

# Alice Paul's Convention

By Crystal Eastman

"Mr. Speaker," said Sara Bard Field, turning the full force of her childlike smile and beaming eyes upon the unhappy Congressman, "I give you—Revolution."

With these naive words, gently spoken in a dim, echoing vaulted room at the heart of the national capitol, the victorious Woman's Party presented to Congress the statue of the suffrage pioneers, Lucretia Mott, Susan B. Anthony, Elizabeth Cady Stanton. Let me quote a few more sentences:

"Mr. Speaker, we do not commit to your keeping merely a block of marble wrought into likenesses which in a chaste repose like death itself will henceforth remain in Statuary Hall, but we commit to your keeping blood-red memories, alive and pulsing. . . . It is universal freedom for which the movement represented by these women has ever stood. . . . The very first Suffrage Association aimed to enfranchise the Negro as well as the woman. Listen to these words written by Susan B. Anthony and introduced as part of a resolution in the convention which formed the first American Equal Rights Association: 'Hence our demand must now go beyond women. It must extend to the farthest bounds of the principle of the consent of the governed.' Do you think that women who thought in those terms would sit idle today because political democracy has become an accomplished fact in this nation? Do you think that women like these who published a paper in the Sixties called 'Revolution' would not see the need of that brooding angel's presence still? Needless to say I don't speak in terms of bloody revolution any more than did they. But men and women are not yet free. . . . The slavery of greed endures. Little child workers, the hope of the future, are sacrificed to industry. Young men are sent out by the billion to die for profits. . . . We must destroy industrial slavery and build industrial democracy. . . . The people everywhere must come into possession of the earth."

And finally, "Mr. Speaker, you will see that if you thought you came here to receive on behalf of Congress merely the busts of three women who have fought the good fight and gone to rest, you were mistaken. You will see that through them it is the body and the blood of a great sacrificial host which we present—the body and blood of Revolution, the body and blood of Freedom herself."

"What does all this mean?" I asked myself as I heard the words go echoing up to the dome. If Alice Paul is such a confirmed reactionary as many of her former followers say she is, why did she feature Sara Bard Field at that impressive ceremony? Why did she deny the claims of the Negro women and of the Birth Control advocates for a hearing at the Convention, in deference to certain powerful groups among her supporters, and then as if in complete defiance of these same conservative groups insist that the only words uttered in the name of the Woman's Party on the opening night should be the obviously uncensored words of a fairly celebrated rebel?

And now that the convention is over, I find myself wondering all the more: Why did Alice Paul stage this dramatic bit of Quaker defiance at the beginning and then treat us to three dull days of commonplace speeches, often irrelevant, often illiberal, with only a few hours reserved at the end for the essential purpose of the meeting—the discussion of the

future of the Woman's Party, which to many meant the future of the feminist movement in America? Five hours for that discussion—hardly time enough to determine the future of a high school dramatic society!

Nothing is more fun than to speculate about the motives and intentions of a shrewd and able leader who keeps his own counsels. I give my speculation for what it is worth: Alice Paul was not really interested in the convention, she was interested in celebrating the victory. After all, despite reports to the contrary, she is a human being. An explorer who had been away on a long and dangerous journey, whose best friends had doubted, whose foes had been many, whose rivals had been bitter, when at last he returned crowned with success, would rejoice in the celebration of his achievement. And the colder and lonelier had been his journey the more appropriate would seem the warmth and luxurious friendliness of his welcome. So it seems to me Alice Paul felt about the victory of woman suffrage—her victory.

In one respect, however, my simile of the explorer breaks down; it was strictly the achievement and not herself that Alice Paul arranged to have celebrated. Throughout that elaborate ceremony at the Capitol Alice Paul was not so much as mentioned by name. I had one glimpse of her behind the scenes after the show was over; with complete unconsciousness of herself as a personality, and with very effective indignation she was preventing the chief usher from covering up the statues and taking them away before the crowd outside had had a chance to come in and see them.

From beginning to end Alice Paul was never in evidence. But Jane Addams was there to say the first words. The name of the President's daughter appeared on the program. The press announced that Mrs. Harding endowed the affair with her official blessing. The Speaker of the House, who had fought the Party for eight years, graciously consented to receive the statues. No, Alice Paul was not there,—even the Woman's Party figured with one silent banner among hundreds—but the General Federation of Women's Clubs was there, the Association of Collegiate Alumnae was there, the Eastern Star was there, the Maccabees were there, the Army Nurses and the Navy Nurses, the Republican Women and the Democratic Women, the Daughters of the Revolution, the Daughters of the Confederacy, the Congress of Mothers, all, all were there, and dozens and dozens of others,—those who had scorned and condemned when the pickets stood for months at the White House gates, when they insisted on going to jail and starved themselves when they got there,—all these came now with their wreaths and their flowers and their banners to celebrate the victory.

Supremely neglectful of respectability during the long fight, Alice Paul saw to it that the victory celebration should be supremely respectable. All doubtful subjects, like birth control and the rights of Negro women, were hushed up, ruled out or postponed until the affair at the Capitol was over.\* Nothing was allowed to creep into the advance publicity that was calculated to alarm the mildest Maccabee

\*The Negro women were finally allowed to "lay a wreath." and the Birth Control advocates were at the last moment given a hearing at the convention. But in each case the action was taken too late for the name of the organization to appear in the program.

or dismay the most delicately reared Daughter. And when her radical friends called her a reactionary for all this, Alice Paul was adamant to their pleas as she had been adamant to the attacks of her enemies when they called her a wildcat.

But having corralled all this eminent respectability into the Capitol for the celebration she must needs give them a shock. So she made sure that the militants, speaking through Sara Field, should speak with no tame voice, but as usual with a voice quietly promising rebellion.

After that first evening in the Capitol the convention became dull and regular, everybody was well-behaved, there were no brilliant speeches, no surprises, no stormy and uproarious hours. The only thing that makes a convention exciting or worth while is the debate over resolutions and program. But in Alice Paul's convention there were no resolutions and hardly any program! No resolution on disarmament was passed to give expression to the overwhelming pacifist sentiment of the Convention. No resolution of protest against the disfranchisement of Negro women was passed, although the Convention was almost unanimous in its indignation on that subject. Even "simon-pure" feminist resolutions were discouraged.

To all such complaints graduates of the Alice Paul school had one dogmatic reply: "Never endorse anything that your organization isn't ready to fight for. Never protest about anything unless your organization is ready to make that protest good." The more sacred a dogma is the more dangerous it is, and this one has the sacredness of the torn battle flag and the battered sword; it is the legacy of a victorious movement. Vital as this doctrine of extreme consistency was in the heat of the militant campaign—and no one can question that—what bearing had it on the deliberations of this body of women met to consider for the first time the actual status of women and lay the foundations of the movement which is to liberate them?

Last summer I went to Alice Paul with a roughly sketched but fairly complete feminist program. After a little discussion, she said, "Yes, I believe in all those things, but I am not interested in writing a fine program, I am interested in getting something done." That is the way she takes the wind out of your sails. But is she always right?

It reminds me of a story they tell about Alice Paul's first meeting with Bill Haywood. Bill grasped her tiny hand with hearty sincerity and began,

"Well, Miss Paul, the movement you represent and the movement I represent are the only movements in the country that have stood out against—"

"Yes," interrupted Alice Paul, who had been looking up at him with an expression of deep earnestness as though she were considering the philosophic relation between the Militants and the I. W. W., "and will you tell me, Mr. Haywood, how you went about it to raise that \$300,000?"

Alice Paul is a leader of action, not of thought. She is a general, a supreme tactician, not an abstract thinker. Her joy is in the fight itself, in each specific drawn battle, not in debating with five hundred delegates the fundamental nature of the fight. "The Executive Committee have provided a good enough phrase—'To remove all the remaining forms of the subjection of women.' Let the delegates with the least possible debate adopt this phrase to serve for purpose, program and constitution." Of course she said nothing, but that, I believe, was Alice Paul's notion of what the Convention's action should be. "I will let you know what the first step is to be, how to act and when. Go home now and don't worry." These words were not printed in the program, but they seemed to be written between the lines.

Perhaps there are times in all movements that call for a leader just like that and for followers just like the majority in that convention who did what they were told. But this was not one of those times, and the proof of it is that the five hundred delegates, whether they voted with or against the leader, went home disappointed, without a quickened understanding, without a new vision. If their discontent could have been articulate it would have expressed itself in some such words as these: "We didn't come here just to state that women are still in subjection and that we are going to free them. We came to discuss and define the nature of our subjection and to outline the terms of our freedom. We came not merely to throw down a challenge, but to bring in a bill of particulars. For we are starting a new movement. We need a program in order to understand each other, we need a program in order to hold our mind and purpose steady and sure in this new field, we need a program as a first step in the process of education with which all new movements must begin."

A minority resolution looking toward such a program was actually introduced as a substitute for the Executive Committee's proposal, but the time limit and a very efficient steam roller disposed of it before the discussion had fairly started. The resolution was as follows:

"Having achieved political liberty for women this organization pledges itself to make an end to the subjection of women in all its remaining forms. Among our tasks we emphasize these:

"1. To remove all barriers of law or custom or regulation which prevent women from holding public office—the highest as well as the lowest—from entering into and succeeding in any profession, from going into or getting on in any business, from practicing any trade or joining the union of her trade.

"2. So to remake the marriage laws and so to modify public opinion that the status of the woman whose chosen work is home-making shall no longer be that of the dependent entitled to her board and keep in return for her services, but that of a full partner.

"3. To rid the country of all laws which deny women access to scientific information concerning the limitation of families.

"4. To re-write the laws of divorce, of inheritance, of the guardianship of children, and the laws for the regulation of sexual morality and disease, on a basis of equality,—equal rights, equal responsibilities, equal standards.

"5. To legitimize all children.

"6. To establish a liberal endowment of motherhood."

If some such program could have been exhaustively discussed at that convention we might be congratulating ourselves that the feminist movement had begun in America. As it is all we can say is that the suffrage movement is ended.

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Is Alice Paul a radical? Is she even a liberal? Is she really a reactionary? These vague reformist terms are inappropriate in describing Alice Paul. Let us use the definite terms of the revolution. She is not a communist, she is not a socialist; if she is class-conscious at all her instincts are probably with the class into which she was born. But I do not think she is class-conscious. I think she is sex-conscious; she has given herself, body and mind and soul, to the woman's movement. The world war meant no moment's wavering in her purpose, in fact she used the war with serene audacity to further her purpose. I imagine she could even go through a proletarian revolution without taking sides and be found waiting on the doorstep of the Extraordinary Commission the next morning to see that the revolution's promises to women were not forgotten!

Alice Paul does not belong to the revolution, but her leadership has had a quality that only the revolution can understand.