy themselves with efforts to assist their less “protected” sisters towards maintenance: they may form an admiring audience: they may have the honour of being allowed to share in their country’s defence by dint of knitting socks: or “serve,” as one ungallant soldier put it, by providing one of the “horrors of war” as a Red Cross Nurse. In the war-area itself, they form part, along with the rest of the property, of the spoils of the conquered. One cannot easily refrain from the inference that, though they have weakened the pull of the old womanly competence, the “advanced women” have done very little in the way of furnishing the necessary foundations for its successor.

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Whichever path one takes in considering this question of womanly complementariness or secondariness, if one so chooses to call it, always the same conclusion is arrived at: an effectual assertion of *physical force* is the first essential to any successful digression from the normal womanly protected sphere. It is a blunt fact, with a none too attractive sound, and there will be few women who will care to give voice to it: which silence, by the way, is more telling evidence of the amount of distance which the “movement” has travelled than fifty years of platform oratory. Poor Mrs. Pankhurst, to her bewilderment, found herself driven irresistibly against the fact only to gib at it each time she came up with it. She could not avoid it, still less could she go through with it. “Militancy” in its infancy and “Militancy” now, in its decrepitude, are the translations into practical effect of her realisation of and her revolt from it.

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Whether the “revolting” women will ever move on to the point of acquiring the elements of self-defensive and aggressive force depends on the extent to which the ardour of ambition can survive

the depressing effects of the present too realistic presentation of their actual position. In any case, the set of circumstance and environment are against it. For it, there is nothing but pride of temper; the same ferment, however; which has been responsible for the rising of every subordinate race and class. If Englishwomen elected to, there exists nothing in themselves to prevent them from being as good a fighting force as the Japanese, for instance: and that would do to be getting along with. What does prevent them is lack of desire, and therefore lack of initiative; consequently there is no apparent necessity to make a drive through that heavy inertia which the substantial triumphs of passive womanliness have fostered. They are accustomed to win success almost solely through well-utilised inertia, and the better they succeed as “females,” the more encouraged they are to remain inert. The spur of necessity, occasionally, will overcome it; but, lacking that, there is nothing to urge them on, and everything to pull them back. Even status—women’s status—lies that way. Ninety-nine out of every hundred women can better hope to improve their status by looking to their marriage chances than by “carving a career.” Only a personal pride (out of the ordinary), and intelligence, and the unique something which sets straight for individual power, remains to count on. Their possession is rare enough, and even when possessed are to be exercised only if something quite as vital to women can be fitted in alongside. In exchanging the old competence for the new, no women can afford to forego that end which was the main objective of the old competence, and which this earlier proved so superlatively successful in attaining.

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