

**MARGARET ETHEL
MACDONALD**

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J. RAMSAY MACDONALD

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1885

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By
J. RAMSAY MACDONALD
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Preface

I HAVE been asked if I would reproduce, by way of preface to this edition, the section on the Women's Labour League written for a memoir circulated amongst private friends, and I agree with pleasure, though to some extent it but repeats what is written in this book :

“ It was with a deep purpose arising from her views of woman and the home that she started the Women's Labour League in 1906. True, the immediate object of the League was to help the Labour Party, but when she discussed it with me before the work was begun, she always put other purposes first. ‘ If I did not share your ideals, how wretched would our life be ! ’ she often said ; ‘ and if I accepted your absorption in public work

simply because it was making you a public person, what a drag would that vanity be upon both of us !' Her project met with opposition and coldness in several influential quarters, but she had made up her mind that her full purpose could be carried out in no other way, and nothing under such circumstances daunted her. What was her purpose ?

"She had seen the husband working in the wide educative field of public service, drifting away from the wife walled in within a stifling sphere as though she were in purdah, and she grieved at the consequences. She became full of the conviction that something had to be done to bring women out of their prisons and give them a place in our movement. And after much thought and consultation with me she came to the conclusion that that could only be done if women were made responsible for some work of their own. Trade Unions admitted women, the Independent Labour Party enrolled them as members. But she thought that was not enough. Women's duties made it impossible for many of them to attend

the meetings called at times most convenient for men ; women's training made it equally impossible for them to give their best and their most to work which was controlled and conducted by men. So she founded the Women's Labour League in the same spirit as the pure knight rode out to free damsels cursed under evil spells. Through it she was to supply him who toiled in the Labour movement with a wife who helped him in all his doings, who understood him, who was not misled by false ideals ; she was to build up Labour homes on the solid foundation of mutual sympathy, of common counsel, of hand-in-hand effort ; she was to lead out women on to the open field where the tilling and the sowing were being done to hymns of faith, and reveal to them the joy of those who were labouring there, and enable them to share in it. Her conviction was that it was only when the woman knows life in all its fulness of aspiration that she can turn inwards to her home with a heart full of affection for her husband and children. Then, they are not merely her mate and her offspring. They are the

creatures of tragic fate and heroic endeavour. A great pity and a great love endear them to her. Only when the home is shadowed by the clouds, and cheered by the sun of the outside world does it become that haven of rest and garden of healing which she thought it ought to be.

“For that, and nothing meaner than that, the Women’s Labour League, the best-beloved of the offspring of her thought and labour, was to stand. How shadowed have been its opening chapters! If the great things of life awaken with a dirge and grow through sorrow to triumph, the Women’s Labour League has begun well. That wonderful woman, its secretary, Mary Middleton, whose saintliness bloomed like a rare flower in a village garden and was unknown beyond a small community, died this summer, and my wife passed after her ere the autumn was out. But if any influence can cross the border between Life and Death, theirs is now guarding and cherishing the stricken nursling which they, with a handful of other devoted women, coaxed into life, and led affectionately into the world.”