

An Open Letter to the Leaders of the National Suffrage Movement

*Originally published in the September
1917 edition of The International under
the pseudonym of Cerebellum.*

MESDAMES:

May I address a few words to you with regard to the general policy of the campaign in favor of Woman Suffrage? In most respects the conduct of that campaign has been admirable, but I should like to indicate what appears to me a remarkable omission.

You have understood perfectly that general education is a necessary feature, yet you have not put your finger upon the one great obstacle to the emancipation of women. I refer to what is known as wholesome literature. In England to some extent, but still more in this country, the purveyors of fiction cut away the ground entirely from under your feet by the constant assumption that woman is nothing but an instrument of sex. In the average novel, no matter what the subject, what is called the "love-interest" means nothing more than that the real pre-occupation of the book is with the question as to whether she will, or whether she won't. The entire plot is a species of tantalization. It never seems to occur to the popular writer that a man (even) could take a genuine interest in those things which persons like myself at least are really interested. The doctor who discovers a new cure for diabetes, the inventor who opens a whole new world of activity to the human race, the poet who seeks to translate the divine ecstasy into language, are doing this, according to the popular writer, merely in order to get hold of a girl. It is this fundamental preoccupation with sex, this enormous over-valuation of sex, which is making it impossible for

the people of this country to assimilate in the idea of a woman as a human being, something more than Swinburne's "Love machine With clock-work joints of supple gold, No more, Faustine."

At the present moment we are inaugurating in this magazine a campaign to put sex in its proper place – as a necessary ingredient of life, indeed, but not one to be allowed to obsess the mind. The sex-taboo is the enemy of human progress. Until that is removed mankind can never dwell upon the heights; the mischief done in life by it is made possible principally by the mischief done by so-called wholesome literature.