



## FEMALE SUFFRAGE IN ITS INFLUENCE ON MARRIED LIFE.

ALL large proposals need contemplation from more than one point of view, and many of the strongest arguments for and against such a one as the Enfranchisement of Women are of a kind of which Parliament cannot take cognizance. Of these, the most important concern the influence which the proposed alteration is likely to have upon marriage, and the remarks which follow deal mainly with that influence. They need, however, as preface, a careful statement of what the proposed alteration is. It is very important to remember the exact nature of our claim (I speak as one who joins in it), for on a slight distortion of that claim rests, it seems to me, the larger portion of the reasonable opposition it has encountered.

There is a small body actively hostile to the demand from pure conviction, a large body who regard it with profound indifference, and one almost equally large, and more influential, composed of persons who have nothing that can be called conviction on the subject, who see that it would be more consistent with the fact of a woman occupying the throne that women should have a voice in sending members to Parliament—who are not afraid of the small infusion of female influence which would be added to the electorate while, according to the only plan already proposed to Parliament, men and women vote on the same conditions—but who yet contemplate the proposed

change almost with disgust. They do not directly answer any arguments on our side. They feel that their premises are too different from ours for any issue to be joined between us. They look upon the demand as the mere badge of a party, which in its enthusiasm for untried theories ignores unquestionable facts. "Whatever may be said as to the influence of education and tradition in blinding us to the claims of women," they urge, "it is undeniable that while the facts of life are what they are, while the mother of a family is for so many years of the prime of life an invalid, the burden of supporting the coming generation *must* rest upon men. No arrangement can open professions to a woman who has a child a year. While nature shuts her off from the work of bread winning, it is vain for any human agency to endeavour to give her a place of which that is the condition, and worse than vain to encourage her to make a demand which could be conceded only as part of a consistent scheme including this impossible condition."

This line of argument rests wholly on a misconception of what the demand is, not in matters of detail, but in principle. If nature shuts women out from professions, nature will also, as long as the conditions of voting are the same for both sexes, prevent their voting at elections. We do not ask that any steps should be taken to secure a female electorate. We ask simply that a proviso should be withdrawn which secures an exclusively male electorate. We want no bridges built, we merely want a barrier pulled down. We do not say, "Make the franchise attainable by a particular set of persons who cannot satisfy the test applied hitherto." We urge only, "Let it be attainable by all those persons who satisfy the test." Nay, I am understating our claim. We might say, "At least, do not make the test cease to operate just where it works most efficaciously." Surely no one will deny that it is harder for women to earn their living than men—in other words, that their success in doing so is a greater achievement. If it be so, the success of women implies rather more of those qualities, whatever they may be to secure which the property test was imposed, than the success of men does. Is it not, therefore, unreasonable to enfranchise some persons on the ground that they have given a certain evidence of possessing these qualities, and leave unrepresented others, who have given exactly the same evidence of possessing them in a higher degree? And to ask for enfranchisement on other grounds than that this evidence has been given, remember, will not be an expansion of the principle which has been conceded. It will be the admission of another, at variance with it.

When men come to this point, when they realize that we are not asking for any legislation in our favour, but merely that the law may

not step in to prevent those of us who do a man's work from doing it with a man's advantages, I believe they come to an objection which they have a great and natural dislike to put into words. Of course, therefore, there is some danger in attempting this for them; but if the vague feelings kept in the background of this opposition could be brought forward, would not some such utterance as this form a portion of the case against us?

"It is impossible that we should be eager to confer political power on a class from which all those sympathetic with us have first been sifted away. If you ask us to give women votes *quâ* women, that is a separate question, which has to be argued on its own merits. But if you merely ask that property should be represented whether the holder be male or female, you are in fact asking us to pick out for enfranchisement those women who are least akin to us in knowledge, feeling, and taste. Of course there would be a few exceptions. Under a just law of women's property, married heiresses, small and great, widows, and here and there, perhaps, a wife who earned her husband's bread, would have votes. But a few good possible votes must always be lost to the constituency, and we do not see that widows, bread-winning wives, and heiresses form one of those pressing exceptions which should modify a rule. With this exception you are asking us to add to the electorate those, and those only, who have either declined to cast in their lot with us, or whom we have never desired to have as sharers of our lot. Surely you cannot wonder that we defer the concession as long as we can.

"Nor do we admit," our opponent might with much force continue, "that men are following the example of mere egotism in declining to confide any share of legislative power to those who are the residuum of what they more especially admire and honour. We believe that by the selection of this special class for enfranchisement, you would cut off what is absolutely best in that half of humanity. You would exclude any real knowledge of the most difficult problems of life. You would shut off the women of most experience, of most stake in life, of most of the deep feeling which is a woman's special excellence. You might not at once produce any change in the feelings of women concerning marriage. But you could not help giving a certain dignity to single life which would, in the long run, tell as a slur upon marriage. And it is not as opponents, it is as well-wishers, that we deprecate a change which would turn women's minds to the excitement of political and professional life from that kind of satisfaction which all who know both would prefer. Our approbation is more important to women than theirs to us, it is not selfish therefore to dissuade them from a style of thought and feeling (of which we cannot help taking the suffrage as the mere symbol) which must end in alienating them from us, and rendering them unfit for the position we only can give them."

I wish the concession that much in this line of argument is plausible might lead any one to consider the reasons which make me consider it futile.

No class could seek representation in the national council on any plea, if it were established that the influence of that class were likely to be injurious to the nation. But those with whom I am attempting to argue (they do not form, I admit, the whole body of our opponents)

could not say this of women. To profess any fear that the result of an election should be affected by women-voters, is to abandon the very ground from which these reasoners start, that the bulk of women must remain dependent for their living on the exertions of men. They cannot profess any dread of female influence on public affairs, *while men and women vote on the same conditions*, without stultifying themselves, since this dread would amount to a confession that women are as able to earn money as men, such a confession implying, I repeat, a slight superiority of mental power on the part of women to compensate for their inferiority in physical strength. Enfranchisement on these terms will, in fact, be a triumph for the party which asserts the inferiority of women, if that inferiority be a fact. It is the interest of those who wish to exhibit the disabilities of nature to remove all others.

On the other hand, the plea put forward that men are anxious to prevent women from the strain of deterioration consequent on deserting their own sphere for one more arduous, is one that can have no place under a Democracy. No individual can decide for another what is his or her range of action; and for a class this vicarious decision is as impossible. It will one day be thought a strange instance of unconscious arrogance that the claim was ever made. The theory that one set of persons can decide for another what their sphere is, belongs to that feudal world of which the last traces are rapidly passing away from among us—a world so mighty and so picturesque that it influences the imagination and feelings after it has lost all legitimate influence on actions. We are not saying that political recognition was the right of woman while it was the right of only a small number of men. Some may take that view, of course, but that is not a part of the argument here. We urge only that in this modern\* Democracy you have no standing ground for refusing any class a power they demand, if your only objection is that it is not good for them.

However, it is perhaps more practical, and it is certainly quite as true, to urge that whatever evils are dreaded from the concession of this right are aggravated by its refusal. I do not see how the world of the clubs can be more completely alienated than it is at present from those women who have to rough it in the world. No doubt the tone of bitterness which sometimes mingles with the woman's party appears to many of their friendly opponents ludicrously out of place. Still there is no question that it exists. To give it the excuse of withholding from those who feel thus bitterly what they deem for

\* I use the qualification modern because those brilliant examples of what we call Democracy in the ancient world are misleading as analogy. A slave-holding community can never be what we mean by Democratic.

their advantage is not politic in those who consider that the boon sought is illusory. If the inequality of woman's condition, as compared with man's, is the inevitable result of their inferiority in physical strength, they will be much more ready to submit to it when they see that there are no artificial barriers shutting them out from those fields of action where physical strength is not essential. Moreover, the political power of women, which our opponents tremble to call into existence, seems to me an unquestionable fact. They may ignore it, thereby imparting to it the violence which is the immediate result of a sense of injustice, or they may recognize it, and give to it the temperance which is the ultimate growth of responsibility. I do not think any other alternative is open to them.

These considerations deal with the political and external side of the question. They aim at showing the supposed consequences of female enfranchisement which are dreaded by men to be by no means conditional on that event, but even, to some extent, aggravated by its refusal. They are intended to establish that it lies with women to decide on the validity of any objections which concern only themselves. But I believe it is possible to approach a much larger aspect of this question than any indicated in the foregoing remarks. Indeed, that which I should wish to bring forward cannot be properly spoken of as an *aspect* at all, but is, if it has any validity, the root of every difficulty for which female suffrage is suggested as a palliative or cure.

It seems to me to have been not enough remarked how intimately that divergence of men and women, which few, I fear, could deny to be characteristic of our day, is connected with what is most unsatisfactory in our spiritual life—how much of all that we should wish different in the tone both of those who attack and of those who defend Christianity is either cause or effect of the notion that it is a religion specially adapted for women.

In the first place, this notion has greatly modified our view of what Christianity is. All that system of thought and feeling which we associate with the teaching of Christ has, under the influence of the theory which associates it with woman's sphere, taken a feminine, I might say, an effeminate tinge. Not that a woman has more right to be effeminate than a man, but anyone will become so, unless preserved by exceptional temperament, who is cut off from the interests which bind human beings together in bodies. Pain is a terrible thing to inflict or endure, and the power to do either depends on our feeling ourselves a part of some larger whole, for the good of which it is necessary that that pain should be endured or inflicted. It is quite certain that not every one of the men who went down in the *Birkenhead* would individually have even risked his life to save

another's. It was not that they were a set of picked men, it was that they were under that influence which, in binding us together, gives one the strength of many. From this redeeming influence women have been cut off, and it is upon lives thus impoverished that we have moulded our ideas of religion. No wonder that we should regard it as unsuitable for all the large dealings of life; the thing we call Christianity is so.

I suppose men and women are about equally losers from this state of things, though to a woman the evil seems greatest as it affects women. I will mention one instance of the result of our giving this consecration to the weak side of our nature in which all will agree as to the fact, however different may be their interpretation from mine. I mean the greater degree in which women encourage mendicancy than men. It would be a mistake to suppose that the results of the importunity they encourage are less inconvenient to them than to men, or that they have less opportunity of observing its evil result. Quite the contrary. Almost all men are rather more shielded from such importunity than women are, and among the genteel classes very few men have as much opportunity as most women have of knowing the lives of the poor. But all but very weak men are taught to connect the actual beggar before their eyes with a large brotherhood of pauperism, and the question occurs to every one who thinks at all, "What will be the result on this brotherhood of knowing that a few pence are to be got by asking for them in the streets?" It is possible that a woman should consider quite as anxiously as a man the result on the particular individual before her of giving or withholding her trifle of money, though even this is made more difficult by the want of any sanction we are accustomed to consider religious to severity in our dealings with each other. But that higher point of view which we attain when we ask, "Is this good as a principle of dealing with *a class*?"—a point of view whence duty is wonderfully simplified—this, I believe, is really inaccessible to women as they are now. They are imprisoned in that domain of merely individual relations, in which there is no such thing as an ascertained result, and thus shut off from all sources of strength open to those whose conduct, being moulded by principle instead of instinct, grows easier with every added experience. You may convince the judgment of a religious woman that indiscriminate almsgiving does harm on the whole, and the next time she meets a ragged figure in the streets all your arguments will be like cobwebs before the influence of those sacred words which seem to shut off all consideration of consequences from the duty of relieving distress. Political economy seems to belong to a secular male world, with which she has nothing to do. Against this feeble, merely intellectual, influence, there is the

tug, first, of natural pity, then of all she has been taught to consider womanly, lastly, of all she associates with the teaching of Christ. Would that it were possible to exhibit in a few simple words all the evils which women are thus encouraged to do and forced to suffer!

They are many and various, but the greatest is this, that having cut ourselves off from all those influences which must, after all, be the tests of truth, we lose our value for truth. I really believe that to an average woman the very word conveys no idea except that of sincerity. It would be an arduous task to make such a one even understand what is meant by the duty of bringing our notions of things into correspondence with things as they are, for we must quit our own little world before we can form any notion at all of things as they are. There is no test of truth for the man or woman who refuses to regard his or her individual life as a link between the past and future, and thoughts which we have only known through the medium of such minds may well seem unfitted to regulate the course of nations. Thus it happens that that sex of which the highest truth (unless it is the most profound error) is supposed to be the peculiar occupation and appropriate interest, is that sex which has, in any but the narrowest meaning, least sense of truth.

This is the loss of women; it is impossible to say that the loss of men is a smaller one. The vague feeling that there is a leisurely class of persons to do their religion for them enables them to ignore all the precepts which are most characteristic of Christianity, without confessing to themselves that they throw off allegiance to Him who uttered them, nay, even while they profess and display a considerable amount of zeal for a particular system which they associate with his name. It is even possible that this kind of zeal should be so widely diffused that in such questions as national education, for instance, the division lines marked out by it should also be the division lines of vigorous and irresistible parties; and yet that any reference to the words of one whose supremacy it is the professed aim of this zeal to secure should be treated as irrelevant to the decision of such or even greater questions. Who, for instance, would venture to make any appeal to those words in any international dealings? not from any disbelief in their authenticity, or because the nations concerned repudiated the name of Christian, but merely because there would be a sense of unfitness and irrelevance in applying principles, intended (so it is assumed against the evidence of the whole New Testament) for the privacy of domestic life, to the dealings of nations. And even in domestic life it is only for women that such principles would be deemed applicable. You could hardly more affront or mortify a man of the world than by ascribing to him an eminent share of those virtues which we imagine specially Christian, and the only case in

which Christ's command to turn the other cheek is mentioned between such men, is when an opponent is taunted with a readiness to obey it. Now we have nothing to do here with the question whether it is desirable to revere the words of Christ. But I do say that for men to treat these words as suggestions only fit for women and slaves, and at the same time profess any allegiance for Him who put them forth as distinct commands, is a gross and degrading insincerity. On this basis the whole moral code must be permeated with hypocrisy.

This state of things, then, ought to be considered a misfortune by every one, whatever his view of Christianity. If he thinks that Christianity contains a true revelation, is it not an evil that men should reject it? If he thinks that Christianity is an obsolete superstition, is it not an evil that women should accept it? It must at any rate be an evil so to divide the world that one set of persons never trouble themselves with the tests of truth, and another set of persons never trouble themselves with what, if it is not falsehood, is the most important of all truth.

No doubt this division of labour has great convenience. It is always easier to refer to rules than principles; life is much smoother when one person has shifted the burden of responsibility, for good and all, on to the shoulders of another, taking a different kind of burden in exchange. Women are only too glad to baptize their natural tendencies, calling sloth resignation, and cowardice meekness. It suits one half of the world that the other should take this view of duty. Or rather it would be true to say that of the two halves of humanity, a different set of tendencies are gratified on each side by a theory which apportions their parts as subject and object of obedience. Such an arrangement produces a great deal of a certain kind of satisfaction for a time. We are so content with the outside of things that we can pass our lives with those we love best without ever seeking a common contemplation of the unseen and eternal world. But not only does the world which is thus unvisited become unreal to both parties—for men, practically ceasing to exist; for women, becoming the refuge of all the sentimentality of their nature—but the different code which springs from a different faith impoverishes all their communion. A woman of the kind I am supposing feels that she cannot trust herself to judge a husband or son in any way. Tried by her code, all his life would be wrong. She cannot apply this, and has no other to apply. Such and such actions would be selfish and tyrannical in her or her daughter, but for a man every thing is different. We do not enough consider how gratifying this attitude is to the weak part of our nature. "To be wroth with one we love" is among the greatest pains of life; it is pleasant to get



hold of a theory which shuts out all danger of this pain. And if a woman breaks through this theory, and takes cognizance of the faults of her male kindred, her want of a true basis for sympathy with them shows itself in a manner not quite so ultimately injurious, I believe, but far more immediately disastrous. The woman who lets a man see that he has shocked her by some offence which his own conscience does not condemn, is for the most part alienated from him for ever.

Nor is a man less incapacitated for any helpful judgment of women. Not being able to use the microscope with which women look at certain parts of duty, or the screen with which they cover others, he is able to say only that their conduct is or is not convenient to him, or attractive to his taste. Men have indeed even greater disqualifications for judging of women than women of men; women have at least the great ideals of manly excellence given in literature to judge by. They know, from the creations of genius, what, in a man, seems good to men. On the other hand we have no ideals of womanly excellence as judged by women. The only aspect under which a woman's character has been presented to the world is under that attitude in which a man finds it picturesque, or accordant with his taste.

As men have hitherto monopolized the cultivation of the world, as they have, I should add, a stronger imagination, no woman's picture of a woman has had a chance of competing with theirs. Hence it has come to pass that certain aspects of female life have been put on record with a distinctness and brilliancy which have virtually annulled all the rest, and the average man is rendered even less able to sympathise with a woman than she is with him. Thus it happens that as married people advance in life their standard is apt to be lowered. They have been constantly enlarging the region which by the very fact of their holding it in common is shut off from all moral influence.

They have in so doing cut themselves off from the most elevating joy which we experience in our passage through this world—that sudden generation of power, that sudden enlargement of view, which takes place when two human spirits come into moral contact, and the voice of conscience is echoed by sympathy. This is what marriage might be in every class of life, among the ignorant and hard-working just as much as among the cultivated and leisurely. Our falling short of this ideal has, in addition to all the weakness and imperfection of human nature, this obvious and removable cause, that we have built up an artificial barrier between men and women, so as to make moral sympathy between them impossible.

It is, therefore, in the interests of all we are said to endanger, that

we seek to obtain for our sex that educating influence which belongs to political recognition. To make women feel that they belong to a larger whole, that they are connected with the past and the future, and cannot act as mere isolated individuals, must be best even for that particular aspect of their lives, under which alone men are inclined to regard them. It is quite true that the suffrage given to women as holders of property—given, that is, on the only terms which are possible without a return to the false principle of legislating for women as a class apart—would give whatever power it did give to those women who are not men's actual or probable wives. But if it tended in any degree to set before men and women a common ideal—if it awoke in both sides the sense that there was a larger life in which they were sharers, a life not exhausted by their mutual relations—if it made them feel themselves in any degree more capable of judgment of each other, and therefore of a truer sympathy—it would be a step towards a kind of union between average men and women such as is now seen only between the most exceptionally gifted specimens of the race.

It is easy to turn into ridicule the association of such a hope with the demand for female suffrage. There will always be some to whom it will seem gross exaggeration to ascribe much influence to any event which does not change the material conditions of life, who will look upon it as absurd to hope to mould character by large expectations. And yet the course of history and of every-day life shows that hardly any influence is stronger than that of expectation. People become, to a large extent, what their circle takes for granted that they are. Any measure which shall express a national ideal for women, which shall assume that men and women share the great interests of life, must, so far as it has any influence at all, tend ultimately to bind men and women together. And few who ponder over great evils will deny that all will be lightened and some removed when this reunion of interests is once achieved.

It is not mainly, therefore, because we think men incapable of doing justice to women, that we seek for a share in the government of that nation of which we form more than one-half. We cannot, indeed, deny that the most generous of human beings must be incapable of doing justice to those who withhold from him their own statement of their case; and we consider that the decisions of average men for average women, where, as in the case of the *Birkenhead*, there is no appeal for personal sacrifice, vary between inconsiderate pampering and inconsiderate hardness—both being exemplified in our police-courts by the damages given to women who want a husband on the one hand, and the light sentences passed on husbands whom their wives would thankfully get rid of on

the other.\* But we seek to be numbered among citizens quite as much from our need of being awakened to higher duties, as from a demand for extended rights. We desire it more for what it would make us than what it would give us. This I conceive to be no exceptional plea, but the true ground on which any demand for the extension of the suffrage should be based. Apart from the educating power of responsibility, apart from the fact that men are ennobled by being made citizens, I doubt if any class could make out for itself a claim of admission to the governing body. It must not, therefore, be treated as a preposterous suggestion (in the true sense of that adjective) that we shall be made fit to deal with political questions by being invited to do so. Our hopes from such aid are no more than are justified by the course of history.

JULIA WEDGWOOD.

\* It is sometimes said that these light sentences are passed in the wife's own interest. I cannot refrain from alluding to a case in 1870, in which a man, for whom any length of incarceration would evidently have been only a boon to his hardworking wife, and who had thrown vitriol on her clothes because she refused to live with him, was recommended to mercy by the jury on the ground that he had been influenced by his intense affection for her! That twelve average men should concur in such an interpretation of vitriol-throwing appears to me an indisputable instance of the need of some change which shall give a different notion of the rights of women. Of course it would be quite as easy to illustrate the sentimental side of the mistaken view of women as exceptional beings.