

VIII.

FEMALE SUFFRAGE, CONSIDERED CHIEFLY WITH REGARD TO ITS INDIRECT RESULTS.

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THE question, Ought Women to have the Suffrage? is one, the answer to which implies a consideration of some of the deepest problems of our day. No one can answer it who has not weighed all the large changes which it is likely to introduce into public and domestic life, one against another, and solved an intricate problem of profit and loss. Few are fitted for such a task—few know enough, and many feel too much. The present writer aims at an office, less valuable than that of the judge, but which is, on literary ground, insufficiently appreciated. It is not the act of a partisan, but of an earnest seeker after truth, to contemplate any large subject, for a time, steadily from one side. No persons are likely to be more onesided than those who attempt to look upon anything from all sides at once; who hurry, that is, from one point of view to another too rapidly to correct their crude impressions of any. I think, therefore, that an avowed intention to present to the reader one side of the question solely is the best

safeguard against the great danger of treating it in a onesided spirit. One other preliminary caution must be given. The Enfranchisement of Women is, in this attempt, considered rather for what it implies than for what it is;—as the most obvious and comprehensive symbol of that change which should make Woman, in the fullest sense of the words, a fellow-worker with Man, rather than as an inconsiderable enlargement of the Constituency.

Starting, therefore, from the concession that weighty reasons are to be alleged against the proposed change, that as women are at present educated there is fear that its immediate effect might be an increase of that part of the constituency which is open to unfit influence, and perhaps an addition of strength to whatever is unreasoning in Conservatism, let us yet review all those reasons which should keep the Enfranchisement of Women before us as our goal.

I say “as our goal,” and not “as our present desideratum.” That it is also the latter I neither affirm nor deny. If we regard it as an isolated fact its objective importance would not, perhaps, be very great. But it is not that now and then the women in a small borough might have a chance of turning an election which we have to consider, it is that in such circumstances a large principle would be admitted which would totally change the position of women. Once give a woman political status, and her admission to any career becomes an open question, the *onus probandi* is thenceforward thrown on those who would exclude her. We may think in many

cases this burden would be a very light one, but that is not to the purpose here ; what we have to note is, that in the present state of public feeling a woman has crossed a watershed when she receives a right to vote. I consider, therefore, not merely or chiefly what reasons are there for extending the suffrage to women ; but what reasons are there for admitting them to a platform whence the ground slopes away without interruption to that which is common with men ? In short, Do women really need a wider scope than they have already ? What scope have they already ?

A woman may write books, paint pictures, go on the stage, teach children, manage a hospital,—we may now add, become a Doctor. This does not seem a narrow range of pursuits. They include within their range some of the most varied forms of mental work. But when we say a woman may do these things, do we use the potential mood in the same sense as we should apply it to the choice of a man's profession ? No doubt there are some of these pursuits which are as open to any woman who possesses the requisite talent and cultivation as they are to a man in like circumstances. If a woman writes books as well as a man does, she will find it just as easy to get a publisher to take them as a man does. If she paints pictures as well, she will find the public equally ready to buy them. It is nothing to the contrary that our greatest female writer is known as George Eliot, and that young authoresses who choose a *nom de plume* prefer one which leaves the sex doubtful. We need not enter on the reasons which induce a great

and fearless thinker to claim the liberty of speech conventionally only granted to a man, and for her more timid followers it is sufficient to suggest the presumption that a woman's writing will not be so good as a man's—a probability which no one will dispute. But if the inferiority of her powers to his is due in any degree to the conventional arrangements of society, it is not true that society leaves as open to her as to him any career which depends on the full development of those powers. We make the means inaccessible, and therefore practically exclude the ends. It is not immediately to our purpose to dwell on the poverty of the present means of education for women, but some aspects of this poverty have not been sufficiently recognised, and are relevant to the subject before us. I think the positive inferiority of a woman's means of cultivation to a man's is sometimes over-rated, but what hardly can be over-rated is the difference in the facility afforded a man and a woman in setting to work. I do not believe the idlest youth who just saves his degree at College wastes more of his undergraduate years than an energetic girl of the corresponding portion of her life.

For how does a girl pass those precious years of her life, from eighteen to four-and-twenty? Emancipated from schoolroom inferiority, and moving for the first time among her elders as an equal, she enters the enchanting grown-up world, with all its responsibilities—so, at least, she delights to think—and is eager to take up the full burden of the important duties which her imagination creates out of every small conventional

opportunity. All invitations to gossip become social claims; she hears it said that she should help her mother; and all that is best in her nature throws its weight into the same scale with frivolous tastes and thinly-disguised self-indulgences. How can she sit reading history in her own room, when her conscience and her inclination whisper in concert that she may be wanted to settle a plan with her parents, or entertain a visitor? We may smile at these temptations, but they are omnipotent with a girl of eighteen. The mother who is willing to further the full development of her daughter's powers at considerable (though not, I believe, permanent) loss of gratification to herself, can, no doubt, prevent this conflict, but this at present requires resolute self-denial. Not, as is conventionally supposed, that she turns to her daughter for help. A woman of fifty rarely needs help from a girl of eighteen; that need has not yet arisen, and it is hardly ever selfishness which is the disturbing element in this relation; but she is anxious, on the one hand, that her daughter should make the most of every chance of pleasure which, as continually varying, she thinks exceptional, and on the other she regards study as something that can be taken up at any time, and may therefore be continually laid aside. She has thus no inducement to encourage that rhythmical and continuous life which, while she clearly sees it to interfere with the sources of innocent amusement, she does not perceive to be the indispensable condition of study. A guest is coming, or a guest is going; or it is a beautiful day, and the girls ought to go out; the

books will remain, and the sunshine will not. And the daughter does not discover for some time, that, even if the books will remain, the power of using them is, under these constant interruptions, more evanescent than the sunshine, and when fully awake to this, never knows how far she ought to resist suggestions from her mother. When at length she sees that a stand must be made, if she is to save any power of work, she has plenty of errors to regret on the side of resistance. On Monday she made her book or her drawing excuse for not coming down to a tiresome visitor, and so on Tuesday, resolving to be obedient, she puts aside the book to join in gossip which she likes better than history. I wish I could adequately present the incompatibility of any intellectual work with the doubts and scruples which are born of circumstances like these. It is not that they occupy a large space of time (though they do occupy much more time than any one would imagine who knows nothing of the struggle), but that they keep the attention concentrated on minute and shifting objects, from which, even when released, it cannot return to the large and remote region of intellectual work. I do not say that all kinds of gain are impossible under this experience; there is no trial which may not develop some form of moral excellence, but to expect study to be carried on in such an atmosphere is as if you should expect fine engraving to be done at sea.

This language, which women will understand, will sound exaggerated to men. They know nothing of the experience here indicated. They may, of course, find

it a struggle to stick to work in the face of innocent or laudable temptations to amusement, but certainly, at the age we are considering, the theory is that they should work, and nobody ever attempts to invade their hours of study with any social claim. However much they waste their undergraduate years, still those years are spent in an atmosphere of study. Life is arranged with a view to some kind of intellectual achievement; they are, as women never are, surrounded with influences that make it natural for them to devote themselves to mental cultivation. The influence which the anticipations of others exercise over us is subtle and impalpable, but its importance is such that the difference of facility in following out a pursuit to which these anticipations are or are not adjusted, can only be represented to a person who has never experienced it by saying that the largest allowance of outward help is hardly a compensation. When a woman, after such a youth as is here indicated, wakes up to a distinct knowledge of the capacities of her nature, the power of profiting by it is gone. Leisure perhaps remains to her in abundance, but that power of concentrated attention which can only be attained in youth, with which the scantiest leisure is available, without which the most abundant is useless, is for ever beyond her reach.

[Surely, therefore, we can only say a woman may cultivate Literature or Art in the sense in which we should say a man may be Lord Chancellor.] We mean, that it is not impossible to a nature of exceptional

strength of will and power of work. The mental gifts that would raise a man to the woolsack will make a cultivated woman. I am not now inquiring whether this is desirable; I only urge that, when reckoning up a woman's opportunities, you do not forget that they are opportunities in quite a different sense from a man's.

So much is true even of those pursuits where the social code recognises the desirableness of the end, and only makes the means, to all average women, inaccessible. But even more than this may be said of those which are looked upon as questionable in themselves. [Most mothers, however high in the social scale, would be glad to see a daughter occupy a position in the front rank of literature, though they might do their best to interrupt the solitude and calm which alone makes vigorous thought possible; but they would be anything but glad, probably, to see her manager of a hospital.] And although of late years this has grown more possible, and in average circumstances, under our over-easy filial code, a middle-aged woman would get her own way in the matter; still, I urge,—at what a cost? What a hardening of nature is inevitably consequent on so much strain! What a loss of moral loveliness in the scars that bear token of the conflict! And let it not be supposed that this is a conflict between duty and taste. God forbid that arrangements should ever be made to mitigate the punishment of one who leaves the parent's fading years uncheered by filial care! But a large part of this suffering is inflicted on women who only leave parents not needing them in the least;

parents to whom their removal to the other end of the world by a tolerably happy marriage would give unmixed satisfaction. We visit with almost the same penalties neglect of the most sacred personal claims and of the most ungrounded social conventions, and shackle the movements of a woman whose energy takes any unusual line, as much with the unreasoning anticipations as with the needs of those who love her. What stops her way is not the claim of particular individuals, but the adverse ideal of a social code.

Now, to say that a woman cannot devote herself to any large object without coming into collision with the anticipations of society, seems to me another way of saying that the scope allowed her sex is too narrow. And the undeniable fact that her demand for a larger field of action has been (like most other urgent demands for change) associated with much that is trite, much that is foolish, and much that is in bad taste, so far from being an argument against this conclusion, affords those who maintain it a good illustration; for, if no folly or weakness were associated with the craving after a richer education and a larger sphere of work, it might not unfairly be taken as a proof that the condition of both was satisfactory. As it is, our own exaggeration and distortion affords one proof among many that we need a widening of our horizon, an enrichment of our aims, a strengthening of all that part of our nature which rests on large ideas, a weight thrown into the scale opposite to that of small personal interests. A difference in the power of appreciating

proportion is one of the few almost unquestioned distinctions between men and women. Talk over some small family worry with a man and his wife; which of the two will feel it most keenly will be of course a matter of accident; but you will almost invariably find that in one case you leave the sore subject behind you when you have done with it, and in the other you keep looking at it obliquely. A man is mortified, chafed, annoyed,—he gives vent to his vexation, and turns to something else; there is something else in the background; mere personal feeling does not exhaust his capacity for pleasure or pain. With a woman it is not so; she can only proceed from her own personal interests to somebody else's personal interests, and the wide, enduring, *common* life, so much less subject to vicissitude, so much more invariably available, is hidden from her view.

No doubt this very difference between men and women may be represented as cause instead of effect of their different political position, and thus made to do duty in a direction precisely opposite to that which is here assigned to it. This is not, however, an objection which need be answered by one who is trying only to set forth the arguments on one side. If there is this inherent defect in woman's nature, that is no reason we should not do everything to strengthen the opposite virtue, supposing nothing is sacrificed thereby. Nor can you ever decide which of two concomitant facts is cause and which effect till you alter one of them.

There are many, though not perhaps so many as there

used to be, who will deny that this strong preponderance of the personal element in women is a defect, who would think it a loss that they should ever stand towards public affairs in the same relation as their husbands and brothers, and would lament any diminution, not only of the positive space which the affairs of their household occupy in their minds, but of the proportion in which these private concerns stand towards larger matters. It cannot be denied that any such change would tend to blunt the edge of contrast between the sexes, and if the ideal of their mutual relation is a picturesque antithesis, no doubt things are best as they are, or rather as they were a hundred years ago, for the picturesque contrast is to a great extent lost already. But let those who look at the question through no pre-arranged theory, but through the colourless medium of a simple desire for truth, ask themselves, Do people really effect most in any particular department who understand that department alone? Can we estimate any single thing till we know its bearings towards other things? I believe that very often the only thing sensible women need in order to appreciate some family difficulty is, no more time to think about it. We should come back to our domestic perplexities, after an interval of occupation with something entirely different, as we come back to them after a good night's rest. "Was it only last night this difficulty seemed so insuperable?" we have often asked ourselves: "how simple it is, after this interval of oblivion." And more effective than any mere oblivion is that different action

of the mind which we attain in turning from small to large interests. Let no one attempt to estimate this kind of gain by marking the degree in which intellectual pursuits are a refuge from practical worries. The smallest thing to be done outweighs, in its claim upon the attention, the largest thing to be known; and though study is a shelter from all those cares which we literally create for ourselves, those who turn to it in the hope of escaping the pressure of some real though small practical difficulty, will be apt to feel as if they had leant upon a broken reed. When these difficulties have taken a strong hold upon the mind, we need the help of some peremptory external demand in order to enable us to measure and rightly deal with the interests thus interrupted. Seen through the microscope of prolonged attention, the hasty word becomes an expression of hopeless alienation, the trivial fault expands to the dimensions of a sin needing profound repentance. And so women very often do harm in proportion as they are conscientious. Men far more easily forgive an explosion of bad temper or a display of gross selfishness than that aspect of Christian forbearance and resignation with which their shortcomings are often met by women who would make almost any sacrifices for them, and who simply need a background of large interests in order to turn their conscientiousness to good. This mistake is seen more ordinarily in the form of a cowardly suppression of all criticism, and abnegation of all influence; and perhaps this is not its least injurious form. Especially in the case of a mother and son, I

believe much is lost by a woman's incapacity to look at faults lightly—much to her, and yet more to him. "If I had not preached to my son *then*, he would have been so thankful to listen *now*"—words I once heard from a conscientious mother—indicate an experience quite as injurious to men as to women.

I think, therefore, that that domestic life for the sake of which people are anxious to curtain off large interests from women's lives, would gain by the admission of those interests. Yet I could not concede that if it were not so, this would be an ultimate reason against their admission. We deceive ourselves with names in this matter. "Domestic life" means marriage; and while the attraction of one human spirit to another lies in a region much deeper than the influence of the social code can penetrate, the attraction of an outward framework of life might be diminished with no loss to any one. All high aims gain when they are disengaged from adventitious attraction, and those who think the office of wife and mother the highest, will be the most anxious to cut off every temptation for any one to enter upon it whose motive is a dearth of other interests. When stated in plain terms, indeed, the opposite view is absurd; no sane human being would seriously maintain, as an objection to an innovation, that it would make us pause before entering upon the most solemn responsibilities of life.¹

¹ I retain this sentence, in spite of an assertion in the article "On Female Education" in the number of the *Quarterly Review* for April 1869, to the effect that "Our object is to entice our golden youth into matrimony by the exhibition of a useful and womanly character," which I confess does not appear to me

But people judge of truth and error so much by association, they are so little in the habit of looking at facts except in bundles, and the bundles are sometimes made up so arbitrarily, that it behoves every one who approaches a subject familiarized by long conventional handling to be resolute in refusing all assent to words which do not attach themselves to concrete fact. And those phrases which come to us with the subtle perfume of dignified and peaceful association, and bind together the ideal of Woman and Domestic Life, seem to me in one sense equally true, and in another equally false, for every human being, man and woman alike.

Surely, so far as any of us, woman or man, knows nothing of the family life, so far he or she is the less of a human being. I see no difference in this respect between the dweller in clubs or in convents. Both have surrendered one large source of knowledge and spring of action; they cannot put in its place anything which shall replace, even if it should excel, what they lose; and as every loss is less hurtful in proportion as we are conscious of it, they had better be made aware of this. But to consider that this applies specially to women appears to me an error so hurtful, that it is necessary for one who would speak of this subject at all to discard all conventional theory, however graceful, and confront the actual fact, viz. that the extremely unequal influences by which men and women are drawn towards married life indicate

to form any exception to the class to which I have supposed such statements to belong. Perhaps the character formed with this object, whether useful or not, might not be specially womanly.

a disastrous side of our stage of civilization. It is not necessary to any considerable extent to illustrate a statement which will be accepted by every one who thinks not of abstract wives and daughters, but of the real women he knows; yet, inasmuch as decorous theories of maidenly life form to so many minds a *cul-de-sac* to all speculations on the subject, it is not out of place here to point out some of the inevitable results of a social framework which makes marriage woman's only career.

The most obvious, perhaps, though not the most important, is that it makes friendship between men and women, for average specimens of both, impossible. We all know instances of such friendship, no doubt, and in their power of enriching life they make so much impression upon us, that we are apt to forget they belong only to the exceptions of humanity. The fact that a man with nothing particular about him should be on terms of intimate friendship with a woman with nothing particular about her, is, I venture to say, unheard of. Why is this? Not that commonplace men and women are incapable of mutual understanding—some of the most affectionate brothers and sisters rise to one's imagination to disprove the idea; but that it needs exceptional force of character for a woman to hold at bay the idea of marriage wherever it is possible. To welcome it is easy, to determine against it is easy; but to leave it out of sight—the only basis for friendship—is, to the average girl, whose future is a blank but for this prospect, impossible. It is not only single life which is impoverished by this impossibility; you cannot systematically discourage tastes and

capacities in every region but one, and find them in their full development in that one. To deny men and women common ground except on the footing of man and wife is in a great measure to deny it to man and wife also. However indispensable a husband and wife may be to each other's comfort, if their contact is only at a single point, if their intercourse is confined to their relation, and their mutual sympathies find no exercise in any direction but that of their common needs, their conjugal happiness is apt to grow flat and dull as the advancing years strip life bare, and to be very narrowing while it is intense. All mutual affection is so good a thing that we only estimate the poverty of this form of it by comparing it with a marriage which is also a friendship; but in marking this descent we shall recognise how much marriage loses in being made the sole opportunity of communion between the two halves of mankind.

A yet more hurtful result of the theory which regards domestic life as more sacred for one of these divisions than for the other, is, that it introduces a great unreality into a large part of a woman's life. At the age when a man's efforts, if they are worth anything at all, become definite, earnest, and persistent, she suddenly finds the spirit die out of all the aims of her life, and an anticipation which must not influence a single action destroy the interest of all. She may try to reach history, or teach poor children, or cultivate a musical talent; but for a certain interval all is vague, and difficult. The question "Is this to go on?" takes the edge off every pursuit, and drains off interest to a possible future which has no

continuity with the present. Most of us have chafed under the provoking impossibility of employing an odd quarter of an hour while we are kept waiting, trying to read or write, and wondering all the while whether it is too late for So-and-so to come now. Something like this, counted by years instead of minutes, is the common lot of the average girl ; but the special aggravation in her case is, that the time thus spent is not only wasted and unsatisfactory, but unreal. She has to ignore the possibility which may change her whole framework of life as nothing changes a man's life, and to profess an entire absence of anticipation as to the one event which for a time fills her whole horizon. This is a great evil, and it is an evil to which nothing corresponds in a man's career. His nature is quite as incomplete as hers apart from the discipline of conjugal life ; but he is not taught to look upon that life as his vocation, and so he can take it when it comes naturally, and till then let it alone. Now what I would here emphasize is, that this contrast is the result of a theory and not of a fact. That women spend the best part of their lives in preparing for an event which may never happen—an event for which the very worst preparation is to hanker after it, while the very best is to be strenuously occupied with something different, is the result, not of God's decision that one form of life should be *happier* than another, but of man's invention that it should be deemed more *womanly*. A busy lawyer is not necessarily dissatisfied because the bar might, and does not, lead to the bench ; but we in the analogous case infuse dissatisfaction into the lower posi-

tion by insisting that those persons who remain in it have not fulfilled their vocation at all. An error so widespread and deep-rooted must rest on causes too subtle to allow us to hope for any except a very gradual removal; but I firmly believe that the first step in this direction is a choice of careers for women; and among all the advantages which may be looked for in opening an enlarged scope to them I regard it as not the smallest that it gives them something to surrender on marriage.

[To say, then, that "Home is the proper sphere of woman," that "No education of women is valuable which does not fit them for domestic life," to use any of the well-worn formulas, in short, is to say that you must bring girls up to hanker after husbands. Of course all women, as well as all men, are born into a family; but if a woman is educated with a view to domestic usefulness, she will almost always feel her sphere inadequate till she has a home to rule over. You may call it domestic life when half-a-dozen grown-up sisters live together with a sufficient staff of servants; but I can hardly fancy a state of things less favourable to happiness or concord than that they should all try to find occupation and interest in the affairs of the household; grave faults of temper or feeling would not produce more irritation than the tendencies which would be thus fostered. This is not a real danger, the facts of life are too strong against it; but the alternative of that vague, half-conscious craving after a household of one's own, which I have already spoken of, is real enough. It is true that there comes a time when most people need

from their children the same kind of attention that they have given them, and to satisfy this demand is occupation enough, not only of heart and mind, but of time. But it is not a claim that could be met by a daughter who had spent middle age in a fever of fuss over trifles. What old people need, almost more than even love, is calm. The truth is, that it is the filial relation which would be most enriched by widened interests. For a time mothers need nothing from their children than that they should grow,—to watch and guard the development of life is enough employment for the whole being, and while this employment lasts, the parental relation is on the whole a happy one. Associations of difficulty or disappointment with the life of the nursery or school-room are rare; they take their rise from the period when the children enter on common ground with the parents. Why is this? Because in early life there is, and in middle life there is not, a function to give the relation of parent and child active and healthy exercise. The time of mere growth comes to an end. Of course, our whole life is a period of development; but when youth is past this becomes no longer a thing to watch; one phase of the relation is past, and it is time that another should begin,—the limits that were enough for every desire before now cramp the whole nature. If the parents now immediately began to need the attention which they had just ceased to give, all would be well where the relation has been happy, but during that interval of mutual independence through which most homes have to pass, there comes a grievous strain on

temper and forbearance, because both parties are trying to live in an exhausted receiver. Generally it is about the time when the parents are entering that stage of life when the outer circle of interests begin to wither, when the life of the heart is alone active, and intellectual tastes need to become vicarious. What they now need from the young is not help or service, but opportunities for sympathy, and for participation in interests which they cannot carry on alone; and their children's incapacity to supply this need is what so often spoils the relation. We see this forcibly illustrated in the improvement of intercourse between a mother and daughter that generally takes place after the marriage of the latter; it is not only that they see so much less of each other, or that married women understand each other best; it is also, and I believe chiefly, that the younger woman now brings the elder fresh food for heart and mind. We see the same kind of contrast in the different capacities of a daughter and a son; how much of her dutifulness it takes to compensate for the touch of external life he has the power to bring with him! The half of mankind who are not educated for domestic life are the half who have most power to enrich it.

If, in answer to this attempt to show that women at least would benefit from a change which should remind them that domestic life does not exhaust the possibilities of existence, and open to them some of those alternative possibilities, it should be asked, "Are you prepared to test the value of this change by the condition of

those who have approximated to it already?" I answer, unhesitatingly, No. I would never allow that this or that "cultivated woman," whose cultivation seemed chiefly to have developed the unfortunate tendencies of her sex, and this or that "strong-minded woman," whose achievements in any unfeminine direction unquestionably failed to compensate for her loss of all womanly grace, afforded any arguments against opening to their sisters the region in which they had been unsuccessful. Putting aside the important but obvious consideration that human character is too complex a thing to allow of large inferences respecting it to be drawn from individual cases, I deny that the failures of those who struggle through difficulties and discouragements to reach an object afford ground for any conclusion as to the value of the object, or the practicability of removing hindrances in the way of pursuing it. It is a fertile source of misconception in this matter that we call women cultivated if they are only intellectual; few people, for instance, would hesitate to apply the epithet to a woman who merely read all the new books that were much discussed in the intellectual world, though every one would feel this to imply a very poor ideal of cultivation if it were applied to a man. No doubt, any one who has read the best books of the last twenty years has acquired, if it can be retained, no contemptible mass of information; but to let the ideas of the day float into one's mind just as the current of popular interest shall turn is not what we mean by culture when we bring the word into connexion

with large hopes for our race. To bring the mind into contact with any of the great problems of humanity, to brace the intellect in the atmosphere of any true investigation, to make any region of thought, however small, really *known*—this, which is the function of Education in the full sense of the word, has not been fulfilled in the case of nineteen-twentieths of those who are called cultivated women. "And of how many men?" it may be asked. In comparison with the apparatus of a man's education, lamentably few indeed. "Strait is the gate and few there be that go therein," is true no less of the intellectual than of the spiritual life. But it is only those few, when speaking of men, whom we should select to illustrate the advantages of culture, and we shall never see facts as they are till we accustom ourselves to apply the same measure to both halves of mankind.

Now, it is perfectly explicable that persons in whom a capacity is awakened and not satisfied, should contrast unfortunately with those in whom it is not awakened at all. These latter, as far as they go, are complete. The faculty that has never been trained is a source of pure disorder. There is a knowledge of the truth says Plato,¹ which gives rest to the soul, "and thus saves our life." But the mere capacity for this knowledge gives the soul, not rest, but restlessness. Incomplete specimens of any kind of advantage are not only insufficient as premisses for a conclusion; they are apt to suggest conclusions the very reverse

¹ In the "Protagoras."

of the truth. It is consummate guilt which is most able to simulate innocence, and the most profound emotion the human heart can harbour which in its outward aspect most closely resembles indifference. In like manner it is perfect cultivation which returns to the simplicity of a mind in which the yearning after cultivation has never been awakened. To judge the advantages of education from a mind in the intermediate stage, is like tasting vinegar to see if you like wine.

This is one reason why you cannot estimate the advantages of opening a wider field for women from a comparative view of those who do and do not avail themselves of such possibilities in this direction as already exist; but there is another, which is even more to the purpose of the present Essay. If our standard for man's and woman's education were on a level, if it was the natural thing for an intellectual woman to give as much time and energy to study as it is for an intellectual man, those exceptional natures to whom it is enough to pursue Truth for her own sake would, no doubt, be fully helped and encouraged; but women would still want that stimulus to thought given by its connexion with the world of action which raises and widens second-rate men. This influence is not to be judged from its activity during the period of education, strictly so called. You could not tell in looking over the exercises of two schoolboys which of them was heir to a large property, and which only to hard work. Follow them to College, and there will be some difference, to judge from the praise one hears

bestowed on a rich man who attains Academic honours, though no doubt any strong bent of mind would throw it into the shade; but in the mature world this difference becomes striking and decisive. I remember the Review (in one of our most respectable Quarterlies) of a book written by a man of family and fortune, in which the position of the Author was dwelt upon by the critic almost to the exclusion of all discriminating estimate of the value of his work. This was not mere vulgarity; it *was* the most remarkable thing about a not particularly remarkable book, that it should have been written by one who was without all the motives to intellectual exertion which appeal to the secondary and indirect regions of intellectual dominion; most people in the position of the writer would have let that amount of mental capacity which he had exerted, lie dormant. Now something of this kind is true of the whole female sex. It does not apply to Literature; a woman has the same motive for application here as a man, but she has no other channel in which to turn the energy that is developed in intellectual pursuits, and this energy is continuous in the greater number of minds only on the condition of finding some practical application, some channel between the life of thought and the life of action. Therefore when a woman attains to middle age, and finds that no change of mental exercise is possible, the powers which she has up to that time expended on study either wither away or become a source of disorder; and there is no surer source of discomfort

to every one concerned than that restlessness which is the characteristic of any function unemployed, in man or woman. How many a woman who begins with a strong taste for Science, finds it wane, as the advancing years open no vista into cognate regions where there is something to be done. Would not she bring the medical profession just the kind of interest and knowledge which it can absorb most effectually? Might not a taste for history, not strong enough to suffice to itself after the natural time for learning is past, in like manner revive in some practical form? It is more difficult to illustrate this suggestion, because any application of legal knowledge is further from conventional ideas of woman's occupation than the business of the Physician; but I may perhaps instance the post of Guardian of the Poor, as a noble opportunity for a form of beneficent activity, which, while it lies close to all women's acknowledged and sanctioned occupations, yet opens a field which no one could worthily occupy who was not prepared by intellectual training. And let no one say that it is an unworthy view of the intellectual life to regard it as a feeder to life only in a secondary sense intellectual, that the culture which is sought as a means, and not as an end, is something low and poor. It is not the highest; those who love knowledge for its own sake, must take rank before those who love it for the sake of its practical application; but intellectual interests, avowedly preparatory and subordinate to some practical aim, are widely different from—have,

in fact, nothing in common with—the vulgar spirit which estimates all knowledge as a round in the ladder for “getting on.” There is no self-reference, no vulgar utilitarianism, in the demand for some practical sphere on which the energy may be turned which was trained in intellectual pursuits. It is the natural fruit of the average intellectual development, which, like that of some of the lower animals, finds a different atmosphere necessary for its earlier and later stages.

For a double reason, then, you must not judge things as they might be by things as they are. On one side our specimens are misleading; on the other, there are none. I repeat it, for it needs insisting on, we have before our eyes no specimens at all of the kind of female character which would be produced by study, early begun and continuously carried on, with a view to some course of practical life. That this might be no exceptional education needing the apology of very peculiar circumstances, or of some taste so marked as almost to deserve the appellation of genius, but, like the study of music, for instance, the natural course of things where there was no reason against it, is in the opinion of the present writer the strongest motive for furthering any change which should give women wider influence. It is idle to speculate as to the price we must pay for this gain; it is at least vain to endeavour to deduce it from measuring the loss and gain of those individuals who break into the paths we design to open. We cannot judge how much or how little of the grace and refinement of woman's life must be

sacrificed if we would widen its scope and increase its efficiency, by watching the course of those who have roughly and hastily to do this for themselves. Those who have to fight for a position, afford us no inference whatever for others who would take that position naturally and easily. The women who are warped and strained by the effort of holding their own against the aggression of the world's hostility or suspicion, or embittered by the heart-piercing discovery that divergent opinion has the power to tear away deep-rooted affection, afford no rule for women who, in other circumstances, shall follow in their paths, and do their work without fighting their battle, any more than the dwellers on a frontier that has been the battle-field of former generations must still work with arms by their side. The most salient point in the experience of one set of workers is that which it is our object to remove altogether from the experience of their successors.

This object, if the foregoing reasoning have any value, is surely not a small one. Nevertheless, when such a change as the admission of women to the Franchise is demanded as a means to this end, I can conceive that many people will be impressed by a sense of disproportion, and some even of absurdity. "To give a few morbid women something to think of every four or five years," it may be said, not unnaturally, though most unjustly, "you are asking us to add to the electoral body material avowedly the most corruptible which it could receive. The Chinese epicure who, according to Charles Lamb, burnt a house to roast a

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pig, was not guilty of a measure more preposterous, in the true etymological sense of the word, than you are asking us to concede."

Such an antagonist, I believe, may be met on his own ground. But before inquiring whether in the change we advocate women would not be givers as well as receivers, let me ask our objector if it is a small thing to elevate or widen the minds of those who form, not only half the population, but the educators of the succeeding generation. Let him try to represent to his mind that educational measure which should rival in importance any improvement of the influences which act upon the minds of young children. What measure of University Reform, for instance, could spread over so wide a surface, could penetrate to so great a depth, as one which should bring the nursery under the control of wisdom? Is it held that folly in this region does no harm? that sense is wasted on babies? Such a plea needs no refutation beyond its clear statement; the memory of every human being, if it were sufficiently far-reaching and accurate, would supply material for an answer.

If this were all we had to say, it would be enough, not indeed to establish woman's *right* to the Suffrage,—the question is not here regarded from that point of view,—but enough, surely, to make out a *prima facie* case for its concession as a measure of expediency, which is all that the present Essay attempts. But this is not all that may be said in favour of its object. It may be urged that women, to some extent even as

they are, to a very great extent as they might be, would supply an element needed in our political life, and that from their taking a share in it men would gain, not only wiser wives and mothers, but fellow-workers who had a kind of wisdom which they lacked.

For those who regard Female Franchise as a *right*, the whole of the present train of reasoning must take the aspect (without being in the least invalidated thereby) of a series of supplementary considerations, such as, no doubt, might always be brought forward to enforce the expediency of conceding every right. A share in the government of a nation does not appear to me a subject of right, for either man or woman, in any other sense than as it may be for the interest of the majority that that particular individual should possess it, and those who take a different view of the nature of that political right will at least agree with me in regarding national welfare as its infallible test. Now surely it is an unquestionable truth, when we look at it through an atmosphere free from the mists of prejudice, that a nation's welfare is furthered in proportion as its laws, which can express the wishes only of the majority, absorb and imply the knowledge of the whole nation, and the decision of the strongest side is sifted through every objection that the weaker can bring to bear against it. Can we say this is the case while one large fundamental division of the nation is shut off from contributing that special knowledge which, unless in some exceptional way disqualified, every equally distinct class would be allowed to possess?

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The theory of a Representative Government is that the governing body should represent, as in a convex mirror, the views, opinions, desires, even prejudices of the governed, in so far as the latter have, by the possession of a certain amount of property, given a pledge that they have something at stake in the matter; but we refuse to admit to this representation exactly that half of the community whose acquisition of property gives the strongest proof of all those qualities for the sake of which we make property the test of the constituency.¹

Of course, if women are either exactly like men, or simply men minus something or other, they could add no light to that already possessed by a male constituency, but I know of no one who seriously believes either of these things. There is need very often for showing the falseness of a theory which forgets that

¹ We must not forget that it is a real hardship to working women, that property is for their sex thus shorn of its full advantages, and that this hardship is greatly increased by the last Reform Bill. Of course, so far as the Franchise goes, a female tenant has no chance against one who will bring a vote with him; and the Bill which introduces household suffrage discourages female householders altogether. I do not relegate this observation to a note because I consider that the evil it refers to is slight—it seems to me, indeed, the one unanswerable argument in favour of Female Suffrage—but partly because it lies so far out of the region with which the text is occupied, and partly because to treat it adequately requires a knowledge which I do not possess: I only remind the reader in this note, that our present arrangements seem expressly designed to discourage women who remain single in order to take charge of an aged parent; to increase the number of unsatisfactory marriages, the preponderance of which among the poor must strike every one who compares the average union in their rank and that above them; and finally, to throw every obstacle in the way of one field of employment for women—the management of a little shop or farm, which would present a valuable intermediate ground between the resources of domestic servants and the lower grades of governershood.

both men and women have the characteristics of a common humanity, but any protest against the opposite view, that they have none but these, seems to me entirely superfluous. Nor do I think many people need to be told that "woman is not lesser man." Even those assertions of the radical inferiority of women to which rough practical thinkers have been provoked, perhaps, by the extravagance of some among women's advocates, are not really inconsistent with the admission that women are capable in directions where men are not. Any further discussion when this admission is given is irrelevant to our purpose here, otherwise I at least should be anxious to concede that in all joint action between men and women there does seem a predominance on the part of men which is not likely to be altogether the result of human arrangements. Do not let it be supposed that every one who pleads for an enlargement of the sphere of Woman is thereby committed to the advocacy of her independence. When seeking to obtain for one half the nation a better education, and a career in which this education should find its fitting issue, we need neither assert nor deny that they should retain towards the other half that degree of dependence, whatever it may amount to, that they have at present. The dangers here lie about equally on both sides of the path. That combined cowardice and indolence which shrinks from all responsibility, and from the effort of initiating action, is as much temptation to some characters as the pride and self-will which rejects all control is to others. There is

a part of our nature to which dependence is a temptation, and there is a part to which independence is a temptation, and men and women must be prepared to resist both.

Leaving the irrelevant question of authority open, therefore, let us come to common ground. The strongest opponents and the warmest advocates of Women's Rights would probably agree that women are distinguished from men by the predominance of that faculty which is, on the intellectual side, insight, and on the moral, sympathy ; judgment or justice, according to our point of view, being the analogous faculty in the case of men. It may appear a fanciful comparison, but I should be inclined to compare the difference between the two natures to that between Greek and Gothic architecture, one fine in outline, the other in detail. Now, is there no room in those relations which we label Politics (and in so doing disguise from ourselves that they are no more than relations between human beings after all) for this sympathetic insight characteristic of women? If questions of imperial policy appeal rather to the masculine mind, as needing a judgment of proportion and not of detail, surely they do not exhaust—they less and less tend to exhaust—the exercise of national activity. A large and increasing proportion of this activity is occupied in directions which, if a few people were concerned instead of a great many, we should say were specially woman's province. To care for the sick and poor, and to teach children, are accepted as the special duties of women when we count by units.

Does it make the difference of depriving her of her special qualifications for judgment that we count by thousands?

For the political life of our own day, those qualities which are conceded to be markedly developed in women are needed in a special degree. Take one question certain to occupy the attention of Parliament at no distant period—that of Education. Surely, if we wanted to know what children were likely to learn best, and how to set about teaching it, we should, *cæteris paribus*, turn to a woman rather than to a man. One might endeavour in vain to recall among a pretty large acquaintance any woman who had no experience whatever of teaching, while the difficulty with men is the other way; except in the Church and the body of professional teachers, you will hardly find a man who knows by experience what it is to endeavour to communicate knowledge. This is only one side of a large and complex subject; but it will not be contended, either that it is an insignificant one, or that it does not specially belong to a woman's experience. Much the same may be said of Pauperism. Women know the homes of the poor in a manner and a degree which men do not know them. When we see the patent harm done by rich benevolent ladies, when we watch their influence in extinguishing all idea of independence and encouraging a number of people to leave off all exertion, and bring into the world large families to whom the idea of working for their living is actually never presented,—when we are awakened to the enormous evil which results from women's habit of looking at the

great facts of life as exceptions, instead of as coming under a general law,—we may be inclined to think that legislation is required rather to shut off the influence of women on the poor than to give a larger scope to that influence. Here, as often elsewhere, I believe that the true need is to increase that power which at first it seems necessary to diminish. What we want is to give women a sense of *responsibility* in dealing with the poor. It is so painful to see squalid misery, however well deserved; it is so pleasant to hear words of gratitude, however shallow, and watch a gleam of relief, however temporary. What is to teach us to withstand the temptation of winning this cheap pleasure for ourselves, and restrain us from interference with those laws which for the masses—and for the masses only—bind together misery and sin? Nothing, I believe, but making us feel our responsibility, as parts of a nation, in yielding to these temptations. It needs the sense of a national life to bring this home to us; no sense of individual justice will support us under what we have to witness of suffering and degradation. Nothing but the sense of a common life, to be purified through individual suffering from the evils which those individuals have not always brought upon themselves, will strengthen us to confront our duty in regard to those evils. As women attain a political position, they will, perhaps, awaken to the perception that some among the best of them have done their utmost to transmit from generation to generation an ignoble tolerance of debt, and to shut out from the homes where Englishmen are trained the bracing air of

independence. They may come to see that they have endeavoured to interfere with that beneficent discipline by which a nation is taught uprightness, endurance, and thrift, and have helped to spread the rot of pauperism through the heart of oak that supports the dignity and greatness of England.

And, enlightened by this sense of responsibility, the very power of sympathy which makes the action of women so often injurious as things are now, would prove a channel of actual knowledge. Some years ago, when village savings-banks were first introduced, a friend of mine, upbraided for the information she gave the depositors that the savings of the wife were the legal property of the husband, tried to turn the poor women's indignant dismay against the true offenders, the framers of the laws. "Ah, ma'am!" was the answer, "then the Parliament can't know what husbands we have in *this* part of the country." It is not only to ignorant labourers' wives that such a belief has suggested itself. The following extract is taken from a volume of Essays, which, as "Questions for a Reformed Parliament," naturally affords us specimens of the kind of subject which may test women's capacity of special understanding. After speaking of the incapacity which an assemblage of rich men have for apprehending the needs of the poor, the writer¹ goes on:—"This inability displays itself every day in almost every department of legislation, but most visibly in the action of the House with regard to the Poor Law," and to some other matters with which

¹ Meredith Townsend, *Essays, &c.*, p. 67.

we have no concern. "The Poor Law, as it now stands, was framed by the Reformed House, and was, on one side, an immense improvement upon the ancient system. But its working was from the first impeded by two mistakes, strikingly characteristic of an assemblage too rich to feel where the shoe pinches the poor. The initiation of administering relief was confided exclusively to the ratepayers, and no distinction was taken between the willing and the unwilling recipient."

After going on to illustrate these two mistakes, the writer continues—"It may be admitted, that no representation of paupers was possible at the Boards. But it was quite possible to represent the State as an impartial arbiter, and a really sympathetic House of Commons would long since have done it. As it is, the pauper is left to the ratepayers, without any trustworthy arbiter between him and them."

Do not those words indicate work for a Female Constituency? I venture to say, that no man could enter into the claims of paupers as a sensible, experienced, business-like woman who knows the inside of a workhouse. It will be fresh in the memories of some readers, that when a disclosure of the mismanagement of workhouses was exciting general indignation some time ago, a Poor Law Inspector excused himself for not having noticed the cruel neglect to which the sick were subjected by saying, that none of them had told him of it. "How was he to know of these things, if no one would mention them to him?" Of course this is not brought forward here as an instance of average discernment on the part of a

man ; it was indeed by a man that the state of the sick was discovered and exposed. But it would not have occurred to a woman to justify her indolence by assuming that the way to be awakened to the presence of disease and filth was by being informed of it. Her eye for detail would not have let her assume such an incapacity for perceiving these things, however much her interest might have demanded such an assumption. That, as matters stand now, this superiority of insight is more than counterbalanced by her inferiority in a sense of proportion, that even a careless and languid estimate is less injurious than the exaggeration of a partisan, is true enough ; but it is a truth relevant only to the contrast between responsible man and irresponsible woman. We have yet to learn what might be the result on the minds of women of a sense of power in dealing with abuses. That sense of difficulty, of there being two sides to a question, which seems so wonderfully remote from their minds, is brought home to us with wonderful rapidity and force, when thought and feeling have to issue in action. And let it not be said that the influence of a vote is too trifling to possess this large educational power. The above remarks may perhaps apply more especially to that varied form of contact with the working of our institutions to which the Suffrage is likely to lead, than to the effect of the Suffrage itself ; but you cannot measure the margin of association that gathers round such a fact as a woman's admission to political status,—you cannot estimate what women might do as voters, by adding to what they effect

already the power of giving a vote now and then. There would be a complex action and reaction of their own responsibility and consideration from others which we cannot measure, but which we may be sure would result in no contemptible influence on all those institutions with which they have been accustomed to meddle so helplessly and capriciously. At the same time, a large part of this contemplated action lies close to all that is accepted as Woman's Work. One cannot fancy a less objectionable attempt, from every point of view, than for such a body as the Ladies' Workhouse Visiting-Society to prepare a description of any failure in the working of our Poor Law which might form a basis for legislation; but as matters now stand, it would be an effort rendered futile partly by want of knowledge, but still more by the habit of looking at facts in reference to feeling and not to action. The only new element which we need infuse into benevolent zeal in order to turn it to national gain is the sense of responsibility.

Both Education and Pauperism, then, offer a field in which it may be believed that women, endowed with political rights and with all which these imply, would do valuable work. Is there any other subject on which they may be supposed to be specially qualified? I believe it to be the case with the most important of all. What form the national recognition of Divine guidance is likely to assume in the future few of us have any conception; it is not certain that the form is likely to be changed in the lifetime of the present generation. Yet

it is not improbable, and no one can say that the young may not live to see the day when the Church of England will mean something quite different from what it does to-day. I am aware that the influence of women in any matter of Religion would be regarded by men with a contempt which would save them from dreading it. As women are now, the feeling is not altogether unjust. I fear some among the noblest of us have not awakened to the knowledge that truth demands our undivided allegiance, that the love of light as light, and not merely as the needful condition of doing one's work,—a love rarer among human beings than any other virtue,—is rarest among women. But it is not less true that women have a keener vision for the spiritual world than men, and that their guilt in refusing to gaze into it fearlessly is greater. Surely all that many a man has of religion is a reverence for something which fertilizes the life of his mother or his wife, a glance towards that unseen thread of water in the valley which keeps its margin fresh and verdant. It is always felt as a loss to an individual that he should have been wholly cut off from such influence as this. Is not this equally true of a nation's development? I am unprepared to illustrate this suggestion; I can only point on the one hand to the influence of a religious-minded wife on a worldly-minded man, and on the other to the thinly-disguised Paganism which, in our national councils, always seems to emerge into distinctness, or transform itself into something unreal, on every occasion when Religion is in question, and urge that something analogous to the

highest influences of private life must be possible on the larger scale.

Such are the reasons for which we urge the admission of Women to political Power. It does not fall within the scope of the present Essay to attempt any estimate of those reasons which might be adduced against it, but we are not precluded from noticing the obvious difficulty which presents itself to people's minds with the idea of Female Suffrage. If you go so far, it will be said, why not farther? If we are to admit women to the Electoral body, why not to the Representative? If they are to be Physicians, why not Lawyers? If they are to be educated like men, why not send them to Oxford and Cambridge? And if the second step is in all these cases felt to be undesirable, ought the first to be taken? Can it be desirable to smooth the paths of human beings to the edge of an abyss?

It might easily be shown that this objection no more applies to the admission of woman to the Franchise—the only right of property withheld from her—than it does to the admission of woman to the Throne. The possession of supreme power by a class—a possession which belonged to women when a Queen was a governor—implies the possession of subordinate political power by that class also; and if there happened to be no such things as Queens, the position would strike us as far more anomalous and appropriate for women than the position of female voters does now. But this extension of the Franchise is here advocated on grounds which do bring it within the region to which this

objection applies. We urge it, not for its own sake only or chiefly, but for the sake of results which do, apparently, tend in the direction which is felt so dangerous. And as it is not here based on the ground of justice, we are cut off from the refuge, *Fiat justitia, ruat cælum*. If the sky is to fall, it cannot be justice which seeks to act.

For my own part, I believe that natural selection, in this region as in most others, may be left to do its work without any interference from us. This will be enough, we may be sure, to apportion to Woman those tasks which she can perform better than Man, and to cut her off from those in which he excels her; an occupation for which the two have a quite equal facility does not, I am certain, exist. I can fancy, for instance, that the Medical Profession might be proved to belong so entirely to woman's province, that the exclamation of a little child educated by an American lady-physician, "Only think! there has been a Doctor here, and *he was a man!*" might represent a general feeling. I think, moreover, that a woman's natural shrinking from any actual collision with those to whom she must, on the last resort, make the appeal of physical weakness, may be fairly trusted to hold her back from any profession or office in which, as in the Bar or the Senate, she must meet men as opponents. Her peculiarities of capacity on the one hand, and her insurmountable incapacities on the other, mark out a distinct path, which no arrangements of ours seem to me required in order to narrow. But a more satisfactory answer to such

objections as these lies, not in any speculations as to the safeguards which in future generations will preserve woman from anything unwomanly, but in the conviction that, for creatures as shortsighted and conventional as we are, it is not wise to abstain from any step which we can clearly perceive to be expedient, because it seems likely to lead to another which is inexpedient. Most of us can recall, probably, some curiously wasted anxiety or precaution in our own lives, which, when the period to which it referred is past, we cannot remember without a smile. We have been afraid of finding life empty, and it has proved oppressive from its fulness of interest and work; or we have braced ourselves to endure searching criticism, and have been mortified by utter neglect. The experience of the race is so much more searching than that of the individual, that whatever is universal in such prevision on the part of any one of us is doubly and trebly unwise with regard to the race. It is not for us to estimate the temptations of the generation which is to come after us; we have to beware that we bequeath them no errors of our own, but we are not to abstain from any change which seems beneficent now from any fear that it may turn to misfortune when garnered in the past.

Is it a vain hope that the admission of women to higher culture and wider responsibilities may be a measure fertile in wide-spread and deep-reaching good? that it, and that widening and deepening of the life of one-half of our race which it implies, may make marriage nobler and more complete, a union of mind

and soul as well as of heart, may enrich and strengthen the mother's influence, and give single life dignity and strength, and that the powers thus developed may find their way to a fuller and richer political life, like some beneficent Nile-stream admitted to fresh pastures? We may, we probably must, expect too much from every great change. We have been reminded lately, by one of the most eloquent and thoughtful of our public men,¹ that Christianity itself would hardly bear to be tested by any results that are obvious to us, and the very greatness of the hopes inspired by any change that affects so large a proportion of humanity may be an occasion of inevitable disappointment. But all the greatest benefits which have been won for our race have come through the instrumentality of those who were striving after good that was, for the time, unattainable. If we aimed only at what we could reach, we should reach nothing. It may be, for nations as for individuals, that they should not find the blessings they expect where they look for them; but we know in the case of each individual, and we can see it perhaps even more clearly in the lives of nations, that this disappointment is often the prelude to our greatest gain: that the good which is the unexpected result of earnest search, is far better than that which was its motive, and which we have been taught to renounce.

¹ See Sir J. D. Coleridge's speech on the Irish Church Bill.