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Women and Their Use of the Vote

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By Mrs. Henry Fawcett

WHEN I returned triumphant on the evening of January 10th from the signal victory of the women's suffrage cause in the House of Lords, feeling that woman's (at least one woman's) place was home, within an hour interviewers began to arrive from various papers. One of them, knowing of my fifty years' association with the movement, asked me to describe briefly its "ups and downs." I said I could not do that, because it had been all "ups" and no "downs." He looked so perplexed and incredulous that it is possible other people may also regard my reply as misleading, so I will attempt to prove to readers of THE ENGLISH REVIEW that it was a simple statement of fact, and put before them some of the evidence I have to prove it.

I may say at the outset that I regard the women's movement as one and indivisible, and therefore women's suffrage as simply a part of it. The suffrage movement, though foreshadowed by Condorcet and Mary Woolstonecraft in the eighteenth century, did not enter the region of practical politics until John Stuart Mill's amendment to the Reform Bill of 1867. Seventy-three members voted with him ~~for~~ ^{and} one hundred and ninety-six against him. This we considered a very good beginning. Let me glance at the so-called side of the women's question at that time; there was no public provision for secondary education for girls and women at all. Education in private schools, with one or two notable exceptions, was almost incredibly bad. The ancient endowments originally left for the benefit of both sexes had been in nearly all cases diverted from girls and were being used exclusively for boys. Even where this was not actually the case, the exceptions went far to prove the rule; Christ's Hospital, for example, provided a first-rate secondary education for many hundreds of boys of a character which prepared the best of them for the Universities, but only gave to about eighteen girls the very meagre kind of education which was then supposed to be suitable for domestic servants. There was no Married Women's Property Act, and a married woman had therefore no control even over her own earnings. A married woman had no right of guardianship over her children. After her husband's death she did not become their guardian unless he by will had expressly made her so. Even after her husband's death she could not appoint a guardian for her children. Women were shut out from all local government franchises. There was not a single woman acting as a Poor Law Guardian or on any of the locally elected administrative bodies. It was in 1857 that the Divorce Act was passed, which publicly and deliberately set up a double standard of morals as between men and women. Two colleges for women had been started, through private enterprise and liberality, but there was no University education for women in any part of the United Kingdom. Now every University in Great Britain is open to women except Oxford and Cambridge, and they

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tunity whatever for women to obtain medical education. No opening for women's employment existed in the Civil Service or in any of the great banking and commercial establishments; and, of course, no women had ever been even mentioned as possible members of a Royal Commission. Hence the absurdity, when the Royal Commission on the Housing of the Poor was appointed, of the description of one of the Commissioners as "The Hon. X. Y. Z., on account of his sister's great knowledge of the subject." In 1850 an Act had been passed, generally known as Lord Brougham's Act, which stated that in all Acts of Parliament "words imputing the masculine gender should be held to include females unless the contrary is expressly provided." But all attempts to apply this Act for the removal of the legal, electoral, or proprietary disabilities of women were entirely unsuccessful; repeated judgments were given in the Law Courts which interpreted Lord Brougham's Act as being without application to "the privileges granted by the State." These judgments, therefore, had the practical effect of laying down the principle that in an Act of Parliament the word "man" includes women when there was anything to pay or any penalty to be inflicted, but did not include women where any rights or privileges were concerned.

The history of the women's movement of the last fifty years is the gradual removal of these intolerable grievances and anomalies. Sometimes the pace was fairly rapid; sometimes it was very slow; but it was constant and always in one direction. I have sometimes compared it, ~~with~~ *in its* slowness, to the movement of a glacier; but, like a glacier, it was ceaseless and irresistible. You could not see it move, but if you compared it with a stationary object and looked again after an interval of months or years you had proof positive that it had moved. It always moved in the direction of the removal of the statutory and social disabilities of women. It established their individual liberty and freedom; they were, in fact, gradually passing from subjection to independence. That is why I said the history of the movement had been "all ups and no downs."

There is one exception in the foregoing list; the inequalities of the Divorce Act of 1857 have not been removed. But they have been unanimously condemned by a Royal Commission, on which two women sat as members, and the whole feeling of all classes on the subject is now totally different from what it was in the mid-nineteenth century. The Act itself remains in all its naïve foolishness and absurdity; but its rigorous application in accordance with its verbal meaning has become impossible, and has led to all kinds of ridiculous subterfuges in the interpretation of legal "cruelty," which Mr. Bernard Shaw and other playwrights have so cleverly satirised.

Turning now to the Parliamentary progress of the movement since 1867, we come first to the admission of women to, or, as some consider it, the restoration of women of, the Local Government Franchise. This was in 1869. In 1870, when the first Compulsory Education Act was passed, its benefits were conferred equally on boys and girls; and women as well as men were eligible for the newly-created School Boards. Three women were returned on the first London School Board, one of them (Miss Garrett, afterwards Mrs. Anderson) polling in her own constituency, Marylebone, more votes (over 47,000) than had ever been

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The Schools Enquiry Commission of the early 'sixties included girls' schools in the scope of their investigations. The Local Examinations of the Universities—Cambridge first in 1865, and Oxford a little later—were thrown open to women. The Girls' Public Day School Company (now the G.P.D.S. Trust) was formed, and the means of a sound secondary education placed within the reach of middle-class girls. The great educational endowments were overhauled by the Charity Commissioners, and much of the wealth which had been diverted from the education of girls was restored. Girton College, Cambridge, was founded in 1868, Newnham in 1870, and the colleges for women in Oxford followed.

The long fight for women's medical education cannot be described in detail here. It was led by three English-women: Elizabeth Blackwell, Elizabeth Garrett, and Sophia Jex-Blake. They found the door of every medical school in the United Kingdom and every means of getting on the British Medical Register barred, banged, and bolted against them. They never faltered or hesitated, and did not desist from their determination that these things should be changed until success crowned their efforts. Some great men befriended them inside and outside of the profession. Sir James Paget and Mr. Russell Gurney should be especially mentioned. The latter, a Member of Parliament and Recorder of the City of London, was successful in getting an Enabling Bill passed through both Houses (he was an influential Conservative), which allowed medical licensing bodies to open to women the examinations admitting to the medical profession; this was in 1877, and the first licensing body which availed itself of the freedom given by the Act was the King and Queen's College of Surgeons in Dublin. It was quickly followed by London University. All the other licensing bodies followed in due course the example thus given.

All the men and women who ~~helped~~ in these movements were, I think, with hardly an exception, suffragists, and it is extremely interesting, in looking back over these struggles, to see how the arguments used against us were the same then as they are to-day, or perhaps I should say the day before yesterday, and showed the same want of faith in the capacity of women, the same determined belittling of every attempt to give women equality of opportunity and extend to them the great principle of a fair field and no favour.

In the medical movement I remember distinctly how the opponents of the women were continually asseverating that "of course it stood to reason that women could never be surgeons." The words, "it stands to reason" or "it is self-evident," should generally be construed to mean, "I do not know how to prove." And, curiously enough, it is in surgery that women have proved themselves especially distinguished. "They are better at this than we are, my boy," said a great man surgeon to a pupil of his own, when they had both been looking at a great woman surgeon.

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...and he added, "well, they've been threading
needles all their lives!!"

When one remembers the splendid work done for their country all through the crisis of the great war, both as physicians, surgeons, and nurses, one can appreciate in some degree what the whole world has gained by giving women opportunities of professional training—opportunities which were bitterly and persistently refused them for many a year by the "anti's" of that period. Writers and professional men in Serbia, France, and other countries have borne testimony not only to the value of these services, but to the fact that they have placed the whole status of women in their countries on a different and higher level.

I have often noticed that it has fallen to the lot, from time to time, of the enemies of our movement to render it signal service. The latest instance is Lord Curzon's speech in the House of Lords on January 10th, warning the Peers of probable serious consequences to themselves if they accepted Lord Loreburn's motion to delete women's suffrage from the Representation of the People Bill. This, of course, could only have been done with a full knowledge of its consequences; but sometimes the action of anti-suffragists has been of great service to our movement without their having any perception of its probable effect. For instance, Sir Henry James, afterwards Lord James of Hereford, a powerful and able opponent of any and every extension of women's liberties, soon after the passing of the Reform Act of 1884, introduced and carried through Parliament a very excellent and very stringent Corrupt Practices Act. Its main feature was the statutory limitation of each candidate's election expenses to a definite and very small sum per head of the voters in his constituency. The Act forbade paid canvassing altogether, and severely restrained the number of persons who could be employed by the candidates on paid work. Political agents and party wirepullers were aghast. The work had got to be done or the elections would be lost. But it could not be paid for! It occurred first of all to the Conservative Party that the way out of the difficulty was to engage the unpaid services of women. This was the germ of what afterwards became the Primrose League. The ladies were highly successful from the first, and showed great organising power. They canvassed, they spoke, they looked up removals, and did all kinds of important political work, without, of course, receiving a penny for it. Their political friends were delighted; the opposite party was correspondingly infuriated. A defeated member of the Liberal Party who attributed his failure to their efforts was betrayed into speaking of them in public as "filthy witches"; but a more philosophical frame of mind quickly replaced this burst of rage. If women could do effective work for one party, they could do it for the other; and the Women's Liberal Federation came into existence in 1886, and has held a strong place in the organisation of the Liberal Party ever since. The ladies of this Federation became, though constantly hampered by their own party machine, a power for suffrage. Every use was made of them politically, but the leaders continued to deny that the party watchwords about liberty and self-government had any application to them. The situation gradually became wholly untenable. Not long before the war the Liberal Party was issuing a paper of printed directions to those in the constituencies who were prepared to undertake electoral work in its support. The

English Review—Women and Use of the Vote—Three first sentence in this paper was, "Make all possible use of every available woman in your locality"; and yet these women were still to be denied the most elementary of a citizen's rights.

It was extraordinarily interesting and very encouraging to see the whole thing we were working for growing steadily under one's eyes. Of course, I see clearly that my narrative leads straight up to the anti-suffrage question: Why do you want the vote when you have been able to do so much without it? The answer is very simple. We want the vote in order to get on with our work more quickly. It is easy to recite the achievements of fifty years in the course of half an hour. But do my readers realise the years of work it took for their actual accomplishment? I give one example. Work to open the medical profession in this country to women was begun in 1862. It was not accomplished until 1877, and was not completed even then for many a long year.

Not until the world-war were any of the great London hospitals, with one exception, open to women students for clinical teaching and experience. The most rigidly closed of all were, and still are, hospitals for women and children, because it was here that the competition of women was most feared by the men in the medical profession. But granting that the main objective was carried in 1877, for fifteen years the energies—mental, moral, physical, and economic—of a considerable group of exceptionally able women were concentrated on an object, now universally acknowledged to have been wholly beneficial and of very great national importance. It would have saved a great deal of time and money if they had had behind them the political power which the vote gives. I do not believe it will take fifteen years to get the legal profession opened to women.

My subject being women and their use of the vote, I hope it is not gratuitous folly to prophesy that they will use the vote to secure for women equality of opportunity, professional and industrial, and equality before the law, and that their progress in this direction will be much more rapid in the coming ten years than it has been in the last fifty. We know there are many things which the vote cannot do, but we believe it is certain that it will be useful in expediting reforms. Why cultivate your farm with your hands and nails when you might have a plough or a steam tractor? A well-known anti-suffragist once informed a listening world that the vote could not write a poem or paint a picture. Well, we know it; but still the vote has its uses, and the principle of government by consent of the governed, as against the principle of autocracy, holds the field.