

## Chapter 12 The Woman's Suffrage Movement

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## Chapter 12.

# The Woman's Suffrage Movement.

I should here perhaps pause to explain to the younger generation that the "qualification" for voting in the case of men was neither moral, mental nor physical. It was simply a property qualification. The voter had to be the owner of (at least a small) landed freehold property, or else to be registered occupier of <sup>land or</sup> a house rated at (or over) a certain annual tax-paying value. The successive "Reform Bills" were devoted in each case to lowering the annual value of the property or the <sup>taxable</sup> occupation that was to be received as the "qualification" for the vote, so as to admit to "exercise" the Parliamentary franchise ever-growing numbers of less and less well-to-do persons. But besides the "property qualification" for voting, there was in fact set up a further one, namely, that of the male sex. Women who owned land, or who <sup>as occupiers</sup> paid rates and taxes of a value that would give the vote to men (or any amount of higher value, indeed) were ~~excluded~~ excluded, and held incapable of giving a vote, merely and solely because they were <sup>of the</sup> female <sup>sex.</sup> This was obviously a tremendous insult to all women - to womanhood; and as we Suffragists maintained, it inevitably worked out in unjust laws, as well as in general depreciation, for our sex as such.

The notion of women having as much right as men to political



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representation by means of the vote — or, to put it in another form, the admission that, if representative, elected government be agreed on as the best form of government, women ought to share in it — was still quite novel when, in 1873, I began my share in the long campaign for Women's Suffrage.

Mr John Stuart Mill was the first Member of Parliament formally to introduce the subject into the House of Commons; and this he did in 1867, when he moved an Amendment to the Bill then before the legislature for greatly reducing the amount of the tax-paying qualification for voting in the case of men, so as <sup>to</sup> thereby admit hundreds of thousands more male voters: while still leaving all women, however largely taxed, or learned, or good, without a right to cast one vote. Mr Mill's Amendment (which was to the effect that sex alone should not disqualify for the Franchise those women who would be qualified if they were men) was lost by a large majority; and he failed to secure his seat again in the election of 1868, which followed the passing of the *Reform* Bill into an Act.

It was absurdly called "The Representation of the People Act", though not a single one of the female people ~~was~~ *was* included in it. Several thousands of women in various constituencies nevertheless claimed before the Revising Barristers (who had to settle disputes as to the lists of voters in the first instance) to be placed upon the voters' roll. They claimed on the ground that they had the "qualification" laid down for "men," and that there exists also an Act of Parliament saying that wherever in the law the masculine gender is used it is to be held to imply females also, unless the contrary is distinctly



stated (as was not done in the new Act) to be intended.

Some of the Revising Barristers agreed to this contention, and placed women claimants' names on the lists. Others refused to do so. There were 5,750 women claimants at Manchester; 560 at Birmingham; and so on. At Leeds, the claim of one, Mrs Mary Howell, was not only rejected, but she was fined for "making a frivolous claim".

As the Revising Barristers so differed, test cases were taken to the Court of Common Pleas. The judges decided against the women claimants. One judge said that he "would not admit that woman was man till they were reduced to the condition of zoological specimens." Another said that Revising Barristers were as much bound "to remove a woman's name from the list of voters, as they would be if they found that of a domestic animal, a horse or a dog, on the lists". Elizabeth or Catherine, it was clear, were on a par with Dobbin or Carlo in the learned judge's eyes. It was evident, therefore, that women had to win their franchise, as men had done, by an independent agitation, and by a demand for a special Act of Parliamentary Reform.

All this happened in 1868 and 1869. A few ladies now met together in various centres, and formed local ~~committees~~ Societies for obtaining Parliamentary Representation for Women. The most active of these was at Manchester, largely because of the very generous money assistance at once given to it by



Mr Thomas Thomasson and his son, Mr. J. P. Thomasson. There were also Women's Suffrage Societies formed in London; in Edinburgh for the whole of Scotland; in Dublin for all Ireland; in Bristol, for the West of England, and other centres.

Three or four years after, in 1872, these separate Societies so far coalesced as to form in London a "Central Committee of the National Society for Women's Suffrage". By this newly-organized "Central Committee" it was that I was first invited to the Suffrage platform, in 1873.

Public meetings, Petitions to the House of Commons, private letters from constituents to Members of Parliament, letters and articles in the Press, and all the machinery of popular agitation for Parliamentary Reform was thus set up, and carried on with great expense, labour and self-sacrifice from many of us, for many weary years.

It was not, indeed, foreseen by most of the first workers, that it would be so long and hard a fight. Some of them have left

*Wm. O.*



on record that they expected the walls of Jericho to fall at the first loud blast of the trumpets. It seemed in fact so just, so simple, so reasonable, that women who had every qualification, except the one <sup>of male sex</sup> that man shares with the beasts, for the exercise of a public right (or as I always preferred to put it, the performance of a public duty) should be allowed to fulfil the same, that the earliest workers would hardly have been able to believe that precisely fifty years would have to ~~elapse~~ <sup>pass</sup> from the date of Mr. Mill's motion before <sup>any</sup> ~~women~~ <sup>at all</sup> would be recognised as citizens!

Mr Mill's motion, in May, 1867, was, as he says in his Autobiography, "To strike out the words which were understood to limit the electoral franchise to 'males', and substitute 'persons' <sup>...</sup> ~~and thereby to admit to the suffrage all women who, as householders or otherwise, possessed the qualification demanded of male persons~~ ... When the votes recorded in favour of my motion amounted to 73, made up by Pairs and Tellers to over 80, the surprise was general, and the encouragement great".

Nothing more was done in Parliament for the next two years, for the claim was being made <sup>before the Courts</sup> that women were in ~~the~~ <sup>law</sup> entitled to be registered under the new Act, and to cast their votes. But after the Judges had dismissed this claim, it was necessary to appeal to Parliament to pass another and specific Act to remove female sex from being a voting disqualification; and as Mr Mill had lost his seat, a new and able champion was found in Mr Jacob Bright, brother of John Bright, and of course a Member of the Society of Friends — a Quaker.

He introduced into the House of Commons, in the Session of 1870, "The Women's Disabilities Removal Bill". It consisted of

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one clause only, as follows:-

"That in all Acts relating to the qualification and registration of voters entitled to vote in the election of Members of Parliament, wherever words occur which import the masculine gender, the same shall be held to include females, for all purposes having reference to the right to be registered as voters, and to vote in each election, any law or usage to the contrary notwithstanding."

It will be observed that we did not ask for votes for women as such, but only for the removal of the sex disability. The women who would actually have obtained the power to vote, those namely who fulfilled <sup>every</sup> ~~the~~ qualification entitling men to vote, <sup>except masculinity,</sup> ~~who~~

— those only who owned (perhaps even a little) freehold landed property, or ~~who~~ were themselves paying direct rates and taxes <sup>as</sup> ~~as responsible~~ heads of households, or <sup>as carrying</sup> ~~on~~ some business ~~and~~ independently <sup>— were comparatively few.</sup>

It was easily possible to ascertain exactly how many such women there would be to become Parliamentary electors, because they had been given votes for all local Boards, Town Councils, etc, in a new Local Government Act passed in 1869; in that Act Mr Jacob Bright had successfully moved to include all qualified women as municipal voters. In the Education Act of 1870, too, women were not only declared eligible to vote, but also to <sup>be</sup> ~~be~~ elected as Members of the School Board. Hence, it was ascertained that if our Bill passed, and women became entitled to vote for Members of Parliament "on the same terms as men", there would only be about one <sup>female</sup> ~~one~~ to every seven male voters. Most wives living in family with their husbands would not have been qualified, because the man would have been the registered tax-payer. But the sex insult would have been removed, and we

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trusted, with the confidence engendered in us by our own loyalty towards and sympathy for other women, to the limited number of women who would receive the vote on those terms to represent their sex as a whole and in every way.

When Mr. <sup>Jacob</sup> Bright succeeded, in May 1870, in first bringing "The Women's Disabilities Removal Bill" to a debate and division in the House of Commons, there was a notable and fairly satisfactory increase in the number of its supporters: an improvement mainly produced, of course, by women's work for it. There now voted in favour 119 Members of Parliament <sup>and only 91 against;</sup> and this gave the Bill its "Second Reading"; but the opponents then rallied against it, and it was lost "in Committee".

The Woman's Suffrage Journal, speaking ~~from~~ from inside knowledge, attributes the loss of the Bill in Committee <sup>in 1870</sup> entirely to the personal exertions <sup>put forth</sup> against it by the "great Liberal", William Ewart Gladstone. The Journal says:--

"If at that time the Prime Minister had been favourably disposed to the measure, it is probable that it might have passed into law without serious opposition from any quarter. But unfortunately Mr Gladstone, who had preserved an attitude of neutrality during the discussion and division on the second reading, no sooner found that the House had taken a favourable view of the principle than he changed his attitude of neutrality for one of hostility, and all the influence of the Government was suddenly exerted to crush the Bill. Against such a manifestation of opposition from a then all-powerful Minister, Mr Jacob Bright found it vain to contend, and the Bill was lost".

The Bill was brought to a division again in 1871; the friends numbered 161, and the opponents 230 on this occasion. The next year, our supporters were 165 in number, but they were outvoted by a muster of 242 foes to women's voting. In May, 1873, Mr Jacob Bright had (including Pairs and "Jellers") 172 supporters, and the "Noes", who were "told" by Mr Bouverie and Mr Scourfield, numbered 237.



Thus matters stood at the time when I made my first speech for Women's Suffrage, -- a few weeks before the 1873 Division in Parliament. The Secretary of the Central Committee did not delay in inviting me to speak at the Suffrage Society's further ~~Meetings~~, but owing to other work I was not able to do so until that September (1873). In the interval, therefore, I had my professional stay at Mrs J.P. Thomasson's house, and inspiring talks with her and her mother, <sup>Margaret Bright</sup> Mrs Lucas, helping to confirm and enlarge my views on these points.

My first lectures arranged by the Central Committee were given at the two chief seaside towns of the Isle of Thanet, and were part of a plan adopted that summer for holding meetings at popular resorts. The idea was that visitors from many different towns might be drawn to hear the great and astonishing novelty of a woman speaking in public, and might then carry back to their own home towns the new and startling idea, that some women claimed the parliamentary vote.

My dates were: Ramsgate, September 17th. 1873, Margate, the following night -- so that I was still only <sup>eighteen</sup> years' old. Arrangements had all been made by the Committee's organiser, who had secured an influential local gentleman as Chairman in each town - the leading Physician of Ramsgate, Dr. Henderson, and



the Vicar of Margate, Rev. W. Benham, B.D. Apart from that, I was the only announced Speaker. I must now admit that it was somewhat audacious of me to venture on this solitary and responsible task. I prepared my lecture entirely alone, with no advice or criticism available, and I went forth alone to deliver it. If I had found myself unable to produce a consecutive and adequately long discourse, there was nobody to be there to help me out. But I had deeply at heart the new doctrine I wanted to maintain; I knew now that I could speak; and I was not at all what is called "nervous" about it.

The following advance notice kindly given by the leading local paper, "The Thanet Advertiser," is significant of how very unusual it was, how odd it was then considered, for a woman to address a public audience:-

"A Meeting of a novel kind will take place in St. James's Hall on Wednesday evening. The question to be spoken on is Woman's Suffrage, and the address will be given by a lady. We have no doubt that the fair lecturer will have a large audience... Even those who are opposed to the movement must be pleased that there are women amongst us of sufficient courage and ability to combat the question at a public meeting."

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"Reble's Gazette" is equally amusing when it records in the subsequent report, with evident surprise, that "the audience was quite a numerous one, many very respectable townspeople and visitors being amongst the number."

So having "the courage and ability" to speak from a public



platform, and actually finding "many very respectable townspeople and visitors" to come to hear, what did the girl say? I make bold to answer (after re-reading the long report given by three different Isle of Thanet newspapers, as I find them in my scrap-book) - "An excellent speech!"

The title I had given my lecture was: "The Political Disabilities of Women: their Social and Legal Consequences."

After an exordium, asking for an unprejudiced consideration, and asserting a belief that our position was not the fault of the men of the present day, so much as an inheritance from past times when autocratic and class government for men also was in vogue, I divided my subject under four heads (I quote the report in the "Thanet Advertiser): -

1st. That the laws governing women are not impartial and just.

2nd. That giving the Parliamentary Vote to women is the proper means by which eventually to amend the laws.

3rd. That questions of national interest should be considered by every class in the nation, and would thereby be better decided.

4th. That there existed no valid objection to giving the suffrage to women otherwise qualified to vote.

Under my first heading, I could make out a powerful case. The laws governing the relations of women and men had been made so tyrannous and unfair, especially to wives, that Lord Brougham, the greatest of Law reformers, had declared that he feared to touch

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one of them, so huge would be the task of amending all that ought to be changed.

If I should be asked how I knew the bad state of the law with regard to women, I must reply that the great lawyers of that day had instructed me. Several of the leaders of the Bar had set forth that body of law, and denounced it in no measured terms. I had already been<sup>to</sup> interested in the "Woman question", that I had studied it so long in every way, and was ready to expound it to whoso would listen.

I daresay it sounds incredible that I was so ready, but it was the case. I have just looked over the earliest of the series of volumes that I possess in which I have had bound up from time to time the pamphlets and the periodicals bearing on woman's rights that I acquired. The earliest periodical in my bound volumes is No. 6 of "The Woman's Suffrage Journal," edited by Lydia Becker; the date is August, 1870. I have inserted a note at the front of the volume as follows:-

"These numbers, August and September 1870, have a great interest for me; I was then but fifteen years old, and was spending a summer holiday at Weymouth, when I saw displayed at the door of a newspaper shop the August issue of the then new 'Journal' and bought it for myself; a purchase which shows that I was already thinking about and interested in the cause of women."

Amongst the earliest pamphlets that I have preserved till now there is the report of the House of Commons debates <sup>on</sup> the Married Women's Property Bill, in 1869, which passed into an Act

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in 1870. The recital in this debate of the laws about wives as they then stood, by three distinguished lawyers, Mr. Russell Gurney, Recorder of London, Mr. Jessel, afterwards Master of the Rolls, and Sir John Coleridge, afterwards Lord Chief Justice, might well make any woman's blood boil with indignation, and bring a blush of shame to the cheek of any fair-minded man. In that House of Commons debate, though the immediate subject was the property rights (strictly no rights) of wives, the whole position was more or less brought under review. The following is an extract from the speech delivered by Mr. Jessel (April 14th.1869):

"The existing law is a relic of slavery, and the House is now asked to abolish the last remains of slavery in England. The slavery laws of Antiquity are the origin of the Common Law on the subject of the wife's position..... The Ancient Germans — from whom our law is derived— put the woman into the power of her husband in the same sense as the ancient Roman law did. She became his slave. The law of slavery gave to the master of a slave the two important rights of flogging and imprisoning him. A slave could not possess property of his own, and could not make contracts except for his master's benefit. The master alone could sue for an injury to the slave; while the only liability of the master was that he must not let his slave starve. This is exactly the position of the wife under the English law at present. The husband has the right of flogging and imprisoning her, as may be seen in Blackstone. She cannot possess property; she cannot contract; and he alone can sue if she is libelled or suffers a

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personal injury; while all the husband is compelled to do for her is to pay for her necessaries."

Even this indictment of the laws by a lawyer leaves unmentioned various other evils and injustices. Amongst them was a matter on which I felt most deeply, in my <sup>inborn</sup> sympathy with my fellow women: namely, the denial of a married mother's right to the custody and company of her own children. A married woman's children were not recognized by the law as hers at all, but might be torn from her arms, even though she were faultless, and even by a father living in blatant sin; and might be given by him, from her tender and anxious care, to the charge of a woman as bad as himself. An agreement made <sup>and solemnly signed by a man</sup> before marriage as to the education and custody of the children was torn up by the law, declared null and void. From the grave a dead father could stretch forth his cold hand, and, secure from remonstrance, take a woman's little ones from her, without being required to have assigned in the Will he had made the shred of a reason for doing so. Even if a father died intestate, the mother of the children did not become by law, as she forever must be by nature and the law of love, their guardian and custodian, but they could be taken from her by the dead man's nearest male relative! As one judge summed it up: "The English law does not see the mother! It sees only the father and the child."

Although then, in my early maidenhood, I had no real idea of what my passionate love and devotion towards my own children would actually be, I was gifted with the sympathy to enable me to realise



the enormity of this outrage on motherhood—aye, and on childhood—  
—and this point of evil legislation aroused my most powerful oratory; and I always moved a large proportion of my audience with me, as I depicted the agonies of soul of a mother whose babes were not legally hers, but might be, without even a pretence of cause, torn from her embrace, deprived of her devoted care in health and in sickness, educated to forget the mother who bore them and desired with all her soul to nurture them and train them for time, maybe for eternity, but deprived at the mere caprice or by the deliberate designed cruelty of one man of what must be for ever a woman's most natural, most cherished right. [Nor was this <sup>Legal outrage</sup> mere theory. I could and did quote most cruel and heart-rending cases where a faultless mother had been deprived of her children, sometimes to extort money from her or her relatives, sometimes in the name of religion, sometimes from sheer tyranny and deliberate intention to torture a woman's heart in its most tender spot. The most rhetorical and most eloquent passage of my speech was here. Rachael mourning for her children, Eliza the slave mother in her terrible escape with her babe over the floating ice, nay, the example of the very beasts themselves, the mothers so brave, so reckless of self, in defending their young, moved my audience's hearts and consciences, and when I would contrast the sorrow of the mother whose little ones God had taken to peace and safety, perhaps to eternal joy, with that of the mother whose babes still lived in this world of pain and peril while she was deprived of the power to guard and guide them, by no fault of her own, and depicted such

N.P.



mothers as crying with David - "Let me fall into the hand of God and not into the hand of man" - it was no unusual thing for many women to shed tears of sympathy, realising in their souls the heart-break of losing their children in any way whatsoever. @

Passing from this point, I claimed that women, *(just because of their mental differences,* might bring valuable help to the work of government; and then replied to various stock objections. Amongst these, as present-day women may be amused to know, was always one that wives would be likely to vote against their husbands: to which the reply then was that, as it was only proposed to give votes to women with the ratepaying qualification that enabled men to vote, most wives would not be the registered ratepayers and therefore would not be qualified. Also (this was one of Gladstone's objections) that if the vote was allowed, seats in Parliament must follow: to which I used to reply that, as the women ratepayers for whom we then asked the vote, would be only one in <sup>*of the electors*</sup> seven, it must be men who would vote a woman into Parliament, and if they desired to choose a specially able woman as their re-

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② Feeling so keenly as I did upon this point, it is a great and abiding joy to me that I was able, by a curious combination of circumstances, as I will explain if I ever come to that date in this memoir, to virtually secure by my personal action and influence, the passing into law of "The Custody of Infants Act, 1886", under which for the first time "the well-being of the child and the wishes of the mother" were to be taken into account by the Court. For over forty years this amended law held good. Then women at last got the vote and improved the law yet further.



presentative, why should they not?

Then I ended the address by what my kind reporter of the Dover Chronicle describes as "A thrilling ~~peroration~~ <sup>peroration</sup> which drew from the audience enthusiastic applause."  I tried to picture a future of more equal friendship and help between men and women in every department of life: women better educated and more actively interested in the affairs of the nation, made more reasonable and logical, schooled in wider public aspiration and interest <sup>in human welfare</sup>—men more just, more kind, more willing to be equals and partners, less masterful and privileged. This peroration I generally wound up by quoting Tennyson's perfect passage (perfect alike in meaning and in music) in "The Princess," that begins:-

] "The woman's cause is man's;  
] They rise or sink together: dwarfed or godlike,  
] ~~bound~~ <sup>bound</sup> or free."

and ends:-

] "Then comes the statlier Eden back to man;  
] Then reign the world's great bridals, chaste and calm;  
] Then comes the crowning race of humankind.  
] May these things be!"

(h.p.) [This was in effect and in the main the speech which I always made upon the woman's Suffrage platform: not fearing to expose and denounce the wrongs of my sex, but endeavouring to persuade my hearers that these evils were mostly a legacy from the past, and the time had now come for a change, so that in unison men and women could work harmoniously ~~and~~ for the common good.

After my lecture at Margate, a little incident occurred



which I shall always remember with pleasure. The Chairman was the Vicar of Margate; and so many of the clergy in those early days were opponents of any change in the position of women; that this ~~was~~ was remarkable. But he was a man of exceptional distinction. He was the Rev. Canon William Benham, B.D. one of the six preachers of Canterbury Cathedral. His grandfather and his father were successively for many years the post-masters of a little Hampshire village, where the boy was educated at the National School. His unusual ability attracted the attention of the Rector, Archdeacon Bailey, who was a ~~great Greek scholar~~

*from age, & he*

took the boy in his early teens to be his little secretary, and found pleasure in teaching him Latin and Greek. Later, young

*(then he occupied the Chair of English Literature at*

*Queen's College, the first of all the Women's Colleges of University rank. D<sup>r</sup> Benham*

Benham took a first class degree at King's College, London, ~~and~~ became presently the Editorial Secretary to the Society for Promoting Christian Knowledge. He was so fine a preacher that two successive Archbishops of Canterbury, Longley and Tait, gave him personal preferment, and Archbishop Tait chose him to write the

"Memoirs of Catherine and Crawford Tait," the Archbishop's wife *+ only son.*  
Later D<sup>r</sup> Benham prepared the memoir of Archbishop Tait himself, at ~~the request of~~ ~~Canon Davidson~~ ~~also wrote a number of other popular~~

*the request & with the help of his son-in-law & successor in the Primacy, Archbishop Davidson. Canon Benham also wrote a number of popular works on secular subjects under the pen-name of "Peter Lombard" & also many*

religious books, so he was quite a notable chairman for me.

*as Chairman at my lecture*

In his opening address, he remarked that "it did not follow because he was there that he was an advocate of Woman's Suffrage, and his wife did not like it a bit." (Alas! how often in those early days we heard something like that!) "But his opinion now, as far as he had gone into it, was in favour of the Movement, and at all events it was a subject that ought to be



well considered."

But after the lecture, Mr. Benham gave a much more definite approval. The report says:-

"The Chairman remarked that he thought some who came not very well disposed to the lady lecturer, as she proceeded were converted to her views. At any rate, the warmth she received when she sat down was more fervent than when she got up. He thought some of the arguments must go home to their hearts and minds; and he hoped they would use their influence in the coming election to enable our women who pay rates and taxes to exercise the franchise. They had spent a very pleasant hour, and were extremely delighted and very well instructed."

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He courageously added (says the "Reble's Gazette" report);

"He thought he heard just a faint hiss when the lady expressed her opinion against the Contagious Diseases Act. He however entirely agreed with her, and thought it was a most iniquitous Act."

N.P

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I had in fact briefly referred to this degrading legislation, ~~and also~~ *as well as to other inequalities in laws relating to sex morals;* to the unequal Divorce laws; to the laws that left any man free from prosecution when he used his years and knowledge and money to lead astray a little girl as soon as she had reached the age of eleven; and to the laws that freed an illegitimate father from any responsibility beyond half-a-crown a week for the feeding, housing, <sup>educating</sup> and clothing of the child <sup>that</sup> he had called into the world. The plea I made for an equal moral standard for men and women under these heads was brief, but perhaps touched some hearts as well as consciences, because it was based on the



N.P.

actual misery I had seen in hospital work and knew to result from the opposite unequal man-made opinions and policy. <sup>(N.P.)</sup> [The Woman's Suffrage movement, however, was conducted on somewhat narrow, timid, time-serving lines from the first, and I was soon more or less officially requested not to allude to any of these sex-morality questions on the Suffrage platform. I thought it was right for me to accede to this ~~restriction~~ demand; for it was quite the legitimate function of the Committee to decide what points should or should not be touched upon by speakers representing the Society.

N.P.

But when this "muzzling order" was later on attempted to be carried a step further, and I was advised that I should never speak out, or associate my name with work upon such subjects, at any time or place, under a possible penalty of being excluded from the Suffrage Society's platform, I would not agree to be so silenced. [It seemed to me that it was clear that some persons must and would be prejudiced against Women's Suffrage by their dislike to social and legal alterations that they feared might thereby be brought about. Mr. Lecky, for instance, the author of the "History of European Morals," openly avowed that he would if he could prevent women from voting because they might interfere with untrammelled vivisection of animals! I often in fact felt that the opposition to the woman's vote largely rested on a secret and unavowable hatred and terror of a possible claim resulting for greater purity of life from men, or at any rate for an equal moral standard for both sexes. But on the other hand, if women were not to be expected to hold, and sometimes to try to enforce, a special womanly view of right and wrong, or ever to place themselves in opposition to some special manly views, particularly on questions of morals, why bother about getting them votes? Therefore I did not admit that policy demanded that every woman who came before the public as an advocate of political equal rights must be.



debarred from working at the same time for any Cause that she believed deserved and demanded her immediate support. In a word, I was not an Opportunist and some of the most influential members of the  <sup>Suffrage Society</sup> ~~Committee~~ were so.

But here I am anticipating events;  <sup>differences about</sup> all this was in the future. At my first ~~Meetings~~ I spoke as the spirit moved me to do, with simplicity and seriousness. For I would explain once for all that I took all my work for women in a deeply serious spirit, even a religious one (religion is quite a distinct matter from theology), and that I always felt the responsibility of all public speaking. Even when, later on, I was lecturing on literary and general subjects, I was always conscious of gathering up all my forces, immediately before going on the platforms. It is truly a serious responsibility, when a number of people condescend to come and lend their ears to the speaker, expecting to receive some ideas or information, or at least amusement and interest, to be the speaker  <sup>who ought</sup> to satisfy that expectation, and use that opportunity properly.

After the meeting at Margate, Mrs Benham, whether converted or not, kindly invited me to the Vicarage to supper. When this was finished, the Vicar asked me into his Study and we talked for a little while upon the subject of the Meeting. I have always remembered one little item of that conversation, because it "took my fancy". I told my kind Chairman that these two lectures in the  <sup>leading</sup> towns of the Isle of Thanet were actually my first addresses to large open Public ~~meetings~~, and he smilingly replied that there was a certain suitability in the



place, because the Isle of Thanet was held of old time to be under the special ~~patronage~~ <sup>protection</sup> of a female Saint, <sup>St</sup> Mildred, <sup>she</sup> was the Patron Saint of the ancient Guild — or Mediaeval Trade's Union — of the Bakers of London <sup>(and so</sup> obviously, of the Miller <sup>family too!);</sup> and as they obtained a large proportion of the flour that they used from corn grown in the Kentish Isle, that region was considered to be under the special patronage of their Saint. Saint Mildred is one of the very few female saints to whom many old Churches are dedicated, because of this domestic association.

For the most part, however, our talk was a serious one on the influence and character of women. Finally, Canon Benham rose from his chair, got a book down from his shelves, and said he would like to give it to me as a memento. I have the volume still. He inscribed the following words on the front page:

"To Miss Fenwick Miller,  
" September 16th. 1873.

" With the kind regards of the Vicar of Margate, and with thanks for the admirable words she has spoken this evening."

Then closing his eyes and folding his hands upon the table between us, he repeated the Collect in which the Church asks for individual help and guidance - the one beginning "Prevent us, O Lord, in all our doings -" and then he pronounced the <sup>Benediction</sup> ~~Benediction~~; and bade me farewell.

My next lecture for the Central ~~of~~ Committee was at Dover ( where Miss, afterwards Dr., Alice Vickery spoke as well as myself), on November 5th, 1873, which happened to be my own nineteenth birthday. I read with amusement in the Dover News report that "Mr Councillor



Fuller seconded the resolution, but remarked that "he could add nothing to what Miss Miller had said, because "it would be as useless as to gild refined gold, or paint the lily white".

After this, I spoke for Women's Suffrage as often as my other engagements would allow, ~~and in consequence of my~~ ~~work.~~ I made it a rule never to refuse an opportunity of speaking on this subject in my own neighbourhood, so that time was not spent in travelling, & also I could be easily sought for if one of my "cases" came on. I addressed many "Young Men's Debating Societies", Chapel "Literary Societies", and "Workmen's Clubs", even when I knew there could be but a small audience, because "a little leaven leaveneth a great lump".

There is no record of ~~a great many~~ <sup>most</sup> of these smaller meetings, as often no Press representative would be there, and I <sup>(as I now regret)</sup> used not <sup>to</sup> trouble <sup>write out and</sup> to send in my own reports to the "Women's Suffrage Journal". However, in that official monthly publication for April 1874, the Editor, Miss Lydia Becker, inserted an account which I had written as a private letter to herself, of one of my <sup>local</sup> personally arranged discussions. It is informal and a little frivolous, not being written for publication, but I may quote a portion of it, as it shows rather amusingly the kind of objection that was raised to women's voting, as much in the House of Commons as in <sup>more</sup> humble quarters. So here is a sample of the arguments we had to meet — and incidentally, it is one of the very few instances <sup>now</sup> extant of my "epistolary style" in my teens:-

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"There were between eighty and one hundred persons present, by far the majority men. My address was listened to very attentively; then the chairman called for speakers. After a



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good pause, there arose Mr. A., a man of the round-head and short-neck type, with tremendous lungs. He announced at the loudest possible pitch of his vocal powers that 'women were not now-a-days like their grandmothers, and he might even say their great-grandmothers, aye, and he might even say their great-great-grandmothers! They made too much noise; they (sawing the air with his right arm) want to leave their sphere, and they shan't do it. ('hear, hear', from admiring brethren). Why, what would become of MEN (word discharged as from a hand grenade, to signify its overwhelming importance) if women neglected their homes for politics? If women will be quiet, he promised that all the grievances they talked about would be done away with. Why, they would be now if women had kept in their sphere. That was the skeleton, it was very largely padded with eloquence and oratorical adipose tissue. Then arose Mr W., who made a quite admirable speech. He said 'he thought they ought all to have brought their ladies there tonight, and ought always to take them where they went. Men really said, however: 'Now I will be so kind to you; I will make you such a nice palace, and call it home, and shut you up in it like a prison; and I'll be kinder still, for I'll leave it all to yourself, and I'll never stay in it.' Then if the poor woman cried the other side the locked door, she was told she was ungrateful and wanted to come out of that nice sphere where she was put quite for her own good.'

" Mr B., who is a man of education, not a bonâ fide working man like every one of the others, said he was entirely in favour of the suffrage, but he thought the married women's property should remain as it is now, because everything should be discouraged that tended to destroy the feeling of community



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between husband and wife. I cordially granted this, <sup>in my reply</sup> but claimed that to take away all from one by force and give it to the other was not community of interest; but if Mr B. thought so perhaps he would have no objection to having the application of the principle turned the other way, and making 'with all my worldly goods I thee endow' a legal fact, instead of a sentimental untruth, from a bridegroom to a bride. I <sup>in my reply</sup> remarked also on the inadequacy of the punishment given to wife-beaters, and read a case from that morning's Times, where a man was sentenced to four months' imprisonment for having trampled on, till she was insensible, the wife to whom he had been twenty years married and who had borne him eight children, because the fire was not good enough when he woke up. An audience of intelligent and respectable working men is always very alive to such things as these.

" After Mr. B. came the speech of the evening. A lad of about twenty years, guiltless alike of blushes and whiskers, elevated himself on his feet in a far corner of the room. By his side sat his bosom friend and warmest admirer, a youth of his own age. They might be matchmakers or vulcanite polishers, but they had not the sturdy <sup>figures or</sup> embrowned faces of out-door workers, though their dress and speech showed them to be London working men. Our candidate for oratorical honours spoke loudly and clearly for the first three or four lines — about a minute. I thought we had a local Joseph Arch — an ignominiously placed genius of speech. I must premise that the soliloquy of the speaker was always as distinct as the rest of his oration, and that his backer's remarks were more audible still. I report as nearly verbatim as my memory serves:-- [It is always very

N.P

W.P



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unpleasant to oppose a woman, particularly when she is like Miss Miller; but when she — pouf — she — hum — there, now, I did know what I was <sup>a</sup>going to say — (Friend beneath: 'keep up, keep up; you'll remember it directly!') — I'm sure she didn't ought to have the suffrage, because it isn't her place — pouf. I never made a speech before. (Friend: 'Go on, you did know it!') Well, I was a-going to say that I left an Institution with which I was connected — pouf — I did not like the Institution because they — they said — they did — they wished — pouf — (clasping his side locks in agony, while his backer's voice rose sweetly encouraging: 'Keep up, keep up!') — Ha — a — I had some ideas before I stood up! I think it would be a stigma on marriage — matrimony would be — pouf —. Herewith he subsided amid peals of merriment.

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"Mr S. spoke in favour of the suffrage for women; and then an old man, in ~~the~~ <sup>a</sup> front seat, who had been most industriously taking notes all the evening, said he thought women were too superstitious to be allowed the vote. 'She has the origin of veneration in her head — a very big origin. Besides, man is more mental than woman, and woman is more moral than man. There never was a female 'Omer, or a female what wrote Paradise Lost, or anything else like that. There were some of them Italian women sprang up — I forget their names — if I'd thought of it I'd have looked some of them up, and fetched them along with me. I consider women shouldn't vote, and my old woman never should. What's more, she don't want to, neither doesn't any women.'

'I closed my answer by moving the adoption of memorials to the borough members ( Mr Ritchie and Mr Samuda ), asking them



to support a measure for women's suffrage. It was decided that only members of the Institute should vote, which they did by standing. A large number, including, I was glad to see, four women, stood up for it; and the negative being put obtained the adhesion of Mr. A. and one other man. Mr W. proposed a vote of thanks to me, and Mr. A. took the words of seconding out of the mouth of another man, and clinched them with two inimitable nods, which expressed his own sense of his magnanimity in being willing to thank me for doing what my great-grandmother would not have done!

Meetings arranged by the Suffrage Society, involving always considerable expense for hiring of Halls, advertising, speakers' travelling expenses, and so on, were generally addressed by gentlemen of local importance — we always tried to get the Mayor of the town to take the chair, & often succeeded — and such meetings were more or less lengthily reported by the local newspapers, whence notices were extracted for the Women's Suffrage Journal. It would perhaps surprise many of the women of the present day to learn how steadily such meetings, involving much expense & labour, were carried on by the early Suffragists. Not a month passes without the Suffrage Journal recording several meetings, in all parts of the country.

I see that in the early months of 1874 I had addressed meetings arranged by the Society at Birmingham, Stockwell, Ipswich, Bow, Harrow, Norwich and Yarmouth. Each of these occupied but one day, but at the end of October (just before my twentieth birthday) I managed to arrange a clear week to go on a tour to six towns in South Wales. These <sup>meetings</sup> were organized for the Bristol and West of England Committee by one of its members, Mr Alan Greenwell, M.A., brother of Dora Greenwell, the poetess. My

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companion on the platform was an American, Miss Mary Beedy, M.A. 20  
The ~~the~~ <sup>after her name</sup> letters ~~which~~ used to surprise the public, as Englishwomen  
in those days had no University degrees open to them. There  
are reports of our meetings at Newport, Mon.; Swansea; Llanelly;  
Haverfordwest; Tenby; and Cardiff. Each ~~the~~ meeting was held in the  
largest Hall in the Town, and was well attended, with influential  
local speakers to move our resolutions, several of whom made  
their speeches in Welsh, knowing that this was most acceptable  
to the people who have clung so tenaciously to their own strange  
but musical tongue throughout five hundred years of forced  
union with England.

At Haverfordwest, there was a special opportunity for  
a debating speech, for the local M.P., a Mr Scourfield, had  
actually been <sup>that very year</sup> the seconder of the rejection of our bill. I had  
a verbatim report of his speech, and replied to it <sup>in</sup> seriatim, to  
the huge delight of the audience. ~~One~~ local paper says:-

"Miss Fenwick Miller addressed herself to combat Mr  
Scourfield's objections, her criticisms on his speech being of  
a most sarcastic and unanswerable nature, and bringing down the  
house most effectively".

The other local paper, The Telegraph, Nov: 4th, ends an  
almost verbatim report by saying:-

"The audience showed the arguments were appreciated  
by the enthusiastic applause given several times during the  
delivery of the address."

In the same month other ladies addressed  
meetings at Chester, Warrington, Southport, Blackpool and four  
Scotch towns, and there was also a great Public meeting in the  
huge Town Hall, Manchester, with Mr Jacob Bright in the chair.



Besides public speaking, I carried out two pieces of work for the Suffrage in 1874. One was on the invitation of the Bristol and West of England Suffrage Society. The M.P. for Taunton was a lawyer named Sir Henry James, Attorney-General in the Government <sup>of our</sup> ~~of our~~ unfailing and most powerful enemy, <sup>fishbone</sup> ~~fishbone~~. Sir H James declared, in a speech to his Constituents, that, [He maintained that there were no greater traitors in the world against the domestic happiness of men and women alike, than those ladies who, generally being Social Failures, endeavoured to become Political Successes, and tried to make their wives discontented with their lot .... He could only say that when one half of the ladies of Taunton appealed to him to support female suffrage, he would then do so ....] Will then he should not support female suffrage, though he should lose ten elections, and this he said with full knowledge that its advocates would dog his steps wherever he went".

N.P.

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Would that this supposition had been correct! It was, alas! so far from true that, later on, large numbers of women who professed to desire their own enfranchisement would speak and canvas for Candidates for Parliament who had voted, or openly said that <sup>they</sup> meant to vote if returned to the House, against Woman's Suffrage. But in 1874, in Sir Henry James's own case, his footsteps were so far "dogged" that the Bristol Committee asked me to go to Taunton and visit the women ratepayers and householders, the persons who would have the vote if our Bill were passed, explain the subject to them, and see if one-half of them would <sup>wish to</sup> sign a memorial in favour, as suggested by the M.P. himself as a test.

I handed over such medical cases as I had and might



expect to Miss R —, and spent a very interesting fortnight in Taunton on this mission, in <sup>the early spring of</sup> ~~May~~ 1874.

It is true that Sir H James had asked for the signatures of "half the ladies of Taunton". But I explained in a public address who were the women to whom we meant to appeal, and why. I quote the <sup>local newspaper</sup> report: —

"It appeared to the friends of the Suffrage movement that the fair acceptance of Sir Henry James's challenge would be to invite the signatures of half the women householders, ratepayers in their own persons, those who were given votes for the Town Council and other Municipal bodies in 1869, and would vote for M.Ps when our Bill should pass. Wives and daughters had had no experience in voting for any bodies of Representatives, and were not entirely free to utter their own opinions, being under the protection of men and subordinate to men; and they would not be immediately affected by the passing of the Women's Suffrage Bill, as the single women and widows living in their own houses and paying their own taxes would be. The fairest of answers, therefore, to Sir H. James's assertion that women did not want to be enfranchised must be the signatures of those ladies who would be directly concerned."

The roll of local voters showed that Taunton contained 562 women burgesses, ratepayers in their own names, and so entitled to vote for Town Councillors, but not for Members of Parliament. Half of this number is 281. In a very short time I obtained the signatures of 300, several more than the required half, to a Memorial asking Sir H. James to vote for the Woman's Suffrage Bill.

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I found a little band of helpers ready to assist me, in Taunton. They <sup>see local ladies</sup> took the Memorial for signatures to such women householders as were believed to be favourable; and if any one refused to sign I was notified and interviewed her myself. My chief ally amidst the residents was Mrs Motley, author of a then famous novel entitled "Olive Varcoe".

The women ratepayers that I visited & talked to of their own cause were of all ranks. It was the season of lilies-of-the-valley, and I went into several cottages where poor widow women and their elder children were squatting on low stools ~~at~~ the floor absolutely carpeted with the delicate blossoms, which they were deftly forming into bunches for Covent Garden Market. The scent and the aspect were delightful, but the woman struggling against poverty and bravely earning her daily bread was, after all, the more admirable sight.

The strangest character I met with on this expedition was Rosina, Lady Lytton, widow of the famous novelist, Edward Bulwer Lytton, and mother of "Owen Meredith". Her house was all shut up, blinds closely drawn, and no sign of life; after I had rung and knocked there for some time, I was giving it up, when a neighbour came out of his house, and kindly told me that Lady Lytton lived alone and never answered her bell. He said that, as often as not, she was in bed all day, and took exercise and food in the middle of the night, and that my only chance of seeing her was to write first asking for an appointment. I did so, and got a reply, & I then saw her and she signed the Memorial.

She had been for years separated from her famous



husband, whom she hated with more than even the usual virulence of an unhappy marriage. She had the remains of great beauty, but her now aged face was singularly ravaged by time and emotion. Her room was closely shuttered, and lit by a dim lamp, and was suffocating with the odour of musk. [She either gave me then, or later on sent me, an extraordinary book about her married experiences, called "A Blighted Life", in which she charged Bulwer Lytton with all sorts of matrimonial crime, and declared that he frequently terrified her by violence. threw forks at her at table, and so on, and once jumped at her and bit her cheek deeply. <sup>G.P.?</sup> [Her son, the second Lord Lytton (known as a poet as "Owen Meredith") she admitted had taken his father's side in this sadly infelicitous marriage story.]

N.P.

But it was not till after her death that the son revealed his full adhesion to his father's side, and at the same time emphasized the then legal disabilities of a wife. When Rosina Lady Lytton died, she left instructions for the publication of her husband's love-letters to herself. Bulwer Lytton was, anyhow, a great writer, and the letters were of much interest; but certainly they were absurdly and vehemently amorous. The son suppressed the publication. He claimed that the copyright of the letters vested in him as his father's <sup>residuary</sup> heir, and he further claimed that his mother had no property rights even in the letters themselves, as when she was married everything that she possessed, under the law of that time, immediately became her husband's property, and therefore her love-letters themselves were no longer hers, but must be handed over to <sup>her son</sup> ~~him~~ as his father's heir — and he got the judgement of the court on both



counts. The book was suppressed, and the poor dead lady's love-letters confiscated! I thought of her bitter, furious tirade against her husband when I saw her years before, and hoped that she would not hear in another world of this last outrage on her just rights! <sup>N.P.</sup> [She took rather a liking to me at our one interview, and wrote to me several times afterwards. Her letter-paper and envelopes were so saturated with the perfume of musk that I knew <sup>every time</sup> when one had arrived by the odour that greeted me as I entered the breakfast-room. *Those letters were all about her personal grievances against her husband.* It was rather terrible to see a woman so cherishing her sense of wrong, so incapable of letting "the dead past bury its dead". R.I.P., poor soul!

Well, Mrs Notley sent in <sup>to the M.P.</sup> the Memorial from over one-half <sup>of</sup> the lady householders of Taunton, 300 had signed it out of the total of 562, and many were not called on, as I stopped the work when 300 names had been obtained. The fulfilment of his pledge was demanded of Sir H. James when the next division came on in the House of Commons, and he not only took refuge in declaring that he meant that the signatures of half the entire female population of Taunton must be obtained, but he had the colossal impudence to add that he "did not recognize that the Memorial had the signatures ~~of~~ even of 300 women, for when you pay so much for every signature it is easy to get up petitions!" Brrrrrr! - I did wish I could have been there to make mincemeat of his entire foolish speech and especially of this lawyer-like bit of sauciness. But of course the insult was not so much towards me and the ladies who helped me canvas <sup>to</sup> whom he libellously accused of buying the signatures, as it was to the 300 Taunton women of all ranks whom he slandered by insinuating that they



signed their names for payment, — and I sincerely hope they "dogged his footsteps" for it!

I also went for a few days' work in the General Election of <sup>February</sup> 1874, to Whitby, where the candidate was Mr Gladstone's eldest son. My business was to get leading men of his own party to go to interview the candidate, and ask him to promise to vote for Women's Suffrage. I got a very influential deputation. Amongst other arguments, one of the gentleman pointed out that the three leading Hotels of Whitby were all at that time managed by women, who were refused the right to cast their votes which was allowed to their male dependents, their ostlers and waiters and "boots". Young Mr Gladstone said that he could not refute the arguments adduced, but all his feelings were against women coming into politics. "But", he added, "you must go for my father — get him, and you'll have me." A nice side-light on the independent M.P.!



Another little <sup>personal</sup> effort of this year was accompanying Miss Becker and Miss Lillias <sup>Ashworth</sup> ~~to~~ to "sow dissension" in a conference called, on November 17th, <sup>at the Freemason's Tavern, London,</sup> by the "Electoral Reform Association", whose object was to obtain the Suffrage for yet further <sup>large</sup> classes of men. We desired to have the Conference <sup>request the</sup> ~~Association to~~ include Women's Suffrage in its objects. We were all three accredited delegates from local masculine associations, or we should not have been admitted as speakers. This function turned out to be rather a test of endurance, as we first had to sit through about a couple of hours of male oratory urging the assimilation of the County and borough franchise, so as to admit farm labourers and other country cottagers, <sup>paying very trifling rents, but all</sup> of the masculine sex, to the franchise, <sup>then rose &</sup> and ~~then~~ Miss Becker asked leave to move an amendment to the resolution, pledging the associations there represented to seek also "the representation of women on the same terms as men". A long and stormy discussion raged <sup>then</sup> for <sup>over</sup> three hours as to whether any amendments to <sup>the</sup> ~~the~~ <sup>out-</sup>and-dried resolution should be allowed. We three ladies sat tight through an absurdly disorderly and tangled-up discussion; sometimes half a dozen male delegates were on their feet at <sup>one</sup> ~~the same~~ time. Finally, <sup>towards evening</sup> our amendment was settled to be in order; we all three spoke, and the Conference carried our amendment. The Committee of the "Electoral Reform Association", however, did nothing to carry this instruction into effect!

whilst leaving outside still all women farmers, all ladies owning & administering great estates, as well as cottagers who were women.

During the Session of 1874, petitions in favour of removing the sex disability to vote were presented signed by



430,343

35

430,343 individual persons. There were 203 petitions signed by one person officially, as Chairman of a public meeting that had so voted, or <sup>as</sup> from Town Councils partly elected by women's votes. [There had also been Memorials signed by women only to the heads of the two great parties in Parliament, which received the signatures of 11,000 women.

Mr Disraeli returned a clear straightforward answer, saying that he held it "to be an anomaly" that <sup>a</sup>women should be excluded "from exercising <sup>the Parliamentary</sup> franchise attached to a household or property qualification, while in all matters of local government, <sup>when</sup> <sup>Similarly qualified,</sup> she exercises the right", and, <sup>he added</sup> ~~added that~~ "As I hold this anomaly to be injurious to the best interests of the Nation, I hope to see it removed by the wisdom of Parliament." [Mr Gladstone's reply was evasive and unintelligible, according to his bent of mind. He said merely : "I reserve any particular declaration with respect to any proposed mode of procedure for whatever I may deem a suitable occasion, and for my place in Parliament".

Besides these efforts in organizing meetings and petitions, the various Committees issued many leaflets and some pamphlets, and published the monthly Journal. To carry on all these activities about three thousand pounds was subscribed <sup>in this year</sup> by the supporters of the movement.

With such energy, such expense of time, effort and money, did the earliest Suffragists set about converting their fellow countrymen and women to the new idea of Equal Citizenship.