

FIRST OF THE FEATHERS

By

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ACT I SCENE I

THE STAGE BEGINS COMPLETELY EMPTY. SLOWLY, A YOUNG WOMAN DRESSED IN A WHITE DRESS MAKES HER WAY TO CENTRE-STAGE. THE DRESS IS PLAIN AND SIMPLE, HINTING TO THE TIME OLD IDEA OF THE PERFECT WOMAN - YOUNG, INNOCENT, *CLEAN*. HOWEVER, CONTRASTING THIS IDEAL, SHE IS ALSO WEARING ONE OF THE PURPLE, WHITE AND GREEN 'VOTES FOR WOMEN' SUFFRAGETTE SASHES. THE SASH IS SO LARGE AND SO BRIGHT AS TO COMPLETELY DRAW THE EYE, MAKING WHOEVER IS LOOKING AT HER FORGET ABOUT THE 'PERFECT' WOMAN UNDERNEATH. IN HER HANDS SHE HOLDS A SMALL WICKER HAND-BASKET WITH PURPLE, GREEN AND WHITE RIBBON WRAPPED AROUND THE HANDLE, FULL TO THE BRIM WITH WHITE FEATHERS. AS SHE SLOWLY MAKES HER WAY TO CENTRE-STAGE, SHE TAKES OUT HANDFULS AND DROPS THEM BEHIND HER, SIMILAR TO FLOWER GIRLS WALKING DOWN THE AISLE AT A WEDDING. AT NO POINT DOES SHE MAKE EYE CONTACT WITH THE AUDIENCE OR EVEN ACKNOWLEDGE THAT THEY ARE THERE, THIS COMES LATER. WHEN SHE REACHES THE CENTRE, SHE KNEELS, PLACING THE HAND-BASKET BESIDE HER, AND CAREFULLY TAKES A SINGLE FEATHER OUT. RAISING THE HAND HOLDING THE FEATHER IN FRONT OF HER SO THAT IT IS IN-LINE WITH HER EYESIGHT, SHE BEGINS TO SPEAK.

SUFFRAGETTE:

The year is 1918. The Great War is over, women have received the right to vote, and the fight for female suffrage seems to be coming to an end. (HER HAND LOWERS SO THAT IT IS LYING IN HER LAP, THE FEATHER CLASPED BETWEEN BOTH HANDS). People are celebrating Armistice Day with shouts of peace, and women are beginning to see the possibility of a future where men and women are equal. Yet everyone seems to have forgotten what happened before the world as we knew it changed, the war finally coming to an end seemingly clouding their memory of what happened. (HER VOICE IS QUIET NOW, AND YOU CAN HEAR THE PASSION AND SADNESS IN HER WORDS THAT COMES FROM WHAT HER MEMORIES HOLD) They have forgotten how much we Suffragettes, we *women*, fought for men to hear our voices. (HER VOICE BEGINS TO RISE SLIGHTLY NOW, RETURNING TO A NORMAL LEVEL) They have forgotten the men whose cowardice overcame their duty to fight for their country. (HER VOICE RISES AGAIN, JUST ABOVE NORMAL SPEAKING LEVEL, SHOWING HER FRUSTRATION) They have forgotten the shame we felt as our modesty was being ripped away from us for standing up for what we believed in! (SHE FINALLY LOOKS AT THE AUDIENCE, HER VOICE RETURNING TO ITS NORMAL LEVEL AGAIN) How is it fair that we spent years fighting for our basic

rights as we were laughed at and ridiculed in front of and by our own family and friends? Shamed into immodesty, just because we brought to light how weak it was for men not to enlist to fight? The Suffragettes weren't utilising their most powerful weapon, so some of us took it into our own hands to fix the problem. We had the experience of years of humiliation and pain, so why couldn't we use what we knew to *finally* get our point across?

SHE TURNS HER HEAD TO LOOK AT THE BASKET AND GENTLY PUTS THE FEATHER BACK IN, THEN LOWERS HER HAND INTO THE BASKET FURTHER. SHE LIFTS HER HAND, WHICH IS NOW FULL OF FEATHERS, HIGH ENOUGH FOR THE AUDIENCE TO SEE AND LETS THE FEATHERS DRIFT AND FALL BACK INTO THE BASKET.

SHE STANDS, LEAVING THE BASKET ON THE FLOOR AT THE CENTRE OF THE STAGE. AS SHE CONTINUES TO TALK, SHE MOVES AROUND THE STAGE, PACING AS THOUGH IN THOUGHT BUT EVER SO OFTEN STOPPING TO LOOK OR GESTURE TO THE AUDIENCE TO REMIND THEM THAT SHE IS ACTUALLY TALKING TO THEM.

SUFFRAGETTE CONT'D: A simple white feather, that was all it was.

Yet we were labelled as being 'too forward' or that we were using our 'sexual power' to shame men into the army. How ridiculous. If the men who received a feather felt guilty, it wasn't because we were drawing attention to their decision not to fight. It was because in their hearts they *knew* that it wasn't right for them not to join their brothers on the battlefield.

The look on their faces as we walked up to them, white feather in hand, is something I remember even now, almost three years and a whole war later. Some faces were filled with regret and fear, knowing that they will soon be subject to the ridicule we believed they so rightly deserved. We weren't shy about approaching them, whether they were alone or with friends, at the theatre or walking down the local high street. You could always see the humiliation wash over them, almost like something physical was wrapping itself around them so tight that it would never let go. It marked itself on them like a stain, their own guilt doing more damage upon them than anything we could ever do. Others were more resilient in the face of shame, instead choosing to look at us with the same disgust and amusement that people often regarded us with. These were the harder

of the two types to have an impact on, but we gave them a feather regardless. Just because they weren't affected by the feathers certainly did not mean that we were going to stop our efforts. It hadn't in the past, so why would it now? (SHE BECOMES SLIGHTLY EMOTIONAL HERE, AS SHE IS RECALLING MEMORIES THAT ARE SPECIFIC TO HER) But that didn't stop people laughing at us as we walked by, our heads held high against the whispered gossip that followed us wherever we went. Our friends saw us as embarrassments, husbands choosing to banish us from our own homes rather than live with a Suffragette wife, possible suitors turning away from the idea of being married to a woman who spoke her mind. Being a Suffragette was hard enough, but being part of the White Feather Movement felt like a different kind of shame. We wanted to make ourselves a part of history, leaving our mark so that we may be remembered for fighting against inequality. (HER VOICE GETS QUIETER TOWARDS THE END OF THIS SENTENCE, REMEMBERING THE PAIN SHE FELT) Yet instead we faced our lives being wrenched away from us, losing the support and love of our own families.

SHE STANDS STILL FOR A MOMENT, LOOKING DOWN AT THE SASH ACROSS HER BODY. SHE STRAIGHTENS IT, TAKES A VISIBLY OBVIOUS DEEP BREATH AND STRAIGHTENS. WITH MORE CONFIDENCE, SHE WALKS BACK OVER TO THE BASKET, PICKS IT UP, AND STARTS FIDGETING WITH THE RIBBON AROUND THE HANDLE AS SHE BEGINS WALKING AGAIN. HER VOICE HAS RETURNED TO ITS NORMAL LEVEL, AS THOUGH SHE HASN'T JUST GOTTEN SO CAUGHT UP IN HER EMOTIONS. SHE IS BACK TO THE HEAD-STRONG SUFFRAGETTE.

SUFFRAGETTE CONT'D: What made it harder was having some of our Suffragette sisters refusing to stand with us on this front. We were violently split into two factions, those who were opposed to the war and those who supported it blindly and saw it as an opportunity. Only a year before the war, Mrs Emmeline Pankhurst proudly claimed that she was "a soldier who has temporarily left the field of battle in order to explain... what civil war is like when civil war is waged by women", so it came as no surprise that she called for a stop to our campaign and urged us to support the war instead. Yet her own daughter, Miss Sylvia Pankhurst, took a more pacifist approach and was ardently opposed to the idea of supporting the war.

SHE LOWERS HER HEAD SLIGHTLY AND SHAKES IT GENTLY. THE MOVEMENT SHOWS HER DISSAPOINTMENT IN HER FELLOW SUFFRAGETTES.

SHE TAKES HOLD OF THE RIBBON AND TWISTS IT AROUND HER FINGER. HER EYES ARE FIXATED ON THE RIBBON AS SHE SPEAKS.

SUFFRAGETTE CONT'D: It was interesting, seeing so many women turn away from supporting the war after everything that we had done over the past eleven years. (SHE UNWRAPS THE RIBBON FROM HER FINGER AND PLACES THE BASKET ON THE GROUND. SHE TURNS HER BACK TO IT, AND WRAPS HER ARMS AROUND HERSELF, AS THOUGH SHE FEELS ALONE) The idea of such violence seemed too much for them, yet we had spent over a decade choosing to disrupt Parliament, attack politicians, chain ourselves to railings, burn down churches and set post-boxes on fire. And as if that wasn't enough, dear Emily Davison threw herself under the king's horse at the Derby race, making herself a martyr and one of the most famous Suffragettes in the process. (SHE LOWERS HER ARMS AND BEGINS TO PACE AROUND THE STAGE AGAIN. HER HANDS AND ARMS BECOME MORE ANIMATED NOW, GESTURING TOWARDS THE AUDIENCE AND TO HERSELF AS SHE SEEMS TO ARGUE WITH SOMEONE WHO ISN'T THERE) Was someone choosing to give their life for what they believed in acceptable, yet supporting a war wasn't? How could we not simply use both to our advantage? After all, out of everything that we have done, pinning small white feathers to a gentleman's clothing seems miniscule in comparison. Our movement had been radical from the beginning, believing that civil disobedience was going to be the only way that we were really heard. We Suffragettes did nothing in half measures as it wouldn't have gotten us anywhere, so why was it that we didn't continue in solidarity throughout a war that was going to happen whether we agreed with it or not. Had they not joined us in starvation throughout our hunger strike? Were they not there as we were restless in prison, watching our sisters be force-fed out of the Government's fear that we might starve? Had they not sat with us, side by side, chained to railings so as to make our point known? (SHE THROWS HER HANDS UP IN FRUSTRATION, SIGHING. SHE RUBS HER EYES SLIGHTLY, A SIGN OF RESIGNATION.) But what were we to do? Our insistence that we were doing the right thing only caused more distance between those who agreed and those who didn't, and we were left with a sisterhood broken in two.

It was inevitable that such a large group of people wouldn't see eye to eye about everything, the White Feather Movement being a perfect example. But that wasn't the only thing that divided us.

DEPENDING ON WHAT THE STAGE IS LIKE AND IF SHE WILL STILL BE VISIBLE BY ALL OF THE AUDIENCE, SHE SITS DOWN AND CROSSES HER

LEGS. LEANING FORWARD SLIGHTLY, SHE CONTINUES TO TALK. IF THIS IS NOT POSSIBLE, CONTINUE AS BEFORE.

THROUGHOUT THE FOLLOWING PARAGRAPH, HER TONE IS OF COMPLETE DISBELIEF AND FRUSTRATION.

SUFFRAGETTE CONT'D: 1883 saw the arrival of eugenics. It was widely talked about, by society and Suffragettes alike. Francis Galton's expansion of Darwin's theory of survival of the fittest was devoured by a country obsessed with industrialisation and empire. Superior human genetics and ensuring the survival and development of society's fittest provided evidence and justification for things the British loved. Suddenly colonisation, the class system and the belief that women were objects for reproduction had scientific support. (SHE SCOFFS) Galton strongly believed that women were completely inferior to men and viewed us as breeders, crucial to the healthy development of the 'perfect' species but practically useless for everything else. (IF SHE HAD BEEN SAT DOWN, SHE STANDS NOW - IF NOT, HER MOVEMENT CHANGES TO THE DIRECTIONS THAT FOLLOW. HER BODY IS TAUGHT WITH ANGER AND FRUSTRATION. SHE BEGINS TO PACE AGAIN, BUT THIS TIME SLIGHTLY FASTER AND WITH A LITTLE MORE AGGRESSION. THIS TOPIC IS SENSITIVE TO HER AND IT IS CLEARLY VISIBLE IN BOTH HER BODY LANGUAGE AND HER SPEECH.) This was not only ignorant, but also just plain offensive! We are people capable of our own thoughts, feelings, and decisions. Not useless objects that needed to be told what to do, how to do it and when to do it. Yet Galton was emphasising what people had believed for centuries - that we, as women, should be monitored and looked after, unable to function by ourselves. We Suffragettes just didn't have a chance, facing something that had been so deeply rooted in the beliefs of many for far too long. How could we fight something that had scientific evidence supporting it? It was hard enough before, but eugenics made our fight significantly harder. It went against everything we stood for, rationalising beliefs that we had so strongly fought against. It made no sense supporting something that would force us to take steps backwards, rather than forwards. But when the early concepts of eugenics were developed further by Caleb Saleeby, it caused a shift in the Suffragette movement that caused us to disagree with each other yet again. ~~In an attempt to make it seem more appealing to women,~~ the idea was adapted from women being breeders to positioning them as (SHE SOUNDS AUDIBLY SARCASTIC HERE) 'nature's supreme organ of the future'. Saleeby ~~had hoped that women would support the idea and help~~ him develop what he termed eugenic feminism, and his hope wasn't

Commented [PC1]: A bit like an essay - maybe something like 'they tried to sell the idea to women by shifting them from breeders to...?'

Commented [PC2]: As above - maybe 'Saleeby wanted women to help him develop...?'

in vain. The idea of rational reproduction ~~went with~~
~~was taken~~
~~to easily as it was in keeping~~ with social and racial
thinking at the time, ~~whilst allowing~~ and it allowed
women to
position themselves as citizens rather than objects.
For Feminists ~~believed it to be~~ it was crucial to ~~find~~
~~a way to~~
include women's sexual and reproductive rights in
their fight, and so eugenics found a home in women's
views on reproduction, motherhood and society.

The Suffragettes have been through so much during
our fight that you would have thought that we would
be inseparable and unbreakable, but this was in no
way the case. We were broken apart by some of our
Suffragette sisters supporting eugenics, as it felt
as though we were hindering ourselves instead of
helping our campaign. I wasn't the only one who was
angered by their decisions. Not only was everything
eugenics stated wrong and offensive, but the entire
situation reminded me of the way I had felt when
they had shunned me for my decision to be a part of
something I believed in. It was hypocritical that
they thought those who disagreed were wrong after
the guilt and shame I had suffered.

SHE WALKS BACK OVER TO THE BASKET, WHICH
HAD BEEN COMPLETELY FORGOTTEN UNTIL NOW.
SHE PICKS IT UP AND HOLDS IT WITH BOTH
HANDS IN FRONT OF HER. LOOKING INTO IT,
THERE IS SADNESS WRITTEN ACROSS HER FACE.
SHE IS REMEMBERING ALL OF THE PAIN SHE HAS
SUFFERED, ALL OF THE THINGS SHE HAS LOST
AND FOUGHT AGAINST. WALKING TO THE EDGE OF
THE STAGE, SHE PUTS HER HAND INTO THE
BASKET AND STARTS TAKING OUT THE FEATHERS
AND DROPPING THEM ON THE FLOOR IN A LINE
ALONG THE FRONT OF THE STAGE UNTIL THE
BASKET IS EMPTY. SHE THEN RETURNS TO THE
FRONT CENTRE, PUTS THE BASKET DOWN AND
PICKS UP A SINGLE FEATHER, ECHOING HER
MOVEMENTS AT THE BEGINNING OF THE PLAY.
SHE RAISES HER HAND ABOVE HER HEAD AND
DROPS THE SINGLE FEATHER, WATCHING AS IT
DESCENDS PAST HER FACE AND TO THE FLOOR.

HER VOICE IS QUIETER NOW.

SUFFRAGETTE CONT'D: The White Feather Movement was so important to me.
We were showing those who were against us the shame
and humiliation that one feels when you do something
that the majority don't believe in. Those who didn't
enlist were cowards, and we were not going to sit
and let them get away with it. People had tried to
shame Suffragettes into silence, so we attempted to

return the gesture. But then the tables turned, our sisters seemed to change sides and abandoned us. How is what we were doing worse than turning our back on equality, like those who supported eugenics were? Wasn't that what we were fighting for? To all be equal? Instead they were fighting for those seen as genetically superior to be given better treatment? It's just so hard to understand.

SHE TAKES THE SASH OFF, LAYING IT ACROSS BOTH HANDS SO THAT SHE CAN LOOK AT THE 'VOTES FOR WOMEN' WRITING EMBLAZONED ACROSS IT. HER VOICE IS BACK TO ITS NORMAL LEVEL BUT IS STILL FULL OF SADNESS.

SUFFRAGETTE CONT'D: We Suffragettes were monumental in the development of women's rights, and we fought as hard as we could to do as much as we could. Our actions and decisions may not always have been right, and we may not have been the heroes that everyone wanted us to be, but that didn't mean our effect wasn't positive. It was hard for us, toeing the line between fighting for our cause and taking it too far. We didn't want to be the villains in the story, but we couldn't stay silent any longer. I hope that history remembers us well, but I also hope that people learn from our mistakes. We can't fight each other forever, for what kind of life is that?

SHE PLACES THE SASH INTO THE BASKET AND PICKS IT UP. SHE LOOKS AT THE AUDIENCE ONE LAST TIME, NODS SLIGHTLY AS IF SHE KNOWS SHE HAS DONE THE RIGHT THING, AND WALKS OFF THE STAGE THE WAY SHE CAME ON.

END.

Commented [PC3]: Lovely ending, except she has to demand that the girls hand out feathers to the boys who aren't in uniform. Remember they are all walking about in the background waiting to be pounced on at the end.