

THE ENGLISH WOMEN'S MEMORIAL.

THE following is spoken of as one of the ablest and most statesman-like documents upon the woman status question ever published in any country. It was introduced by Miss Sturge and adopted by the national conference of women, held at Birmingham, England, Jan. 22, 1874:

To the Right Honorable William Ewart Gladstone, M. P., First Lord of Her Majesty's Treasury:

THE MEMORIAL OF MEMBERS AND FRIENDS OF THE NATIONAL SOCIETY FOR WOMEN'S SUFFRAGE, IN CONFERENCE ASSEMBLED AT BIRMINGHAM, JANUARY 22, 1874, SHEVETH,

That your Memorialists earnestly desire to urge on the attention of Her Majesty's Government the justice and expediency of abolishing the disability which precludes women, otherwise legally qualified, from voting in the election of Members of Parliament.

They submit that the disability is anomalous, inasmuch as it exists only in respect to the Parliamentary Franchise. The electoral rights of women have been, from time immemorial, equal and similar to those of men in parochial and other ancient franchises, and in the year 1869 a measure was passed, with the sanction of the Administration of which you are the head, restoring and confirming the rights of women ratepayers to the exercise of the municipal franchise.

The electoral disability is further anomalous because by the law and Constitution of this realm women are not disabled from the exercise of political power. Writs returning members to serve in the House of Commons, signed by women as electors or returning officers, are now in existence, and the validity of such returns has never been disputed. Women who were heirs to peerages and other dignities exercised judicial jurisdiction and enjoyed other privileges appertaining to such offices and lordships without disability of sex. The highest political function known to the Constitution may be exercised by a woman. The principle that women may have political power is coeval with the British Constitution. On the other hand, the practice of women taking part in voting at popular elections is equally ancient in date, and has been restored and extended by the action of the present Parliament. Your Memorialists therefore submit that to bring existing principle and practice into harmony by removing the disability which prevents women who vote in local elections from voting in the election of Members of Parliament, would be a step in the natural process of development by which institutions, while retaining the strength and authority derived from the traditions of the past, and preserving the continuity of the national life, continually undergo such modifications as are needed in order to adapt them to the exigencies of the Age and the changed condition of modern life.

They also submit that the old laws regulating the qualifications of electors do not limit the franchise to male persons; that the laws under which women exercised the parochial franchise were couched in the same general terms as those regulating the Parliamentary suffrage, and that while the latter were not expressly limited to men, the former were not expressly extended to women. There is, therefore, a strong presumption that the exclusion of women from the Parliamentary suffrage was an infringement on their ancient Constitutional rights, rendered possible in a barbarous Age by the comparative weakness and smallness of the numbers of persons affected by it, and continued until the exclusion had become customary. The franchise of women in local elections has been from time to time under judicial consideration, and their right to take part in such elections has been repeatedly confirmed by the judges. During the arguments in these cases, the question of their right to vote in the election of Members of Parliament was frequently mooted, and conflicting opinions thereon incidentally expressed by various judges, but the matter was never judicially decided, and no authoritative judgment

was ever given against the right until the year 1868, after the passing of two modern Acts of Parliament in 1862 and 1867, the former of which, for the first time in English history, in terms limited the franchise created by it to every "male person," and the latter to every "man" qualified under its provisions. Your Memorialists submit that had the question of the right of women to vote in the election of Members of Parliament been raised in the law courts under the old statutes which contain no reference to sex, and before the passing of the limiting Acts of 1862 and 1867, the precedents which had determined the right in their favor in the construction of the law as to the local government must have been held to apply to the case of qualified freeholders or others who claimed the right as regards Parliamentary government.

They submit also, that even after these limiting Acts, women had reasonable grounds for claiming the suffrage under the existing law. There is an Act of Parliament which declares that "in all Acts, words importing the masculine gender shall be deemed and taken to include females . . . unless the contrary is expressly provided." The Act of 1867 contained clauses imposing person liabilities and pecuniary burdens on certain classes of ratepayers. In these clauses, as in the enfranchising clauses, and throughout the Act, words importing the masculine gender were alone used. No provision was made that these words should not include females. Accordingly, in enforcing the Act, the extra liabilities and burdens were imposed on women ratepayers, to many of whom they caused grievous hardship. There was, therefore, reason to expect that the enfranchising clauses would bear the same interpretation, inasmuch as they were confessedly offered as an equivalent for the increased liabilities. But when the women who had been subjected to the liabilities claimed their votes, they found that words importing the masculine gender were held to include women in the clauses imposing burdens, and to exclude them in the clauses conferring privileges, in one and the same Act of Parliament.

This kind of injustice was shown in a marked manner in the case of certain women ratepayers of Bridgewater, who, in a memorial addressed to you in 1871, set forth the grievance of most heavy and unjust taxation which was levied on them, in common with the other householders of that disfranchised borough, for the payment of a prolonged commission respecting political bribery. The Memorialists felt it to be unjust and oppressive, inasmuch as not exercising the franchise, nor being in any way directly or indirectly concerned in the malpractices which led to the commission, they were nevertheless required to pay not less than three shillings in the pound, according to their rental. To that Memorial you caused a reply to be sent through Mr. Secretary Bruce, stating that "it was not in the power of the Secretary of State to exempt women owning or occupying property from the local and imperial taxation to which that property is liable." While fully admitting this, your Memorialists beg to represent that it is in the power of the Legislature to secure to women the vote which their property would confer, along with its liability to local and imperial taxation, were it owned or occupied by men.

They submit that this concession has recently been granted in respect to local taxation and that if justice demands that women should have a voice in controlling the municipal expenditure to which their property contributes, justice yet more urgently demands that they should have a voice in controlling the imperial expenditure to which the same property is liable. The local expenditure of the country amounts to about £30,000,000, the imperial expenditure to about £70,000,000 annually; if, therefore, the matter be regarded as one of taxation only, the latter vote is of more importance than the former. Local government deals with men and women alike, and knows no distinction between male and female rate-payers. But imperial government deals with men and women on different principles, and in such a manner that whenever there is any distinction made in the rights, privileges and protection accorded to them respectively, the difference is always against women

and always in favor of men. They believe this state of things is a natural result of the exclusion of women from representation, and that it will be found impracticable to amend it until women are admitted to a share in controlling the Legislature.

By the deprivation of the Parliamentary vote, women, in the purchase or renting of property, obtain less for their money than men. In a Bill which passed the House of Commons last session, provision was made for the amalgamation in one list of the municipal and parliamentary register of electors. In that list it appeared that the same house, the same rent and the same taxes, conferred on a man the double vote in municipal and Parliamentary government, and on a woman the single vote only, and that the less honorable and important one. When the occupation of a house is transferred from a man to a woman, say to the widow of the former owner, that home loses the privilege of representation in the imperial government, though its relations with the taxgatherer continue unaltered. There have been various societies formed with a view to enable persons to acquire portions of landed or real property, partly for the sake of the vote attached to such property. Should a woman purchase or inherit such an estate, the vote which has been one important consideration in determining the value, would be lost through her legal disability to exercise it.

The deprivation of the vote is a serious disadvantage to women in the competition for farms. A case is recorded of one estate in Suffolk from which seven widows have been ejected, who, if they had possessed votes, would have been continued as tenants. A sudden ejection often means ruin to a family who have sunk capital in the land, and it is only too probable that no day passes without the occurrence of some such calamity to some unhappy widow, who, but for the electoral disability, might have retained the home and the occupation by which she could have brought up her family in comfort and independence.

Besides this definite manner in which the electoral disability injures women farmers, it has a more or less directly injurious influence on all self-dependent women who maintain themselves and their families by other than domestic labor. A disability, the basis of which is the presumed mental or moral incapacity of the subject of it to form a rational judgment on matters within the ordinary ken of human intelligence, carries with it a stigma of inferiority calculated to cause impediment to the entrance on or successful prosecution of any pursuit demanding recognized ability and energy. This presumed incapacity is probably the origin of the general neglect of the education of women, which is only now beginning to be acknowledged, and the absence of political power in the neglected class renders it difficult if not impossible to obtain an adequate share for girls in the application of educational funds and endowments. So long as women are specially excluded from control over their Parliamentary representatives, so long will their interests be postponed to the claims of those who have votes to give; and while Parliament shall continue to declare that the voices of women are unfit to be taken into account in choosing members of the Legislature, the masses of men will continue to act as if their wishes, opinions, and interests were undeserving of serious consideration.

It is now nearly two years since you, in your place in the House of Commons, said that the number of absolutely self-dependent women is increasing from year to year, and that the progressive increase in the number of such women is a very serious fact because those women are assuming the burdens that belong to men; and you stated your belief that when they are called upon to assume those burdens, and to undertake the responsibility of providing for their own subsistence, they approach the task under greater difficulties than attach to their more powerful competitors. Your memorialists therefore ask you to aid women in overcoming these difficulties, by assisting to place them, politically at least, on a level with those whom you designate as "their more powerful competitors."

One of the greatest hindrances in the path of self-dependent women is the opposition shown by members of many trades and professions

to women who attempt to engage in them. The medical and academic authorities of the University of Edinburgh have successfully crushed the attempt of a small band of lady students to qualify themselves for the medical profession, and the same spirit of "trades unionism" is rife in the industrial community. A few months ago, the printers of Manchester, learning that a few girls were practising type-setting, and endeavoring to earn a little money thereby, instantly passed a rule ordaining a strike in the shop of any master printer who should allow type set up by women to be sent to his machines to be worked. At the present time, in a manufacturing district in Yorkshire where there are "broad" and "narrow" looms, at the former of which much more money can be earned, the men refuse to allow women to work at the broad looms, though they are quite able to manage them, because the work is considered too remunerative for women. At Nottingham there is a particular machine at which very high wages can be earned, at which women now work, and the men, in order to drive women out of such profitable employment, have insisted on the masters taking no more women on, but as those at present employed leave, supplying their places by men. A master manufacturer reports—"We have machines which women can manage quite as well or better than men, yet they are not permitted, by a selfish combination of the strong against the weak." These are only samples of the cases that are constantly occurring of successful attempts to drive women out of remunerative occupations. Your memorialists submit that women would be more able to resist such attempts if they had the protection of the suffrage; and that men would be less likely to be thus aggressive and oppressive if they had learned to regard women as their political equals.

Besides the restrictions on the industrial liberties of women effected by combinations of men, there are existing and proposed legislative restrictions from which men are exempt, and which exercise a powerful influence on the market for their labor. For the coming session we have the proposal further to limit their hours of paid labor in factories, and to place other restrictions on their labor in shops, also a proposition to place married women on the footing of half-timers. Without here expressing any opinion as to the wisdom of these proposals we urge that members of the House of Commons would be more capable of dealing with them in a just and appreciative spirit if they were responsible for their votes to the persons whose interests are directly concerned, and whose liberties they are asked to curtail; and, further, that it is a grave question how far it is safe to trust the industrial interests of women as a class, to the irresponsible control of the men who have manifested to individuals and to sections of working women, the spirit indicated by the examples we have cited.

In the same speech you spoke of a state of the law in which the balance is generally cast too much against women and too much in favor of men. Since you directed your attention to this matter, you have not been led either to introduce or to assist others who have introduced measures to ameliorate the state of the law respecting women, and such proposals have been unable to win consideration from Parliament. Your Memorialists cannot believe that this neglect has arisen from want of a desire on your part to deal with the grievances under which you have admitted that your countrywomen suffer; they are therefore led to the conclusion that you have been unable to take into consideration the affairs of an unrepresented class, owing to the preoccupation of Parliament with the concerns of those to whom it is directly responsible.

You stated that "the question was to devise a method of enabling women to exercise a sensible influence, without undertaking personal functions, and exposing themselves to personal obligations inconsistent with the fundamental particulars of their condition as women," and that the objection to the personal attendance of women at elections was in your mind an objection of the greatest force. They respectfully submit that the exercise of the municipal franchise involves the personal attendance of women at the polls, and that since your words were uttered changes have been ef-

fecting which render the process of voting absolutely identical for municipal and Parliamentary elections, and the whole proceeding perfectly decorous and orderly. Experience has proved that women can vote at municipal elections without prejudice to the fundamental particulars of their condition as women, whatever these may be; and this experience shows that they may vote in Parliamentary elections without the smallest personal prejudice or inconvenience. The School Board elections have also shown that women can appeal to large constituencies and go through the ordeal of public meetings, addresses and questions from electors, to which men must submit who seek the suffrages of a great community, without any sacrifice of womanly dignity, or of the respect and consideration accorded to their position and their sex. They therefore submit, that events have obviated the objections you entertained in 1871 to the proposal to give representation to women, and that the course taken by the Administration over which you preside in assenting to the extension of the municipal and School Board franchise to them; and calling them to the public functions of candidates and members of School Boards; and lastly, of securing the passing of a law which renders the process of voting silent and secret, have taken away all reasonable grounds for objecting on the score of practical inconvenience to the admission of women to the exercise of a vote, which they would have to give in precisely the same manner, but not nearly so often, as those votes which they already deliver.

It has been said that there is neither desire nor demand for the measure, and further, that women do not care for and would not use the suffrage if they possessed it. But the demand for the Parliamentary franchise is enormously greater than was the demand for the Municipal franchise, and for the School Board franchise there was no apparent call. Yet these two measures were passed purely on their merits, and it was not held to be necessary to impose on their promoters, over and above the obligation to make out their case, the condition that a majority of the women of England, or of a particular district, should petition for the proposed boon. Experience proved the wisdom and justice of this course, for although women throughout the country had taken no active part in agitating for the Municipal franchise, no sooner was the privilege accorded, than they freely availed themselves of it, and statistics obtained from some of the largest boroughs in the kingdom show that from the first year in which women possessed the suffrage they have voted in about equal proportion with men to the number of each on the register. The Parliamentary vote is more honorable and important than the Municipal vote; it is, therefore, safe to conclude that women who value and use the latter will appreciate and exercise the former as soon as it shall be bestowed upon them. Your Memorialists submit that great injustice and injury is done by debarring these women from a voting power which there is such strong presumptive ground for believing that they would freely exercise but for the legal restraint.

Your Memorialists are especially moved to call your attention to the urgency of the claim at the present time, when a bill extending the application of the principle of household suffrage is about to be proposed to Parliament, which bill received last year such expressions of approval from members of Her Majesty's Government as to lead to the belief that they are willing to take the proposal into serious consideration. They submit that the claim and the need for representation of women householders is even more pressing than that of agricultural laborers. The grievances under which women suffer are equally great, and the demand for the franchise has been pressed by a much greater number of women, and for a much longer period of time, than in the case of county householders now excluded. The number of persons who petitioned last session for the County Franchise Bill and for the Women's Disabilities Bill respectively were, for the former, 1889, and for the latter 329,206. The latter bill has received most influential support from both sides of the House, and more votes have been recorded in its favor than have been