

VROUWEN-DAG,

December 16, 1913.

*"Would ye be wise, ye cities, fly from war!
Yet if war come, there is a crown in death
For her that striveth well and perisheth
Unstained."*

EURIPIDES "TROJAN WOMAN,"

Translated Gilbert Murray.

FRIENDS,—

From far and near we are gathered to-day to commemorate those who suffered bravely and died nobly in the past.

Of old a great man said:— "Acts deserve acts, and not words in their honour," and this is true. Yet having come so far at your request to share in this solemn dedication, and having been most closely bound with the last hours of their lives, I feel constrained to offer my tribute to the memory of those women and those little children who perished in the Concentration Camps.

Many of them it was my privilege to know. How strange a thought that from their memory to-day flows a more vital influence for good than can be found amongst those who have lived and prospered. In this way, perhaps, is the prophetic vision fulfilled: "Refrain thy voice from weeping and thine eyes from tears; they shall come again from the land of the enemy; thy children shall come again to their own border."

Do we not in a very real sense meet them again this day?

Yet another thought urges me to offer this tribute of words.

From ancient times men have pronounced eulogies over the graves of their fellow-men who had fallen for their country. To-day, I think for the first time, a woman is chosen to make the Commemorative Speech over the National Dead—not soldiers—but *women*—who gave their lives for their country.

My Friends,—This day, this Vrouwen-Dag is *Good*. Like the Sabbath in the week, it breaks into the hurrying years, and in the pause, the past can calmly be recalled, its inspiration breathed afresh, its lessons conned once more.

Let us take this moment to consider where we now stand and what these lessons are.

You are gathered here from all parts to consecrate this spot to women and children who were stripped of all—I say it advisedly—of *all*. Husbands and sons, houses and lands, flocks and herds, household goods and even clothing. Denuded, it was good to watch how yet they "possessed their souls." "It is tragic," says a writer, "how few people ever possess their souls before they die." That these did I know, because I saw. I bridge in mind the years, the thirteen years, and move once more amid the tents that whitened the hillside. Torn from familiar simple life, plunged into sickness and destitution, surrounded by strangers, were those poor souls,—stripped bare. The sight was one to call forth pity, yet pity did not predominate. Quite other feelings swallowed that. Even throughout the deepest misery the greater pity was needed elsewhere. "Christ," I have read, "had pity for the poor, the lowly, the imprisoned, the suffering, and so have we, but remember that He had far more pity for the rich, the hard, those who are slaves to their goods, who wear soft raiment, and live in kings' houses. To Him riches and pleasures seemed greater tragedies than poverty and sorrow." So, as we turn our minds back thirteen years to dwell on the stormy past, pity enters in, but whom is it that we pity? Surely, had you watched the inward and spiritual graces that shone forth from that outward and visible squalor you yourselves might have felt that it was not the captives in those foul camps that were most in need of pity. The rich and highly-placed, the financiers who wanted war, the incompetent statesmen who were their tools, the men who sat in the seats of the mighty, the blundering politicians of that dark story—all the miserable authorities incapable of dealing with the terrible conditions they themselves had brought about—these needed and still need our deeper pity. That vast tragedy as it rolled through your land upon its bloody way, came at length face to face with the great array of the women and children—the weak and the young. Wholly innocent of the war, yet called upon to bear its brunt, nobly they rose to meet the trial that awaited them. Sympathy indeed they craved and did receive, but they towered above our pity.

And so to-day. What gave the impetus to this movement? What stirred you to gather pence for this monument? What brought you here from far and wide? It was not pity, it was Honour.

Yet if you have pity and to spare, give it even now to those, who, still alive, must ever carry in their hearts the heavy memories of the blundering wrong by which they wrought that war. You and I are here to-day filled only with honour for those their heroic and innocent victims who passed through the fire.

For this monument is a symbol.

Far away in Rome I have been privileged to watch its creation. I noted its conception in the Sculptor's thought, I saw it first issue in the common clay; moulded by his hand it passed into the pure white plaster; at length chastened to his mind and meet for the supreme ordeal it was cast into the pit of burning metal whence issued the perfected work.

Even so did Destiny, the mighty Sculptor,—like clay in his hands—take those simple women and children from their quiet homes, mould and chasten them through the successive stages of their suffering, till at length purified and perfected to the Master-mind by the fierce fire of their trial, they passed from human sight to live forever a sacred memory in your land.

Their spirit which we feel so near to us to-day warns ever:—"Beware lest you forget what caused that struggle in the past. We died without a murmur to bear our part in saving our country from those who loved her not but only desired her riches. Do not confuse the issues and join hands with those who look on her with eyes of greed and not with eyes of love."

Is it not the glory of those weak sufferers to have laid down this principle:—In this South Africa of ours, true patriotism lies in the unity of those who live *in* her and *love* her as opposed to those who live *on* her but *out* of her. The Patriots and the Parasites.

This issue though fought out of old is ever with you, it is alive to-day; voices of the dead call to you, their spirits lay a restraining hold upon you as they plead: "Here is the true division beside which all other cleavages are meaningless."

There can be no permanent separation betwixt those who *love* our country, live *in* her and are bound up *with* her. At bottom such are one.

Alongside of the honour we pay the Sainted Dead, forgiveness must find a place. I have read that when Christ said, "Forgive your enemies," it is not only for the sake of the enemy He says so, but for one's own sake, "because love is more beautiful than hate." Surely your dead with the wisdom that now is theirs, know this. To harbour hate is fatal to your own self-development, it makes a flaw, for hatred, like rust, eats into the soul of a nation as of an individual.

As your tribute to the dead, bury unforgiveness and bitterness at the foot of this monument forever. Instead, forgive for you can afford it, the rich who were greedy of more riches, the statesmen who cou'd not guide affairs, the bad generalship that warred on weaklings and babes—forgive—because so only can you rise to full nobility of character and a broad and noble national life.

For what really matters is *character*. History clearly teaches this.

In the present day, minds are strangely confused, eyes are blinded, and it is the almost universal idea that the all-important thing for a country is Material Prosperity. It is false.

Noble Character forms a great nation. Statesmen who aim at material prosperity as if it were an end in itself, forget or have not recognised, that too often great national prosperity is accompanied by deterioration of national character and the highest well-being of the people.

For it is not the rich and prosperous who matter most, but you who live the simplest lives, and upon whom in the last resort, if trial comes, falls the test of the national character.

This thought ennobles the humblest life. The dead we now honour met that test and did not shrink. They died for freedom; they clung to it with unfaltering trust that God would make it the heritage of their children. The years have brought changes they little dreamed, but South Africa is one and it is free. Its freedom is based on all they did; they suffered; they died; they could do no more. The supreme offering was made, the supreme price paid. Their sacrifice still bears fruit. Even could the graves open and give up their dead, we would not wish those women back, nor have them relinquish the great position they have won. Not even the children would we recall, the children, who—counting the vanished years—would stand before us now, some 20,000 youths and maidens, fair and comely,—a noble array—peopling the too solitary veld. For who does not feel their spirit move amongst us here to-day? Who fails to recognise the noble example by which they still live?

In this vast throng can there be found one unresponsive soul? One heart that will not go hence filled with high resolve to live more worthy of the dead

My Friends,—Memories and emotions throng. Thirteen years have passed since under the burning January sun I trudged daily forth from your wire-girt town to that kopje of many tears. Daily in that camp, as later in others, I moved from tent to tent, witness of untold sufferings, yet marvelling ever at the lofty spirit which animated the childhood as well as the motherhood of your land. So quickly does suffering educate, that even children of quite tender years shared the spirit of the struggle, and sick, hungry, naked or dying prayed ever for "no surrender."

Think what it meant for an Englishwoman to watch such things.

Did you ever ask yourselves why I came to your aid in those dark days of strife? I had never seen your country nor ever known anyone of you. Hence it was no personal link that brought me hither. Neither did political sympathy of any kind prompt my journey.

I came—quite simply—in obedience to the solidarity of our womanhood and to those nobler traditions of English life in which I was nurtured, and which by long inheritance are mine.

For when Society is shaken to its foundations, then deep calleth unto deep, the underlying oneness of our nature appears, we learn that "all the world is kin."

And surely, the honour of a country is not determined by the blundering acts of some passing administration or weak generalship, but lies in the sum-total of her best traditions which the people at large will rise up to maintain.

Even as the noblest men are ever ready to admit and remedy an error, so England as soon as she was convinced of the wrong being done in her name to the weak and defenceless confessed it in *very deed*, and by thorough reformation of those camps, rendered them fit for human habitation.

Thus she atoned.

I stand here as an Englishwoman, and I am confident that all that is best and most humane in England is with you also in heart to-day. Reverent sympathy is felt with you in this Commemoration and in your desire to accord full honour to your Dead.

You and I were linked together by the strange decrees of fate at that dark hour; we stand now face to face for the last time.

One thing I would ask of you.

When you remember the ill done, remember also the atonement made.

Dwell also upon all you have gained through this great episode, in the legacy left you by the Dead.

Let me explain. It is not mainly sorrow that fills your heart to-day; time has already softened personal grief. Therefore many may and do say it is useless to perpetuate as we do to-day memories so drear. But these very memories are needful because they embody that precious legacy from the past. My own face now is turned towards the West, and soon each one of us who witnessed the sufferings of the Concentration Camps will have passed to our own rest; but so long as we who saw those things still live, they will live within us, *not* as memories of sorrow, but of *heroic inspiration*. For what never dies and never should die is a great example. True is it of your dead that which Pericles said of his countrymen:—"The grandest of all sepulchres they have, not that in which mortal bones are laid, but a home in the minds of men; their story lives on far away, without visible symbol, woven into the stuff of other men's lives."

Your visible monument will serve to this great end—becoming an inspiration to all South Africans and to the women in particular. Generation after generation it will stand here pressing home in silent eloquence these great thoughts:—In your hands and those of your children lie the power and freedom won; you must not merely maintain but increase the sacred gift. Be merciful towards the weak, the down-trodden, the stranger. Do not open your gates to those worst foes of freedom—tyranny and selfishness. Are not these the withholding from others in your control, the very liberties and rights which you have valued and won for yourselves? So will the monument speak to you.

Many nations have foundered on this rock. We in England are ourselves still but dunces in the great world-school, our leaders still struggling with the unlearned lesson, that liberty is the equal right and heritage of every child of man, without distinction of race, colour or sex. A community that lacks the courage to found its citizenship on this broad base, becomes "a city divided against itself, which cannot stand."

Lay hold of and cherish this ideal of liberty then—"should your statesmen be hostile or coldly neutral, should your rich men be corrupt, should your press which ought to instruct and defend the liberties of all sections of the people, only betray—never mind—they do not constitute the nation. "The nation," said John Bright, "is in the cottage."

You are the nation, you whom I see here to-day, you, most of whom live in remote villages and silent farms leading simple hard-working lives. You are your nation's very soul and on you lies the responsibility of maintaining her ideals by the perfecting of your own character.

The old old watchword Liberty, Fraternity, Equality cries from the tomb; what these women, so simple that they did not know that they were heroines, valued and died for, *all other human beings desire with equal fervour*. Should not the justice and liberties you love so well, extend to all within your borders? The old Greeks taught that not until power was given to men could it be known what was in them.

This testing time now has come to you.

For ponder a moment.

We meet on Dingaan's Day, your memorial of victory over a barbarous race. We too, the great civilised nations of the world, are still but barbarians in our degree, so long as we continue to spend vast sums in killing or planning to kill each other for greed of land and gold. Does not justice bid us remember to-day how many thousands of the dark race perished also in Concentration Camps in a quarrel that was not theirs? Did they not thus redeem the past? Was it not an instance of that community of interest, which binding all in one, roots out racial animosity? And may it not come about that the associations linked with this day will change, merging into nobler thoughts as year by year you celebrate the more inspiring "Vrouwen-Dag" we now inaugurate. The plea of Abraham Lincoln for the black comes echoing back to me:—"They will probably help you in some trying time to come to keep the jewel of liberty in the family of freedom."

Still more intimately will this Monument speak to the womanhood of South Africa, and beyond to a yet wider range.

To you, women, it should cry ever, "Go back, go back, to simpler lives to nobler principles; from these martyrs learn the grandeur of character that chooses rather to suffer to the uttermost than to win life by weakness." Women, high or low, rich or poor, who have met in your thousands to-day; do not go empty away. You cannot be as if these Dead had not died. Your country demands your lives and your powers in another way. As the national life broadens, difficulties appear little dreamed of in a simpler state. Complicated problems arise which seriously affect the well-being of your sons and daughters. It is for you to think out these problems in your homes, for you to be the purifying element in the body politic, for you to help guide the helm of state.

The Dead have won for you a lofty place in the life of your nation, and the right to a voice in her counsels. From this sacred duty you surely dare not flinch. No one is too humble or unknown; each one counts.

For remember, these dead women were not great as the world counts greatness; some of them were quite poor women who had laboured much. Yet they have become a moral force in your land. They will enrich your history. As the diamonds and the gold glitter in the bedrock of your soil, so their stories written or handed down, will shine like jewels in the dark annals of that time.

And their influence will travel further. They have shown *the world* that never again can it be said that woman deserves no rights as Citizen because she takes no part in war. This statue stands as a denial of that assertion. Women in equal numbers to the men earned the right to such words as the famous Athenian uttered at the grave of his soldiers: "They gave their bodies to the commonwealth receiving each for her own memory, praise that will never die."

Nay, more—for they gave themselves, not borne on by the excitement and joy of active battle, as men do; but passively, with open eyes, in the long-drawn agony of painful months and days.

My Friends:—Throughout the world the Woman's day approaches; her era dawns. Proudly I unveil this Monument to the brave South African Women, who sharing the danger that beset their land and dying for it, affirmed for all times and for all peoples the power of Woman to sacrifice life and more than life for the commonweal.

This is your South African Monument; but it is more; for "their story is not graven only on stone, over their native earth."

We claim it as a WORLD-MONUMENT, of which all the World's Women should be proud; for your dead by their brave simplicity have spoken to Universal Womanhood, and, henceforth they are "woven into the stuff" of every woman's life.

EMILY HOBHOUSE.