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MOTHER, DOCTOR, AND POLITICIAN

A Candid Close-up of Dr. Edith Summerskill

THERE is so much to approve of in Dr. Edith Summerskill that I felt a little ashamed when I found myself on my way home after my interview with her trying to analyse why I felt disappointed. If anything, Dr. Summerskill was more colourful, more elegant, and more gracious than I had expected. She was clear and intelligent in her answers to my questions. But, and I think this is where my disappointment lay, her answers were too easy and too obvious. They were the answers that anyone might have given; but then I had to admit that perhaps they were the questions that anyone might have asked. Besides, I had to remind myself (for Dr. Summerskill was looking very fresh and immaculate), she had travelled a long way in a short time, she had survived an exacting Australian tour, and she had had a week of nights broken at 2 a.m. before the plane which was to bring them to New Zealand finally made the crossing. It was surprising, all things considered, that she was not more bored, more languid, and more jaded.



DR. EDITH SUMMERSKILL

On the Platform

Then, as I discovered when I heard her on a public platform, I had also made a mistake in my interview in thinking that she was first and foremost a feminist and only incidentally a politician, and a politician in wartime England. On the platform Dr. Summerskill comes to life. She is a politician and also an actress. She knows how to handle an audience of women. Whether she is so successful with men I do not know. She knows all the dodges for holding her audience, both eyes and ears. Her face is alive and vital, and she uses her hands and arms, and indeed her whole body, in her gesticulations. She knows how to get the maximum effect from her words: where to pause and where to let them tumble out. She can make her audience laugh and clap, and I saw many handkerchiefs pulled out to wipe away the tears she drew. She is entirely self-possessed. She will stop to have the loudspeakers adjusted, knowing that her audience is listening keyed up for what she has to say next. She knows, in fact, that it takes more than a good speaker to make a good meeting—that you must also have a good audience, that she must herself make her audience responsive.

When she speaks of West Fulham, which is her constituency, and the wonderful way in which the people of Fulham have stood blitzes and bombings, she appeals to the audience. Do any come from Fulham, she asks, and her face lights up as she invites the Fulhamites to come up and shake hands with her afterwards. She likes to talk of her husband and children. "If my husband were out here he would be somewhere there at the back of the hall. He is my greatest fan, you know." Or, "I had two cables from my husband this morning and he sends you all his love." All this is permissible and very popular;

so also are her allusions to the occasion when she astonished her fellow-members of Parliament by her performance at the House of Lords shooting gallery, or her part on the Women's Committees of the House. It was so good that I thought I had underrated Dr. Summerskill's ability when I first met her. It was only when I got home and opened the paper and found that she must have used the identical speech a couple of nights earlier that my vague doubts returned.

The War is Uppermost

Of course it is the war that is uppermost in Dr. Summerskill's mind and it is the war that has given her feminism its special twist. It is the war that is going to give women those rights which she believes all women should have. The war, she says, has brought all women, in every age group, out of "their little brick boxes" and given them a taste of the joys of mingling with the outer world. She believes—I think this is more common in England than in New Zealand—that women should have the same rights and opportunities as men. They should be able, if they wish, to defend their homes by joining the Home Guard, and she herself was largely responsible for the action that led to the forming of the Women's Home Defence Units and their training in marksmanship.

When I asked her whether she thought that universal family allowances would come into operation in England after the war, she replied confidently. Yes. "Only," she added, "they intend to cut down the amount to a mere 5s a child. I would like to see 10s a child as a minimum, and an increasing scale for larger families. It is absurd to argue, as people do, that the larger the family the less each child costs. The larger the family, the more the mother is tied and the more she needs for the expense and organisation of her home. Apart from family allowances, women should

(continued on next page)

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