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ARTICLE

FLASH-LIGHTS OF THE AMSTERDAM CONGRESS.

[Rather than try to give a condensed report of the Amsterdam Congress and what I saw of the European Movement in general, I shall present a series of articles under the above general head, subdivided under special heads. This flash-light method will be on the whole better. It will deal in detail with persons and things; and the flash-lights will, in the end, be seen to run into one another and portray the scene more effectively.—DANIEL DE LEON.]

VI.

EMILE VANDERVELDE.

AT the risk of having some friend of Vandervelde's hastily throw this article aside before reading to the end, I shall start with the broad side of the wedge.—Vandervelde is essentially a comedian.

This may seem an insult; it may seem derogatory to Vandervelde's unquestionable intellectual parts; it may seem a disparagement of his undeniable services, rendered to the cause of Socialism. It may seem all that. Yet it is not. None can really take offence but blind admirers. As to these—so much the worse for them.

The Rachels, the McCullochs, the Siddonses, the Booths, the Bernhardtts, the Irvings, the Terrys, the Talmas, together with scores of others, have all been actors, yet they have enjoyed wide and deep respect, have evoked genuine admiration, have spurred to emulation. On the skirt on the picture of one of them a great artist gallantly wrote his name with the expression of the certainty that thus her skirt would raise him to immortality. When it is considered that one and all of these stars improved their powers with all the appliances and means to boot known to the tricks of the stage;—when it is considered that skillful touches can impart chin to the chinless face; breadth to the straightened forehead; size to the gimlet eye; hair



EMILE VANDERVELDE
(1866–1938)

to the frayed skull; beard to the weak face; breadth of shoulder, depth of chest and roundness of limbs to the shaggy, the shallow of breast and the spindle-shanked;—when all this is considered and the fact is duly weighed that Vandervelde, even if he would, is deprived of recourse to such aids and expedients by the stage on which he stars, then the man's extraordinary histrionic powers can not fail to evoke wonder, and the esteem he enjoys with many may be readily understood.

I have previously stated how Clara Zetkin, the translator into German, threw spirit and fire even into translations of tame routine matter, clean out of place. The lady is no artist. Vandervelde is; he is a consummate actor. The conclusion may not be warranted from his conduct when he speaks originally. The manner in which he operates his arms, the studied modulations of his voice, his peculiarity of stepping forward, then stepping back and posing—all these habits may be simply personal mannerisms. His talent as an actor appears when he translates. He translated several times from the German into French. A translator may with genuine naturalness put into his translation all the warmth of the original, provided the original expresses his own sentiments. When, however, the original's views are contrary to his own, when they even assail him, then, to reproduce the original with its original fire is a feat of different category. Vandervelde accomplishes the feat. In his translations of even views that he does not share, he reproduces the vocal emphasis, the gestures, the stamping of feet, the flash of the eye, the pouting of lips, the puckering of brows—in short, all the emotions of the original, however hostile to himself. A speech translated by him does not lose in its rendition, however counter to his own sentiments. That is a gift, shared by few. I verily believe Vandervelde could reproduce a speech of even Jaures, including the streams of perspiration that trickle down Jaures' cheeks, or a speech of Guesde, including the rasping notes of Guesde's voice.

On Thursday, after the debate in the committee on international tactics was over, the Adler-Vandervelde Resolution defeated, and the Dresden-Amsterdam Resolution accepted, the committee proceeded to consider the procedure to be adopted before the full Congress. As stated in the second number of this series, Bebel was of the opinion that no further speeches or motions be allowed in the Congress. He, accordingly, moved that the committee submit to the Congress a condensed report of its transactions, that Vandervelde be the reporter, and that the Congress then take a vote. Bebel argued that Vandervelde himself, the co-mover of a defeated resolution, would be able to make an impartial report of the occurrences. Nobody objected to Vandervelde as the reporter, but numerous were the protests against applying the gag in the Congress. I, for one, objected. Although not mean was the opinion I had been forming of Vandervelde's extraordinary ability as a conscientious actor, I was not ready to trust him with the stating of the attitude of the Socialist Labor Party, which I had represented in the committee, including my motion. For a moment Bebel forgot himself, and started to interrupt me, compelling me to notify him then and there that the Party I represented would not allow itself to be intimidated, and that the day would come when he would learn to appreciate the importance of the S.L.P. stand. Too well-meaning a man and too sensible withal to insist upon a false position, Bebel immediately subsided, and thus saved me the necessity of greater severity. Bebel's motion was materially altered. To make a long story short, it was decided that all the defeated motions, mine included, be submitted to the Congress, as they were; that they would all be incorporated in the report of the Congress; finally, the movers of the several motions were to furnish Vandervelde with a synopsis of their arguments, and were not to speak unless dissatisfied with Vandervelde's report, each being himself the judge of whether he should be satisfied or not—a condition that I insisted upon. As stated in my preliminary report, I furnished Vandervelde with such a synopsis, but I took the precaution of causing my name to be inserted on the list of speakers by Troelstra, the chairman of the Friday session of the Congress, in case I found it necessary to supplement Vandervelde. I stood the eleventh on the list. The table of the American delegation was away in the rear. On Friday, when the report of the committee was to be made, I sat forward at the table of the French comrades. Vandervelde made

his report. It was then more than on any other occasion that the man displayed his matchless theatrical powers. He impersonated Bebel, he impersonated Guesde, he impersonated Jaures, he impersonated every mover and most of the speakers. He impersonated me, even quoting exactly some of my words. As I sat there watching the incredible performance, I mentally put to the actor the question: "How do you do it?"—I was satisfied, and so informed Troelstra, authorizing him to strike my name from the list. He also was still under the spell of admiration for what he termed Vandervelde's "great achievement." I agreed with him, and he shook my hand rapturously.

I have often wondered at the reasoning of people who condemn the stage as immoral—as having an immoral effect upon the audience. They condemn the actor, they pity the audience. The reasoning seems to me topsy-turvy. If there is immorality about the theater, the actor is the victim, the audience the victimizer. Can the human being who habitually simulates love and hatred, rapture and wrath, joy and sorrow—can such a being preserve the spontaneity of its own individuality? Is it not rather the actors who are sinned against by the audience that pays them for such self-immolation than they who debauch the audience by such spectacle of suicide of individuality? I, for one, would never know when a great actor is in earnest. His hand-shake, his embrace, his utterances off the stage, can not, meseems, be but affected by the simulation of his profession. The actor's habit once acquired, he seems to me perpetually on the stage. Nor can I resist the impression with regard to Vandervelde. In fact, his career bears me out. After the futile, even disastrous and certainly ill-advised Belgian general strike of a year and odd ago, Vandervelde boasted in the Belgian Parliament that, at his call, so and so many thousands of workingmen rose,—they did and scattered as on the stage; noise, signifying nothing! So with the Adler-Vandervelde Resolution: its fascination for Vandervelde was its stage parade. So, more recently, since the Congress, when, as a delegate of the Inter-parliamentary Union and Peace Conferences in this country, he could not only leave unprotested the eulogies to the spiked-police-club President Roosevelt, but could join in carrying them to the political head of the Capitalist Class—a comedy within a comedy! And so also did we see him here one day staging in public and declaiming for the Social Democratic party, on the plea of its being

“Socialist,” and the next day staging in public and declaiming for the anti-Socialist Gompers and his capitalist Civic Federation, on the plea of their being “friends of Labor.” Kautsky, as I stated in a previous article of this series, thought that he who speaks well likes to speak. Likewise, it may be said, he who acts well loves a stage. With him it is, Anything for a stage; rather die than not to stage.

Off and on actors have contributed their share towards arousing the masses from lethargy and to action. But the actor’s part on such occasion is merely subsidiary. A movement in which a Vandervelde is the most conspicuous figure can not but lack the coherency of mature development. Every nationality follows its own course of detailed development. A Vandervelde is the product of the course that the Belgian Movement happened to take. Clear as anything is the conclusion that, valuable though a Vandervelde may be in such a country, his conspicuousness denotes absence of seriousness in the Movement. With greater maturity a Movement grows serious, and then produces other leaders. The leader of the seriously revolutionary Belgian Movement is yet to make his appearance.

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