

A Savoyard Suffragette

The Extraordinary Adventures of Vera Louise Holme

On December 8, 1906, Gilbert & Sullivan opera returned to the Savoy Theatre, London, for the first time in nearly five years with a new revival of *The Yeomen of the Guard*. It was the start of the D'Oyly Carte Opera Company's first London Repertory Season, which would also include *The Gondoliers*, *Patience*, and *Iolanthe*, and run through August 24, 1907. Although billed as "under the personal direction of the Author," the productions were cast by Helen D'Oyly Carte without consulting the author, W. S. Gilbert, who resented Mrs. Carte's usurping control of such an important production matter and felt compelled to inform *The Times* in a January 20, 1907, letter that "in the present series of revivals my responsibility is confined exclusively to the ordinary duties of a stage manager."¹

One member of the ladies' chorus was Vera Louise Holme. Born in August 1881 in Lancashire, little is known of her education or theatrical experience prior to her engagement by the D'Oyly Carte. She was reportedly an accomplished violinist and singer,² but details of her background are lacking. Photographs among her papers in The Women's Library, London School of Economics, suggest that she also appeared in amateur theatricals, at times in trouser roles and on at least one occasion in Gilbert & Sullivan—as Little Buttercup in *H.M.S. Pinafore*.

Vera owned the two volumes of Gilbert's "Original Comic Operas"³—the first series of eight encompassing the Gilbert & Sullivan operas from *Trial by Jury* through *The Mikado*, and the second including the remaining five from *Ruddigore* through *The Grand Duke*, as well as three libretti Gilbert had written for other composers in the 1890s. She signed and dated her books "Vera L. Holme/Savoy Theatre/June 5, 1907." The next day she presented them to Gilbert and asked him to sign and inscribe each with a quote from the operas. Gilbert obliged with:

"Sad is that woman's lot who, year by year,
Sees, one by one her beauties disappear!"

from *Patience* for the first series, and for the second, from *The Gondoliers*:

"The end is easily foretold:
When every blessed thing you hold
Is made of silver or of gold,
You long for simple pewter."

One might think the *Patience* quote an odd selection for a 25-year old chorus lady, and so it is. Did Vera ask for that specific lyric, was it an inside joke between the pair, or was it simply Gilbert being Gilbert? We'll never know, but we can say without fear of contradiction that Vera Holme was not your typical Savoy chorister.

¹ "The Gondoliers," *The Times*, January 22, 1907.

² Elizabeth Crawford, biography of Vera Louise Holme, *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography*, vol. 27 (p. 777)

³ W. S. Gilbert: *Original Comic Operas*, First Series and *Original Comic Operas*, Second Series. London: Chappell & Co., Ltd., and Chatto & Windus, Ltd., n.d.

Gilbert was back at the Savoy for the second London Repertory Season (April 1908 to March 1909) as well, and Vera rejoined the chorus midway through the Season. Gilbert again stage managed, this time less aggrieved, with a cast more congenial with his frame of mind. He must also have been gratified that his most popular opera, *The Mikado*, could again be performed in London. It had been banned during the first Season on the dubious grounds that it might cause offense to a visiting Japanese prince. Vera returned to the Savoy chorus on November 2, 1908, her contract as a contralto chorister paying her a weekly wage of £2.⁴

It was during this second Savoy season that Vera Holme took up the cause for which she would be best remembered—women’s suffrage. In 1908 she joined a group of better known theatre personalities (including Ellen Terry, Edith Craig, Sybil Thorndike, Lena Ashwell, Lily Langtry, and Nina Boucicault) to help form the Actresses’ Franchise League (AFL). The League was open to anyone engaged in the theatrical profession and worked for women’s enfranchisement through education—selling suffrage literature, staging propaganda plays, and the like.

Not content with the long-established but pacifist suffrage organizations, such as the National Union of Women’s Suffrage Societies, Vera also signed on in 1908 with the militant Women’s Social and Political Union (WSPU). “Deeds Not Words” was their motto, and that seemed to suit Vera just fine. If anything, her enthusiasm for the cause required some reining in. Sylvia Pankhurst described her as “a noisy and explosive young person, frequently rebuked by her elders for lack of dignity.”⁵

One of the goals of the WSPU was to publicly challenge the British government and its cabinet ministers who opposed their cause. This, of course, typically led to their members’ speedy ejection from events and meetings they were disrupting. Vera and fellow WSPU member Elsie Howey hit on a new and original plan to prolong their challenge and gain publicity for the suffrage movement at the same time. In May 1909 they slipped into Colston Hall, Bristol, unobserved, three hours in advance of a meeting of the League for the Taxation of Land Values, and hid in the Hall’s large pipe organ. The meeting was to be chaired by Mr. Augustine Birrell, Chief Secretary for Ireland, a member of Prime Minister H. H. Asquith’s cabinet. Both Asquith and Birrell opposed female enfranchisement.

At 8:00 p.m. Mr. Birrell began his address only to be interrupted by a disembodied voice calling out “Votes for Women!” Generally hilarity ensued for the next seven minutes as the meeting’s stewards dashed wildly about looking in vain for the miscreants. The audience reacted with good humor—expressed with a mixture of cheers, boos, and raucous laughter. Paragraphs got into all the papers, as reporters present interviewed the “Suffragettes in the organ” (once revealed), eager to learn how it was all done.

⁴ Contract in Papers of Vera (Jack) Holme Archive, The Women’s Library, London School of Economics.

⁵ E. Sylvia Pankhurst, *The Suffrage Movement: an intimate account of persons and ideals*, 1931. (p. 225)

The May 7, 1909, issue of *Votes for Women*, the weekly WSPU newspaper, gave a full account of the event⁶ as well as a musical parody, written by Vera L. Holme, of Adelaide Procter and Arthur Sullivan's "The Lost Chord":

Seated one day in the organ,
 We were weary and ill at ease;
We sat there three hours only,
 Hid, midst the dusty keys.
We knew not if they'd be playing,
 And to us what would happen then,
But when we heard Mr. Birrell,
 It was then we protested, then.

Our voices rang out from the twilight,
 But nowhere could we be found;
They looked from the floor to the ceiling—
 Then stewards came searching round.
We asked for Votes for Women,
 And that justice should be done;
But Birell he could not answer,
 And the audience made such fun!

He said he had come from Asquith,
 And to him they must give ear;
But a voice rang out still louder,
 Making our question clear.
It may be that Mr. Birrell
 Daren't speak in that hall again,
And it may be, never in Bristol,
 Until the vote we gain!⁷

Vera's next several years were devoted almost exclusively to the suffrage cause. In August 1909 she was appointed chauffer to WPSU leader Emmeline Pankhurst. In November 1909 Vera appeared as Hannah Snell, the woman who went to war disguised as a soldier, in *A Pageant of Great Women*, a play authored by Cicely Hamilton and performed by members of the AFL. Like many WPSU members she had her run-ins with the law—at least three arrests (twice for "wilfully obstructing police")⁸ and one five-day prison sentence on a charge of stone throwing. In 1911 she began living with fellow suffragette Eveline Haverfield and their lives would remain entwined until Miss Haverfield's untimely death in 1920.

⁶ "Questioning Cabinet Ministers," *Votes for Women*, May 7, 1909, (p. 634).

⁷ Vera L. Holme, "An Organ Record," *Votes for Women*, May 7, 1909, (p. 635).

⁸ Metropolitan Police bail notices in Papers of Vera (Jack) Holme Archive, The Women's Library, London School of Economics.

With the outbreak of World War I, Vera, along with most of the suffrage leadership, chose to support Great Britain's war effort. In 1914 Eveline Haverfield founded the Women's Emergency Corps. Vera Holme was commissioned a major in the Corps and in 1915 was sent to Serbia where she was in charge of horses and trucks for the Scottish Women's Hospital units there. In 1917 she returned to London to deliver a report on the situation of the Serbian Army on the Rumanian front to Lord Derby, the Secretary of War. She remained close to the Serbian people after the war, as administrator for the Haverfield Fund for Serbian Children, and revisited that country in 1934.

Among Vera's many women friends was the accomplished Scottish illustrator Jessie M. King. In 1918 Jessie King agreed to design a bookplate for Vera Holme.⁹ Perhaps in anticipation of the pending World War I armistice and the Representation of the People Act 1918, enfranchising women over the age of 30 who met certain property qualifications, Vera's bookplate would feature the triumphant armored figure of Joan of Arc above the legend "O Freedom Beautiful Beyond Compare Thy Kingdom is Established."¹⁰ Two of her new bookplates were then pasted onto the front endpapers of her treasured copies of Gilbert's "Original Comic Operas," First and Second Series, facing the signed Gilbert lyric quotes. Vera eventually settled in Scotland, near Kirkcudbright and the artistic community there led by Jessie King.

Vera Holme did not abandon the stage when she joined the women's suffrage movement. She was an acting member of the Pioneer Players from 1914 to 1915 and again from 1917 to 1920, and remained a lifelong friend of Edith Craig, the group's founder. For many years Vera also helped Craig stage the annual Ellen Terry memorial performances in Kent. There's no record of Vera Holme performing in the Gilbert & Sullivan operas again, but she retained the books of libretti that Gilbert inscribed for her in her library for over 60 years, until her death in Glasgow on January 1, 1969.

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⁹ Jessie King's warm April 14, 1918 letter to Vera Holme, agreeing to design the bookplate, is also part of the extensive Papers of Vera (Jack) Holme Archive, The Women's Library, London School of Economics.

¹⁰ This phrase previously appeared as the first line of a poem by Edward Carpenter in his book *Towards Democracy*, third edition enlarged, London, T. Fisher Unwin, 1892. (p. 111) In subsequent editions the poem was given a title: "Children of Freedom."