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Muna Lee (Mrs Luis Munoz Marin), ex '12, internationally famous poet and feminist leader, and a contributing editor of this magazine, begins in this issue the first of a series of articles on leading feminists. Miss Lee is the author of «Sea Change», the director of the bureau of international relations of the University of Porto Rico, and is at present on leave of absence for one year, to serve as director of national activities of the National Woman's Party of the United States, with headquarters in Washington

## Alva Belmont: feminist

BY MUNA LEE, '12

**T**he dedication of Alva Belmont House, on Capitol Hill, in the City of Washington, as the national headquarters of the National Woman's Party, in January of this year, was a significant tribute to the leadership of Mrs O. H. P. Belmont, president of the Woman's Party, whose refusal to accept as binding traditional restrictions, and whose fiery impatience with discriminations against her sex, have been largely responsible for the greater social as well as political freedom enjoyed by women today. It is a fascinating study to put together the different segments of Mrs Belmont's career, seemingly so diverse in motivation and expression, and realize that through it all, in the historic Costume ball which, opening Marble House, in Newport, became one of the most glamorous episodes in the history of American society, just as much as in her declaration, after the passage of the suffrage amendment, that "Women must reach their full stature as human beings!"

One strongly unifying idea is demonstrated: the idea of equality and freedom.

Born Alva Smith, in Mobile, Alabama, Mrs Belmont's was the typical sheltered luxurious childhood of the Southern cotton exporter's household, and even at the age of five, her spirit of rebellion was evidenced: "It was our clothes," she explains, smiling. "In our home, we received a great box of Paris frocks twice a year. And what anguish we suffered in having to wear these clothes, quite proper as to style, the latest thing in fashion, but utterly unlike what our little friends were wearing. In those days," she added, "like all children, we were conformists, and to be like the rest was our chief desire." It is an amusing and inconsistent incident to record at the beginning of a life which has been so striking an exemplification of that "divine discontent" with existing conditions which is said to be the chief incentive to progress.

She married William K. Vanderbilt in

1874. Her subsequent leadership of New York society developed and perfected the qualities of initiative, independence, and executive genius which were later transferred from the narrow social sphere to the great field of international feminism. She showed, then as well as later, a fine sense of dramatic values, a capacity for detail, and a mastery of organization, which have never deserted her. Her manifold interests have come to converge upon an unflinching determination to give women equal rights with men in every sphere. She was the first woman in America to obtain a divorce from a prominent man, and her poise and valor in meeting the ensuing turmoil were notable. Perhaps in this experience might be found the roots of her subsequent efforts to remove discriminations against women. In any event, her first recognition of herself as a feminist came years later, at a tea in a friend's house, when she heard a suffrage talk and realized on the moment, with that magnificent

capacity for instantaneous decision which is one of her leading characteristics, that on the progress of women depends the progress of civilization.

She married Oliver H. P. Belmont in 1896.

Mrs Belmont is actively interested in architecture, and is a member of the American Institute of Architecture. Her homes—Marble House, in Newport; Port Washington, Long Island; her villa on the Riviera; her fourteenth century chateau in D'Augerville which was the home of Joan of Arc's lawyer; and her beautiful Paris house—are internationally famous.

Just as Mrs Belmont was one of the first women in the country to visualize the importance of securing suffrage by national amendment rather than by the slow process of obtaining the vote state by state, so has she been a pioneer in international feminism, advocating an equal rights treaty to be ratified by every nation of the world. When the National Woman's Party, centering upon federal suffrage, was formed, Mrs Belmont as its officer demonstrated her generalship. She is, above all, past-mistress of strategy. She contributed, moreover, in addition to sagacious counsel, hundreds of thousands of dollars to educate the nation to suffrage. Her gifts to the Woman's Party have been likewise munificent.

Mrs Belmont's three children are William K. and Harold S. Vanderbilt, and Mme Jacques Balsan, formerly the Duchess of Marlborough. She is the grandmother of the present Marquis of Blandford; and her tiny great-granddaughter, Lady Sara Spencer Churchill, is also a member of the National Woman's Party of the United States.

Her interest in the advancement of women is of almost religious intensity. For years she has dedicated herself to the realization in her own lifetime of her vision of a world wherein men and women shall be equal, in responsibilities and in opportunities. And to the hastening of the epoch when that world shall be a reality, she is devoting the magnificent resources of one of the most alert and vigorous minds of our generation.

A gallant and valiant figure, unflinching in her demand that every woman be permitted to grow to her full stature, it was fitting that Mrs Belmont should see her own name bestowed with appropriate ceremonies on the beautiful national headquarters of the party of which she is president. Alva Belmont House will be, through the years to come, a museum and a laboratory of Feminism: a museum in that most vital sense of the word, a storehouse of the past lending inspiration for the present; and a labor-

Mrs Oliver H. P. Belmont, president of the National Woman's Party of the United States and a leading protagonist for eliminating political inequalities against women



atory where the elements which will form the future are determined and tested.

Even a cursory reading of Mrs Belmont's commentaries on the place of woman in a constantly changing world reveals her as both an individualist and an exponent of organization. In other words, she holds—as the Woman's Party has always held—that women will be able to accomplish their utmost only when they are banded together, working, as women, for women; and she believes at the same time, and has often declared, that the individual woman must develop fully if womankind, and consequently humankind, are to achieve their destiny. "The important thing," to cite her own words, "is to break down the barriers which prevent women from utilizing, for the good of the human race, all their energies, capabilities, and talents." And, again, in the ringing declaration of principles which she gave the world in 1922, "I am working only to put women in a position where they can make of themselves whatever they choose to be and can be!" It is in this same declaration that she made use of the frequently quoted and now famous phrase, "Almost any woman with a broom gives, to my mind, a better picture of action than any man with a musket."

The various interests that have played an important part in Mrs Belmont's life are finely synthesized in the national headquarters which, bearing her name, is dedicated to the greater freedom of

women. It epitomizes Feminism, of course, since it is the home of the most advanced feminist group in the country; it recalls her devotion to architecture, for so long one of her chief delights, since Alva Belmont house is a classic example of the gracious dignified Georgian mansion. Research, Mrs Belmont's insistence upon exactitude, her intellectual pleasure in concrete knowledge of the subject in hand, is realized in the exhaustive and fully documented studies on the status of women being carried on by the Woman's Party. Her flair for gardens—and her gardens have been internationally famous—is simply but beautifully exemplified in the roses and lilacs, the poplars and laurels and iris-beds, which give this house so much of its Old World charm; just as her staunch patriotism cannot but be pleased to recall the honorable connection of the place with the only defense made of the city when the British rode against Washington in 1814.

Even more than her china and silver in the dining-room, her girlhood desk in the drawing-room, the marble bust in the entrance hall and the bronze plaque on the rosy brick Georgian wall, it is the spirit pervading the house, the spirit of the Woman's Party, the spirit of Feminism, which makes Alva Belmont house so appropriate, so adequate, and so satisfying a name for the colonial mansion which houses the national headquarters of the Woman's Party of the United States.