

The Claim of Englishwomen to the Suffrage Constitutionally Considered.

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AMONG the demonstrations of opinion which the discussions on Parliamentary Reform have drawn forth during the past session, no one was more remarkable than the petition signed by fifteen hundred ladies, which was presented to the House of Commons by Mr. J. Stuart Mill. This petition is comprised in a few short sentences, and sets forth that the possession of property in this country carries with it the right to vote in the election of representatives in Parliament; that the exclusion from this right of women holding property is therefore anomalous; and that the petitioners pray that the representation of householders may be provided for without distinction of sex.

This claim, that since women are permitted to hold property they should also be permitted to exercise all the rights which, by our laws, the possession of property brings with it, is put forward in this petition on such strictly constitutional grounds, and is advanced so entirely without reference to any abstract rights, or fundamental changes in the institutions of English society, that it is impossible not to feel that the ladies who make it have done so with a practical purpose in view, and that they conceive themselves to be asking only for the recognition of rights which flow naturally from the existing laws and institutions of the country.

That a considerable number of ladies should think it worth while to examine into their actual political status, and finding it to all appearance inconsistent with the principles of the British Constitution, should proceed to lay what they term the anomaly before the House of Commons, is assuredly an important symptom of our age: a national condition; an evidence that the minds of English people, men and women, are actively at work in many directions where they might have been but little expected to penetrate. It is, at the same time, a sign of that disposition which various causes (partly political and partly philosophical) have tended to foster of late years, to seek the reform of existing evils rather in the development than in the overthrow of the present order of things.

It may appear, at first sight, as though in proportion to the millions of Englishwomen who live happily under our laws, or who groan under all the miseries of wife-beating and other social evils, without a thought of how their condition might be affected by legislation, fifteen hundred women are too small a number to be worthy of a moment's consideration. But if we reflect a little on the peculiar position of women, and their usual ways of thinking—on their habitual reticence on all subjects which they are accustomed to consider as beyond their own sphere, their timidity and dread of exposing their names to public observation, their deference even to the most unreasonable prejudices of those who have any claim on their affections, their clinging to old associations, and their regard for the opinion of all who are even remotely connected with them—we shall see reason to think that these fifteen hundred ladies, who have not hesitated to affix their names to a public document, and to pronounce a decided opinion, open to the controversy and criticism of all the world, must represent an extraordinarily important phase of thought. It is not going too far to say, that for one woman who can and will pronounce openly on

such a subject, there must be at least ten whom family hindrances or habitual timidity will prevent from expressing an opinion, even if they have formed any. And the number must be still greater of those whose minds are only partially prepared for any ideas on such subjects, who are little in the habit of arriving at any definite conclusions at all on political matters, but who, as they have passed through much of the same experience, and lived in the same state of society as their more energetic or more active-minded sisters, must have been liable to the same influences, and are not at all unlikely to adopt the same way of thinking, when it is put before them in so plausible and so little startling a form as we find it in this petition. The peculiarly dependent position of women is another circumstance which must add much to our estimate of the number really represented by these fifteen hundred petitioners. There is scarcely a family in the kingdom where a mother, or a widowed or unmarried sister, or one married to a kind husband, is not the intimate friend and confidant of a daughter, a mother, or a sister in a less fortunate position. Those who have been brought up together, who have learnt from one another's experience, or who have imbibed from one another the same ways of feeling, are often separated in appearance by the political or religious opinions of their fathers or husbands, or by a domestic despotism which only allows one person to express openly what many think. Moreover, when we remember that few women are able both to form and to express political opinions at all, without the assistance and encouragement of some at least among their male relations, it becomes evident thatpage: 5every woman who does form such must be looked upon as the representative of a considerable body of opinion. And when the thought thus expressed is so comparatively new as to meet with little external encouragement, it must be strongly rooted in many unseen ramifications before it can have grown vigorous enough to show itself in a clear, definite, and conspicuous shape. But even independently of any of these considerations, it is impossible to glance down the list of signatures appended to this petition without seeing that it includes a proportion large for the actual number of names, both of the intelligence and the property of Englishwomen. With all these facts before us, we think we are justified in repeating that the appearance of such a claim, supported in such a manner, is a significant indication of the direction public opinion is taking.

What we find asked for, then, in this petition seems to be that Englishwomen shall be included in that measure of political freedom which the wisdom of Parliament sees fit to grant to Englishmen. This amount of political enfranchisement is asked for by the means by which men and women have for ages been accustomed, in this country, to make their wants known to the legislature; namely, by petition to the House of Commons. It would appear as if the election to Parliament of a member who, before his election, distinctly enunciated his opinion that women ought to have votes, has, in the judgment of the petitioners, opened for them a new prospect of getting their claims heard. That a writer of the scientific eminence and political ability of the member for Westminster holds such an opinion, and moreover that openly proclaiming it he has been returned to Parliament by a constituency influenced only by public motives, is certainly a fact that may very justly encourage these ladies to think that the political representation of women is really a question ripe for discussion; and it may fairly give them reason to hope that if they can advance any rational grounds for their claims, they will receive reasonable attention. This being the case, we propose to examine, in some degree, not merely into the general purport of this petition, but also into the specific reasons assigned in it for the claim which it puts forward. For although it would be in itself a remarkable thing that so many Englishwomen are now prepared to ask for some sort of political representation, yet more or less increase of the

liberty allowed to women has been recommended by men and asked by women, both in this country and others, for a long time past. Some relaxation of the restrictions under which the female sex has hitherto laboured is indeed a natural and inevitable consequence of the advancing freedom and civilization of the other sex; but this movement is marked by what appear to us some novel and especially national characteristics. It is interesting to observe what form this general tendency towards freedom assumes when it shows itself among a large body of Englishwomen; by what means they propose to work it out, and by what train of reasoning they seek to recommend it to their countrymen.

The petitioners ground their request on the principles of the British Constitution. They assert that certain facts in our existing system establish that women cannot be considered to be without the pale of the Constitution, for that there are precedents to show that its general principles have already been applied to women in some particular cases. They point out that in this country the franchise is dependent upon property, and that the acknowledgment of women as sovereigns among us shows that women are not considered disqualified for government. From these two principles, both of which are undoubted parts of the British Constitution as it stands at this day—the representation of property, and government by female sovereigns—the petitioners draw the evident inference that where the female sex is no bar to the higher, it cannot reasonably be to the lower privileges of political life, when those privileges are dependent upon conditions (such as the possession of property) which women actually fulfil. And they characterize the exclusion of half the human race from any share in self-government as an anomaly in our representative system.

Whether this way of treating the subject arises from the petitioners themselves only looking at it from this peculiarly English point of view, or whether it is adopted as the one likely to meet with the most general support and the smallest amount of dissent, it is equally a sign of the times. If the idea of the political representation of women has now made its appearance among us in a peculiarly English dress, and one adapted to the exigencies of the reform discussions of the past session (which have turned so specially on the representation of property, and a suitable property qualification), we cannot refuse to admit that it is all the fitter to take its place among the political ideas of the day; and that it has thereby assumed a more practical character than if it had been attempted to establish it on the grounds of any more general or philosophical systems of representation. Without attempting to go at length into the subject, it will be easily seen that the representation of women might be urged with considerable force on almost any of these systems; but it is itself more in harmony with our present institutions than they are. Nothing can be more entirely foreign to our whole English system than Universal Suffrage, or than either Personal or Class Representation. All these systems, whether we hold them to be in the abstract pernicious or beneficial, are so entirely unable to coalesce with that already prevailing among us, that if they are to be tried it would be a wise policy to introduce them *parallel*, so to speak, to our present institutions, of which they are not the development, but properly and literally a re-form. But if any of these systems be admitted, either partially or entirely, either in theory or in practice, women would find a place under them equally with men. Universal Suffrage by its very name includes them; personal representation, if carried out on principle, has for its necessary consequence the representation of women, since the leading idea of personal representation is the effort to secure a hearing to every individual interest or opinion in the nation, however insignificant or obscure. And the totally opposite principle, of class representation, is in the highest degree favourable to the political interests of women, who, if considered as a class, are

the most numerous class in the country. Indeed, no advocate of the system of class representation can for a moment refuse in consistency to recognise the claims of so important a class, and of one which is certainly bound together by a community of interests in many of the largest branches of human affairs. Those who disapprove of all attempts at class representation, and believe them to be a lingering remains of an effete state of society, and those who disapprove of special legislation grounded on difference of sex and enforcing by law the exclusion of women from all masculine occupations or privileges, may consistently object to consider women as a class, or to make any claim for them as such. But this is not possible for those who group all women together, as actual or potential wives and mothers. They, on the contrary, must in consistency admit that the wives and mothers of the nation, regarded as a class, form one before whose vital importance, and overwhelming numbers, all other classes shrink into insignificance. For independently of the consideration that women are in this country more numerous absolutely than the sum of all the many classes into which men are divided by their occupations, it is evident that if women are permitted no other interests than those which they hold in common with all women by virtue of their sex, these interests must be of proportionately greater consequence to women than the equivalent interests are to men, since men have other interests in life as well.

If therefore the lady petitioners had chosen to urge their claims simply as women, and not as English women, they would, on the theory of class representation, have been able to take up very strong ground. But, apart from all consideration of the abstract truth of this theory, it seems to us that they have done well to leave it aside. For it is, as we have indicated, diametrically opposed to the English political system, and indeed more fundamentally so than personal representation. For if the English system refuses to recognise the mere individual as a political unit, and if it insists that he must have palpable evidence that he requires protection for something more precious (we presume) than life or honour, before it admits him to any share in protecting himself; still more does it refuse to protect interests which do not belong to any one in particular, but which are diffused over vast numbers of men, grouped together under the merely ideal definition of a class. Property represented by an individual is the true political unit among us; and in this we recognise the influence of those mediæval habits of thought, which, putting forward living persons as the representatives of rights supposed to be inherent in particular functions or particular localities, was itself practically an advance on those Oriental ideas of caste which survive in the privileges of class, sex, or colour. This mode of thought was due partly, no doubt, to the influence of the Church, which gave and still gives examples of it in the "incumbent" and "parson" or "persona," who derives his rights neither from privilege of birth nor even from his functions as priest, but from the induction into the enjoyment of certain property for his life, of which he has the management; and of which he becomes, so to speak, the bodily expression, the "persona," responsible for the due payment of all charges. It was diffused and perpetuated by the arrangements made under the feudal system for the protection of property in times of war and against all illegal violence; and it seems to have been held, that as only those possessing property could be obliged to furnish a contingent share towards the expenses of government, they alone had any direct interest to protect against the central authority, which, in so far as it preserved peace and order in lawless times, must have stood in the position of gratuitous benefactor towards the unpropertied portion of the people. However this may be, there can be no doubt that the principle underlying our English system of government, is that men are endowed with the privilege of voting in the election of members of

the Legislature, in order to enable them to protect their property against undue taxation, or other legislative enactments that might injuriously affect it. So deeply is this idea rooted in the English mind, that long after the separation of the American colonies we find American politicians arguing against conferring votes on negro slaves, upon the express ground that slaves, not being able to hold property, do not require political representation; and for authority for this point of view we find them referring to the acknowledged principles of the British system of law, which, it is well known, is considered as the foundation of the institutions of the United States, wherever not abrogated by the American Constitution or by special legislation.

Lord Somers, in 1703, speaking in the name of the House of Lords, lays it down that “The Lords ... conceive that giving a vote for a representative in Parliament is the essential privilege whereby every Englishman preserves his property; and that whatsoever deprives him of such a vote, deprives him of his birthright.” The line of thought, or train of reasoning, plainly to be traced here, is certainly very favourable to the claim of the ladies. The birthright of an Englishman is defined by this high authority as the privilege of preserving his property. He is refused any birthright inherent in himself, but it is laid down that by the possession of property he comes into possession of a privilege attached to property; a privilege which is a birthright apparently, because it is essential to the system of law under which he is born. It is observable that this way of considering a birthright as not of *natural* but of *legal* origin, is in conformity with modern habits of thought in regard to civilized men, the natives of civilized societies; but exactly in proportion as it is opposed to any *à priori* theories of the rights of man, it is also opposed to any attempt to give or withhold privileges for merely *natural* reasons, such as difference of sex. It is hard to see how, if the law of England endows a woman with property, it can, consistently with this legal dictum, deprive her of the essential privilege (which, as we understand Lord Somers, must be her birthright if she is born in England) whereby her property is to be preserved. Undoubtedly, Parliament may make special enactments excepting particular classes of English subjects from the rights they would otherwise enjoy in common with the rest of the community; and from this point of view the adoption of the word “male” in every Act of Parliament which confers the suffrage, must be looked upon as the adoption of an exceptional form, used (as Lord Somers would say) to deprive Englishwomen of property of their birthright. Now, it is assuredly in harmony with all our institutions that any class of persons, labouring under an exceptional disability as a consequence of special legislation, should petition Parliament for its removal, and should appeal against it to the general principles of the Constitution; while the burden of adducing sufficient reasons for such an exceptional disability must, in justice, lie with its supporters.

In pointing out the quite peculiar position occupied by female possessors of property, the lady petitioners have undeniably touched upon a weak point in our present political system, a kind of gap, where in political life there exists no equivalent for what we have in social and civil life. It is an anomaly, as they assert. For who else among us, entitled by law to hold property to a certain amount, is nevertheless deprived of the vote which the British Constitution looks upon as the safeguard of property? The answer will be—Minors, idiots, lunatics, and criminals. These, and these only, are classed politically along with women. But none of these are so classed in anything but in politics. In no other respect can their standing among us be compared with that of women. We do not mean to compliment the ladies by asserting that they may not be as weak, as foolish, as mad, or as wicked as any of all these classes of the community; but we might be as enthusiastic a woman-hater as ever wrote in the *Saturday Review*, and still a moment’s reflection

on the legal position of these classes would show that it has nothing in common with that of women administering their own property. However incapable these latter may be, our institutions do actually permit them to administer their property for themselves. Women do actually undertake the responsibility and enjoy the privileges of property, excepting only the privilege of voting. They are liable for debts; they can enter into contracts; they can alienate or they can purchase at their own free will and pleasure; they can devise by will or gift; they can sue or be sued in courts of law in vindication of their rights or in punishment of their shortcomings; they can release others from legal obligations towards themselves, and they can incur legal obligations towards others in regard of the property they hold. But minors, idiots, lunatics, and criminals can do none of all these things. They merely hold the right to the possession of property at some future time when they shall have become different from what they now are, along with the right to transfer it to their heirs. Upon them the law bestows no power of dealing with their possessions as seems good to themselves; no power of vindicating their own doings before a legal tribunal; no power of prosecuting those who attack their pecuniary interests; no power, in short, of preserving their property before the civil law.

Nor is this all. The legal powers of women in regard to property are no dead letter. These powers are not an obsolete right known only to antiquarians, hidden away among the curiosities of the Constitution, exercising no influence upon the world around us; a mere chance survivor of effete customs, an anachronism in the society in which we live. So far from it, the exercise of these powers is anpage: 10established part of our social system, and every day becoming a more prominent part. It awakens no surprise by its novelty; it shocks the prejudices of no one among us; on the contrary, he who should propose to deprive maiden ladies of their little independence, and put it into the hands of their nephews, or who should recommend a law to place all widows' property under the control of their deceased husband's brother, would be universally looked upon as un-English, and as either a fanatical admirer of exploded absurdities, or a would-be introducer of Oriental ideas. Not only, therefore, do our laws permit women to exercise all the rights of property, but it is customary with us for women to do so, and public opinion regards their doing so as usual and proper. Nor is it any novelty among us. Although we know that in the more disturbed and lawless periods of our history it was necessary to make haste and marry rich unmarried girls and widows (unless they were willing to retire into convents), in order to secure protection for their riches, still we cannot point to any precise date when this state of things came to an end, and when advancing civilization and general respect for law relieved rich women from the fear of outrage, and made it possible for them to dispense with a male protector. It is very possible that the dispersion of the monastic houses may have hastened this stage in the emancipation of women; it is still more probable that the rise of the middle classes had much to do with it; but from whatever cause it originated, it has long been an established thing with us that no woman is obliged to hand over her property to any one unless she so pleases, and that if she does not so please, law and custom allow her the fullest liberty, and an absolute equality of right with men, excepting only in the single instance of political right.

Whence, then, comes this exception? Why, when they possess the necessary property, are women, alone among citizens of full age and sane mind, unconvicted of crime, disabled by a merely personal circumstance (that of sex) from exercising a right attached by our institutions to property and not to persons? What is the historical origin of this anomaly? For an historical origin there must be, and it appears to us shortsighted to attribute it to any of those general theories about the natural functions of women which it might be necessary to have recourse to in

explaining a similar anomaly in a system based on universal suffrage. The explanation must, we think, be sought in our own history, and is not far to seek. It is probably the very fact to which we have referred, that, during the earlier period of our constitutional history, society was in so unsettled a state that women could not practically administer their own property, which led to women's not being included among the voters in the elections of members of Parliament. While women did not actually fulfil the other functions of owners of property, the political functions were naturally not attributed to them. Even though it might be by no fault of their own that women could not govern their own property in those times, still it was not likely that they should be admitted to a share in the political government of property which was not actually under their management. The Constitution was perfectly consistent in permitting the feminine page:

11 nominal owners of the property to derive as much benefit from their civil ownership as they could manage to do, while it ignored all personal claims on their part to political influence derived from property which they were not (from whatever causes) practically competent to administer. Many centuries elapsed after our electoral system had been brought into tolerably regular operation, before the progress of law and order enabled women, as a matter of course, to exercise openly the civil rights which the law attaches to property. It is in the natural course of things that now, after one or two centuries of the practical enjoyment of their civil rights, intelligent women begin to ask why the political rights should not accompany them.

To this question, there can, we apprehend, be but one answer in the negative, at all consistent with the general principles of English law and institutions. It may be said that society is still in too uncivilized a condition to be able to protect women in the enjoyment of their political rights; for that it is still beyond the power of the Government to prevent them from being molested by riotous proceedings at polling-booths, or coerced by undue interference on the part of their male relations. It is evident that, even if this statement had a broader foundation in fact than we believe it has, this foundation would be diminished by the natural progress of every year that passes over our heads. But it can scarcely be seriously maintained that the central authority which can preserve Hyde Park, against the whole working population of London, for the recreation and health of ladies and children of the upper classes, is incompetent to preserve order in and around polling-booths on the exceptional occasional of an election. And if neither the troops, nor the police, nor any number of special constables could prevent women from being subjected to insult on these occasions, it would still be perfectly easy to afford to them the same immunities as are already accorded to non-resident members of the Universities of Oxford and Cambridge, and to permit ladies also to record their votes by means of voting papers.

The notion that the possession of a vote would expose women to improper coercion on the part of their male relations, will still less bear examination than the theory that our Government is not strong enough to protect any class of its subjects in the exercise of whatever rights it may see fit to accord them. The strength of the motives that would be likely to induce men to interfere with their female relatives in the disposal of their property, is incalculably greater than the strength of the motives that, even in times of political excitement, would urge men to try to overawe women in the exercise of the suffrage. The law has for centuries ruled that women possess sufficient strength of mind to protect their own pecuniary interests; and it has left them to seek the same redress as men, if they find themselves subjected to force or improper influence in doing so. The will of an elderly lady is not cancelled because of the possible influence her son may have used to induce her to make it in his favour, any more than the will of an old gentleman is set aside on account of the possible interference of his daughter. The page: 12 law very properly refuses to

consider whether men are likely to domineer over women, or whether women are likely to cajole men, and in either case it requires ample proof before proceeding to act on particular instances of either disposition. The law, which has, most properly, left women to fight their own battle (and the battle of their heirs) against private greed, cannot be required in these days to provide exceptional protection for them against the comparatively mild force of political enthusiasm. No candidate for parliamentary honours ever more ardently desired them, than a spend-thrift nephew desires that his rich aunt would leave her comfortable fortune to him, rather than to her favourite minister; nevertheless, we none of us dream of depriving the poor lady of all control over her property, in order to protect her against the unprincipled importunities either of the minister or of the nephew. Yet how great is the prize that either of these may hope from the weakness of only one woman, compared to the triumph of the parliamentary candidate, even if every qualified woman in his constituency could be persuaded or compelled to vote for him! To say that such danger of undue coercion as might be exposed to by the possession of a vote, however small, is wanton, inasmuch as women seldom care for politics, is to overlook the drift of the constitutional claim made by the petitioners, and which it has been the purpose of this paper to follow out. The English representative system, such as it is, good or bad, represents not persons but property. By holding property women take on rights and duties of property. If they are not interested in politics, their property is. Poor-laws and game-laws, corn-laws and malt-tax, cattle-plague compensation bills, the manning of the navy, and the conversion of Enfield rifles into breech-loaders—all these things will make the property held by English women more or less valuable to the country at large of this and the succeeding generations. It is on the supposition that property requires representation that a property-qualification is fixed by the law. It is not the mere personal interests of the rich man that a property franchise is supposed to protect; were it so, the injustice of giving the franchise to the rich man only would have been too grossly palpable to have endured so long, or to be capable of as good a defence as the English Constitution; for the rich man's person is no dearer to himself or to the nation than the poor man's. Nor is it granted to him because he is supposed to be, by some mysterious dispensation of providence, endowed by the possession of a 10 l pound . house with a special capacity to understand and care for the personal happiness of himself or others. The law acts upon the supposition that he who is in actual possession of property will be keener and more efficient to protect it than any other person. The abhorrence of our ancestors for allowing land to fall into *main-morte* proceeded in part from this mode of thought; a habit of considering it as at once the general interest that land should be efficiently managed and protected, and as the most effectual way of providing for its being so, to place it under the guardianship of an individual personally interested in it. It is to us almost indubitable, that the same legislators who enacted the statute of mortmain would, if aspage: 13much English property had been in the hands of women as at the present day, either have deprived them of the right of holding property at all, or else have invested them with the power of protecting it in Parliament, rather than have permitted it to remain unrepresented as it is now is.

The next question that will probably be asked by such of our readers as have accompanied us thus far in the consideration of the peculiar line of argument of the Ladies' Petition, is— Supposing this petition be granted, and that Parliament were to extend the suffrage to duly qualified women, what good would it do to them or to the country in general? And, on the other hand, what harm might be expected to arise from it? And, looking at the matter from the point of view in which it is placed by the petition, these two questions are perfectly reasonable; it is

indeed in our eyes one of the merits of this point of view that it brings us so directly and so logically to the consideration of these really practical questions, and enables us to leave aside all those considerations either of abstract right or of accidental custom and sense of fitness, the discussion of which is certain to be as difficult as it usually indecisive. For if we acknowledge with the petitioners, that the exclusion of women from the right to vote in the election of members of Parliament is an anomaly, the question of right may be granted, but the question of expediency is not. We may acknowledge that their exclusion is exceptional, the result of exceptional legislation, producing an invidious distinction under which they alone labour; and yet we may think it desirable to impose such a distinction, and to establish such an exception. But then we must be prepared with reasons for doing so. What this petition appears to us to have pointed out is, that no one who accepts the principles upon which the British Constitution and English society are established, can consider the exclusion of women from political privileges as a matter of course. On the contrary, he must look upon it as the result of anomalous legislation, requiring to be justified either by its urgent necessity or by its evident advantages.

Unfortunately for anything like clearness of thought, it is very seldom that we find people willing to look at the subject in so simple and practical a manner; too often, on the contrary, the very persons who would most object to importing theories of the abstract rights of man, into a discussion on the franchise, will go off into vague generalities on the nature of women, and fancy that some such universal axioms can be somehow applicable to the legal position of particular classes of Englishwomen in the nineteenth century. Now we are far from denying that general principles must underlie not only all theory, but also all practice. We readily admit that most people do in reality either accept or reject the abstract theory of the natural equality of all men, just as they do in reality talk either poetry or prose; and so, in like manner, most people have their own theory as to the special aptitudes of women. But the theory that all women are destined for family life is about as applicable to any practical settlement of the franchise in this country, as the somewhat equivalent one that all men are born free and equal. We may assent to either assertion, or we may dissent from it, without being one whit further advanced in the question under discussion; for in fact they have nothing whatever to do with it, unless we propose to pull down the whole fabric of English law and society altogether, and build it up anew from its foundations. Whether or not all women are destined for family life, all Englishwomen do not live it; whether or not women are fitted by nature to be anything else than wives and mothers, many Englishwomen are something else; whether law ought or ought not to recognise women as anything else, the law of England does so recognise them. Marriage may or may not be the only good, the only ideal existence for all women; but the law of England has long ago refused to drive women into marriage, as sheep are driven into a fold, by shutting every gate against them but the one they are intended to go through. Even if all unmarried women ought to be looked upon as stray sheep, still, as we have already seen, both law and custom in this country have bestowed upon them abundance of rights and privileges; and the assertion that such people have no right even to exist, is out of place in answer to the question, whether the rights they already possess do not naturally imply one right more?

It seems to us, therefore, that no abstract ideas of woman's mission can reasonably be brought forward as proof of an urgent necessity for the exclusion of women from the franchise under our existing system; and that if the question is asked—What good would be gained by their admission? the answer is very plain—Whatever good is to be gained by the British Constitution. If that be a good, it is evident that the carrying it out must be good. The perpetuation of an

omission which originated in circumstances that have long since passed away, must do as much harm to those who are omitted as would have been done to their countrymen if the British Constitution had not existed. If it be an advantage to be able to protect one's property by the power of voting for members of Parliament, the possession of this advantage must be a good for all those who live and own property under Parliamentary Government. The good that would be done to women themselves is, in fact, not open to dispute, unless we dispute the advantage of Parliamentary Government and representation of property; and in that case we must dispute the advantage of the English system of government altogether.

If, continuing to confine ourselves to a strictly constitutional point of view, we ask what would be the advantage to the country in general of the political representation of female holders of property, on the same conditions as men, we think, as we have already indicated, that the reply is equally clear. If the representation in Parliament of those who are interested in property is a national good, tending to the preservation and fostering of all property interests, to the increase of our national wealth, and to the handing down to our descendants of the national property under favourable conditions, then the disfranchisement of any class of holders of property must be an evil proportioned to their numbers, and their enfranchisement an advantage in the same proportion. Whatever may be the causes, there can be no doubt that the class of independent women is a continually increasing one in this country, and their admission to the franchise is therefore continually becoming, by the natural course of events, a question of greater practical importance.

Turning now to the question, what harm could be done by their admission? we are embarrassed by difficulty of finding any answer whatever, unless we go out of the bounds we have prescribed to ourselves, and get beyond the limits of the constitutional point of view. Revolutionary violence is out of the question from them, and their numbers are not such as to give rise to any of the apprehensions of a disturbance of the balance of power which have been excited in some minds by the claims of the working classes. There would probably be found some duly qualified female voters in every rank of society, and among them some members of almost every religious system or political party, so that the existing interests of no single class or party or religious body could have anything to fear from them. It seems difficult to imagine a case where the principles of the Constitution could be applied with more absolute freedom from the slightest shadow of danger.

Can it be said that, although there would be no danger to the State, nor to anybody within the State, yet that private interests might suffer? We confess we do not see how this is to be maintained. If we consider the private interests of men, they cannot be concerned in the political action of independent women. Their political interests may be; but we have just seen that for these there is no danger. If it be urged that the power of voting may make women more independent than it is thought they ought to be, it appears to us, once again, that English law has already decided that women may be independent, and that a woman who is absolute mistress of her own life, person, and property, will not be rendered more independent of men by the power of giving an occasional vote for a member of Parliament. There are some who think that by giving to any women whatever the power politically to protect their own interests, we should diminish that generous, disinterested, and romantic character which is so charming in women, and which indeed we all like to see in others, and most of us even to encourage in ourselves, so long as it does not expose us too defenceless to the selfishness of the selfish. Yet the remarks we have already made on the legal ability of women to defend their own pecuniary interests will

apply even more appositely here. For if the sole responsibility of all their own private pecuniary affairs does not unsex spinsters and widows, and make them coarse, worldly, avaricious, grasping, and selfish, the addition of a vote, giving them a very slight direct influence on public affairs, is not likely to have so extraordinary an effect upon the most gentle and amiable half of mankind; on the contrary, as we find that the names of ladies abound on all charitable and philanthropic subscription lists, showing how kindly and generous a use they are disposed to make of their property, so we might reasonably expect that such little direct influence on politics as the possession of a vote would give to women, would probably be chiefly used in the direction of what we may call philanthropic legislation; in any case, politics in themselves certainly afford more scope for exalted and generous feeling than private business affairs. Ladies accustomed to the government of households and the management of their families, will scarcely find political affairs petty, or calculated to exercise a narrowing influence on their sympathies. Whether we consider that women ought to be especially devoted to what is beautiful or to what is good, there is much work in the interests of either to be done in politics; and if the ladies were only to take schools, workhouses, public buildings, parks, gardens, and picture galleries under their special protection, and try to send to Parliament a few members who would work efficiently at such subjects, the rest of the community would have cause to be glad of their help, without their being themselves in the smallest degree vulgarized by such a task.

But, in fact, as we have already pointed out, it is too late to be afraid of letting Englishwomen share in the life of Englishmen. We cannot shut up our women in harems, and devote them to the cultivation of their beauty and of their children. We have most of us long ago acknowledged that a perfect woman is

“Not too bright and good for human nature’s daily food.”

The fear that a womanly nature could be corrupted or hardened by politics, would strike at the root of our Western and Christian civilization, which owes much of its progress to having devolved upon women a share of the commonplace practical cares and duties which go to make up the sum of ordinary human life, whether domestic or political. The ingenuity, the love of luxury, the taste, and the housewifely instincts of women, have contributed much to the comforts of modern civilization; a more rapid and efficient adaptation of these same comforts to prisons, schools, barracks, and workhouses, would be a useful and probable result of the extension of women’s energies to political life. It is, indeed, remarkable how large a part of the subjects which occupy most attention in modern politics are of this quasi-domestic character; and how growing a tendency there is for them to become ever more so. The homes of the working-classes, education, factory acts (regulating the labour of women and children), sanitary laws, water supplies, drainage (all municipal legislation in fact), the whole administration of the poor-laws, with its various subdivisions—care of the pauper sick, pauper schools, etc.—all these are subjects which already, by common consent, are included in the peculiarly feminine province of home and charity. If the possession of a vote should induce more women to extend their interest to the comfort and happiness of other homes besides their own, it will certainly not have exercised a deteriorating influence on their character.

THE END.