



Votes for Women

Elizabeth Robins, adapted by LAMDA

Vida is a suffragette living in London, preparing to lead a rally in Trafalgar Square. This speech is her public address to the crowd in Trafalgar Square, where she advocates for women's rights.

(Vida comes to the edge of the platform.)

VIDA: You've seen the accounts of the girl who's been tried in Manchester lately for the murder of her child. Not pleasant reading. Even if we'd noticed it, we wouldn't speak of it in my world. A few months ago I should have turned away my eyes and forgotten even the headline as quickly as I could. But since that morning in the police-court, I read these things. This, as you'll remember, was about a little working girl – an orphan of eighteen – who crawled with the dead body of her newborn child to her master's back-door, and left the baby there. She dragged herself a little way off and fainted. A few days later she found herself in court, being tried for the murder of her child. Her master – a married man – had of course reported the 'find' at his back-door to the police, and he had them to produce the evidence. The girl cried out to him in the open court, 'You are the father!' He couldn't deny it. The Coroner at the jury's request censured the man, and regretted that the law didn't make him responsible. But he went scot-free. And that girl is now serving her sentence in Strangeways Gaol.

A woman is arrested by a man, brought before a man judge, tried by a jury of men, condemned by men, taken to prison by a man, and by a man she's hanged! Where in all this were her 'peers'? Why did men so long ago insist on having a jury of their peers? So that justice shouldn't miscarry – wasn't it? A man would best understand his circumstances, his temptation, the degree of his guilt. Yet there's no such unlikeness between different classes of men as there is between man and woman. What man has the knowledge that makes him a fit judge of a woman's deeds at that time of anguish – that hour – (*Lowers her voice and looks over the crowd.*) – that hour that some woman struggled through who ran here into the world. I noticed when a previous speaker quoted the Labour Party you applauded. Some of you here – I gather – call yourselves Labour men. Every woman who has borne a child is a Labour woman. No man among you can judge what she goes through in her hour of darkness – (*Catching her fluttering breath, goes on very low.*) – in that great agony when, even under the best conditions that money and devotion can buy, many a woman falls into temporary mania, and not a few go down to death.

In the case of this poor little abandoned working girl, what man can be the fit judge of her deeds in that awful moment of half-crazed temptation? Women know of these things as those know burning who have walked through fire.

(Vida leans over the platform and speaks with a low and thrilling earnestness.)

I would say in conclusion to the women here, it's not enough to be sorry for these our unfortunate sisters. We must get the conditions of life made fairer. We women must organise. We must learn to work together. We have all (rich and poor, happy and unhappy.) worked so long and so exclusively for men, we hardly know how to work for one another. But we must learn.

Act 2, 'Trafalgar Square, London'