

## PERSONALITIES & POWERS

*IT has been said that the admitted political genius of the people of these islands is due, not to their knowledge of politics, but to their sure and delicate instinct for character. In Great Britain, as in no other country in the world, people seem to have a knack of acquiring a curiously just estimate of the personality of their leaders, and so found their decisions, if not altogether upon a man's moral worth, at all events on his qualifications for the job they have set him to do, ignoring to a great extent more complex considerations and subtle political arguments of which they are less capable of judging. They thus oft-times achieve success where a more intellectually alert people might risk failure.*

*If this is so, it must follow that the constant discussions concerning our leaders, the anecdotes that are told of them (frequently true in the spirit, if seldom in the letter) and the critical comments and character sketches which appear in the Press, are of far greater real importance than we have hitherto realised. Gossip becomes under these circumstances not merely a pleasure but a duty.*

*Now the Press caters largely for our taste in this direction so far as men are concerned. It fails almost entirely to teach us anything material about the women of the day.*

*It will be the deliberate policy of this paper to discuss freely, honestly, and critically, women as well as men of achievement. In pursuance of this policy, we propose to publish each week a critical study of some public man or woman.*

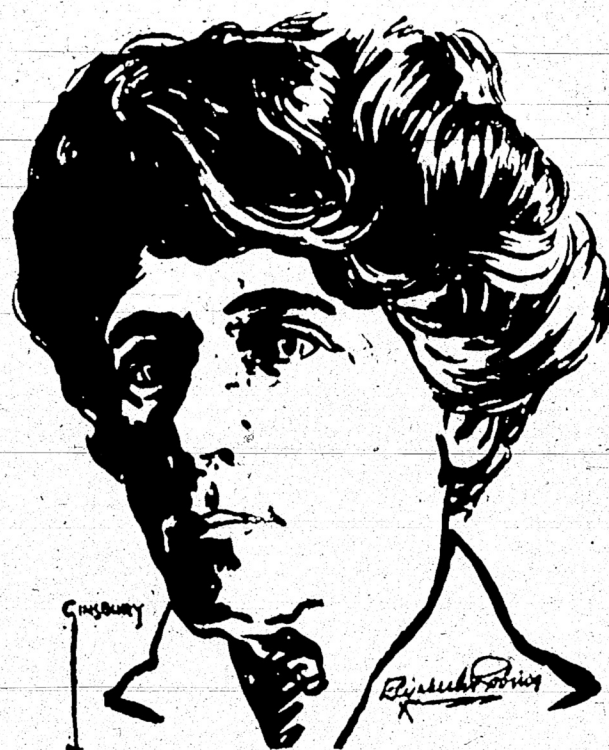
### ELIZABETH ROBINS.

#### AN APPRECIATION

By LADY BELL.

**T**HE passage of Elizabeth Robins through the world, a flaming torch in her hand, may well bewilder those whose prudent path in life is the beaten track. She has from the beginning confronted each successive phase of experience with the same indomitable and upright independence. Circumstance has never mastered her. The rich variety of her existence has developed a personality which has stood forth as a beacon to many of the women of her time.

She was born in one of the Southern States of North America, at a time when storm-tossed memories of the Great War were still vividly present to those around her. The early chapters of her book, "The Open Question," record the indelible imprint made on a rare and sensitive nature by the tales and traditions of the Civil War and of the liberation of the slaves. That process which to all of us is familiar, of harbouring uncomprehended in our memory incidents of childhood of which we suddenly realise and interpret the meaning in later years, became to Elizabeth Robins, with her deep insight and quickness of impression, a store-house of treasure. In "The Open Question," part of which may no doubt be looked upon as autobiographical, it is evident that every detail of those by-gone days stands out in the writer's memory, and regarded in the light of the later interpretation it constitutes one of the most striking records of that



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An Impression by Capt. J. W. Ginsbury.

momentous time. It is of keen interest in the light of the subsequent career of the writer to see how the child described in those first chapters is the Elizabeth Robins of to-day, with her unswerving truthfulness, her passionate intolerance of authority, and her irrepressible dramatic gifts—and yet, coupled with these, is the beautiful picture of her absolute and voluntary surrender to the influence of the older kinswoman, type of a past age, whom she venerated and loved. That power of whole-hearted reverence is an apurage of the finer minds. The mind of the younger woman in the book could never have harboured a small or a mean thought—nor can the mind of her delineator. But in spite of this willing submission, the child's soul burnt with desire to interpret life for herself, to achieve her own destiny in the way she longed for. Her thoughts, her hopes, were increasingly centred on the stage, so utterly and wildly aloof from her surroundings.

Her vocation finally burst its bonds, and she left sheltered home and dignified guardianship to embark on the perilous adventure of the stage, on which she was so gloriously to succeed. In so doing, she broke away once and for all from the life of her inheritance, from the tradition of those to whom publicity, especially for women, was the Thing abhorred. And when after her modest beginnings she returned like a heroine of fiction to her native State as the successful Jeune Premiere, playing leading parts with shining success, the family she was rejoining were hardly conscious of the occasion. She persuaded one of them to witness the performance. Wounded to the quick by what he considered an unbecoming revelation of emotion in public, he got up and left the theatre in the middle of her great scene. When she proudly wrote to her splendid old kinswoman of the first salary she had received, the reply came in words of icy condemnation: "You are the first woman of your race who has earned money." But it was of no use. No other claims counted but those of her art.

During the two years that she was a member of the famous Stock Theatre Company in Boston, she played 380 parts, a training seldom vouchsafed to the actress of to-day.

A series of hazards led her to come to Europe, with the widow of the famous Norwegian violinist, Ole Bull. The first European country with which Elizabeth Robins made intimate acquaintance was the country of Ibsen. She intended to return to America with her companions, who tarried in London for four days on their way to Liverpool. During those four days an opportunity was offered her on the English stage. She had to decide at once; she was sailing next day. She decided to remain, and that evening determined her destiny. She has found a permanent abiding place in England. She shares her allegiance to the land of her adoption with her unceasing allegiance to the land of her birth.

After some short years in London, we find her, in conjunction with another young American actress, flinging down the gauntlet of defiance to the conventional playgoer, and running a series of Ibsen's plays at a time when he was derided by the general public, and when, according to the most obvious test of success, it was supposed that such an enterprise had "no money in it." But the two young enthusiasts who believed in him produced his plays, and played them in a way which took London by storm. The fact that they had to overcome hostility and opposition, let alone indifference, gave their work a fire and an impetus that carried it through to triumph. The general public of to-day have by this time learned what they must think about Ibsen, and that he is among the great. But to those who saw Elizabeth Robins in that first crossing of swords with convention, the enterprise will stand out as the highest inspiration of her genius. Great acting can live only in the memories of those who record it. It can put on immortality only in the terms of their testimony. It behoves, therefore, those who saw the plays of Ibsen acted by Elizabeth Robins to place on record some of their ineffaceable memories. Hedda Gabler is probably the part in which most people will remember her—Hedda, the cruel, the baleful seeker after thrills. Who that saw it will ever forget what Elizabeth Robins did with the end of the second act? The crouching figure by the fire, Lövborg's book in her terrible maleficent grasp, the firelight flickering on the sinister triumph of hatred in her eyes, as handful by handful she cast the manuscript into the flames, the intensity of her sibilant whisper shuddering through the air—"Your child, Thea! your child and Eilert Lövborg's . . . . now, I am burning the child!"

That picture, and many others—would it were possible to describe them here—cannot be thought of even to-day by those who saw them without a share of the wild excitement in the midst of which Hedda whirled through space.

And who will ever forget that moment in the first act of the *Master Builder*, when Elizabeth Robins knocked at the door and then strode in from the mountains, her tall staff in her hand, panoplied in her youthful strength and unquenchable resolve, herself the embodiment of the younger generation that was entering in? She has knocked at many another door since, and entered with the same glorious confidence.

It was the inevitable complement of her temperament, of her revolt from the accepted, her eager search for the new, that when, later, she tried the ordinary stage on conventional lines it lost interest for her. But she had another form of art under her hand, the art of the pen. Her first attempt was a short story called "The Lucky Sixpence." Published in the "Fortnightly Review" under a pseudonym it attracted immediate attention. It was followed by many others, at first still under a pseudonym, then under her own name, including

"The Open Question," to which reference has been made. There is no space in this article to discuss her writings; they are still available for the whole world to see. But the impression made by her great book "The Magnetic North," founded on her amazing expedition into the heart of the Klondyke, must be recalled.

She excursed into play-writing once, with signal success, in a play entitled "Votes for Women" produced by Granville Barker, in support of a cause which she looked upon as sacred. That cause she championed with written and spoken eloquence until the need for championship was over. Still an ardent believer in the claims of women, she is ever ready to enter the lists on their behalf; the power of her pen, and her gift of enmeshing others into her impassioned enterprises, making her in every encounter a redoubtable adversary and an invaluable helper.

During the war-years of storm and stress she gave herself unsparingly to the public service of the country she had adopted. Many have been her fields of activity. She became, in conjunction with another successful writer, librarian to a London War Hospital run by women. She was later persuaded to take service under the Food Ministry, and delivered a series of addresses in England and in Ireland. She threw herself heart and soul into the starting in the village where she lives of a Women's Institute, which became during the war a real economic factor in the life of the community. In the great social readjustments of our time she is frankly on the side of the working classes. Her help is invoked in every direction by those who are trying to answer some of the pressing calls for reform that ring in our ears to-day. And everywhere she gives her best; she brings the same potent equipment of her glowing purpose and her eloquence, enhanced by her great personal charm.

There is a far-away north country village where she is wont to delight the women by tales of her experiences in the Klondyke and elsewhere. By those villagers she is adored. So is she—the child lover—adored also by a certain group of children in a remote country house who have listened enthralled day by day to tales from "Uncle Remus," delivered with the unrivalled diction of one who can reproduce the old-time negro talk.

And readings and recitals alike are the performance of a great artist, wielding over young and old, unsophisticated and critical, the same spell.

She has made a very large number of friends in this country, and has had, in addition to her renown, a full measure of what is called social success. There never was any one who had her head less turned by it. The chief pleasure she seems to take in her achievements, and what they have brought her, has been the establishing of her country home in Sussex, where she inhabits what was a charming old farmhouse, and where, with her joy in gardening, her love of nature—interpreted and enhanced by her love of poetry and of letters—she passes delightful days. Athwart them perhaps sweep memories of another beloved abode—before the war, each winter saw her crossing the Atlantic to a country home in Florida, the home of the great illexes and the orange groves, that "wind-swept, sun-steeped place, uplifted like an island above encompassing seas of green," where the kind dark faces were still about her, and the voices of her youth sounded in her ears.

The greatest of her possessions is her art of human intercourse, of companionship with the congenial of every kind. To those who meet her in society, life seems to be quickened and uplifted as she passes by. To those who can call themselves her friends, that friendship is a privilege, an incentive, and a standard.