

THE AMERICAN WOMAN IN POLITICS.



OW that the New York Constitutional Convention of 1894 has refused to recommend that the word "male" be stricken from the constitution of the State, a dispassionate word on the subject may perhaps find a gracious hearing on both sides. Many of the women who opposed the introduction of woman suffrage differed from those who advocated it more in premises than in conclusions. In the heat of debate many misunderstood and misjudged each other, because they were arguing from different standpoints. One took the side of abstract right; the other, of concrete reasons. One called the present condition of women slavery; the other termed the proposed condition enslavement. But upon two points most women were agreed: that the politics of the country, as now managed solely by men, offers a wide field for experiment and improvement, and that, whatever share in the affairs of the State women ask to have given to them, it is the desire of none to sacrifice to it the duties that are distinctively feminine.

These two points should form a sufficient basis for reapproachment, and for the effacement of whatever was bitter in party differences.

Among the literary productions of the campaign, Dr. Mary Putnam Jacobi's "Common Sense as Applied to Woman Suffrage" is, on her side of the question, certainly the most important. The book will continue to be read with interest and profit, and, by women, with a recognition of Dr. Jacobi's lifelong labors in behalf of their sex. The title of the book has such a flavor of monopoly, its pages are so crowded with historic illustration, philosophic thought, and positive statement, that it would take an arsenal of argument to discuss its opinions in detail.

There is one point, however,—and it is the main point of divergence between the advocates and opponents of woman suffrage,—that this able treatise leaves unanswered. This is the point of unrestricted suffrage. Dr. Jacobi repeatedly refers to the injustice of granting to the "negro, the Pole, the Italian, the Irishman," a right denied to the American woman,— "the woman in whose veins runs the blood of the colonists who founded our country,"—but she omits to mention the negro, the Italian, the Irish woman at their side, and to tell us how the American woman, by *her* vote, is to prevail against them.

Universal man suffrage is here to stay. We cannot do away with the evils that accompany it; we must, therefore, try to overcome them, rejoicing all the while that the great experiment is being made in a country where the chances are in favor of success. And what better way is there of making this success apparent and permanent than by the intelligent and public-spirited women of the country, through their good judgment and watchfulness, helping the intelligent and public-spirited men to hold their own against the strength of mere numbers—a task that is daily increasing in difficulty? If women will only assume, at election-times, the responsibility of making the men of their households register and vote, and of guarding, as far as possible, against carelessness and indifference in the matter, they will render a valuable service to the State.

If the vote of the present day were to be doubled by opening the sluice-gates to all women, we could directly divide it into four parts: the educated men and the educated women; the ignorant men and the ignorant women (the word "ignorant" seems best to represent the perverse and the unlettered). Why are we not distinctly better off—looking at the question still from a numerical standpoint, and never forgetting for a moment that our government is, as Dr. Jacobi clearly emphasizes, "a government by *public opinion*"—if, by uniting the vote and the influence of the two higher groups, we make the hard struggle not a struggle of two against two, but of two against one?

The suffragists assert that women will not take part in public affairs unless they are rewarded with the franchise. This is a statement that women, by their disinterested, impersonal work in every direction, are daily contradicting. What they do need, before in numbers they become the political helpmates of men, is the conviction that they can learn to be helpful, and that their help is needed in the body politic. This they have never been taught seriously. And when they set to work to find out how they can best make themselves useful, they will discover that it is only by a mastery of hard, dry facts, and by the onward propelling power of disinterested effort, that men in politics attain the best results. The so-called "coaxing" and "wheedling" power of women, supposed to be in such force and favor with men, and sometimes used as an ill-natured taunt by one kind of woman to another kind, is an overestimated power. Men can usually be coaxed into giving

away only that which they themselves do not value. The occasion of a first conference between two of opposite sex may be marked by grace and graciousness, but after that a woman must depend, as do men among men, upon the merits of her cause and the practical knowledge and good sense that she is able to bring to its support. Almost every woman who interests herself in public affairs, and has had experience with officers of government and men of personal influence, will corroborate this statement. She will gladly confess, too, that the more she works, the more she learns that her own best strength lies in the strength of the object that she has at heart. She will win or fail, too, just in proportion to her ability and the single-mindedness of purpose with which she keeps this object in view. Here is an instance in point, quoted from a woman's letter to a woman:

At the time of the Central Park Speedway Bill I wrote to the only man of my acquaintance who had been influential in the passage of that bill, and asked him to come to see me. He paid me an afternoon visit, and I used all the power of persuasion at my command to convince him that he had done wrong, and that the driveway as planned would destroy the beauty of the west side of the park. My talk had absolutely no effect upon him; he laughed at me, and assured me that the outcry against the bill was hysterical and absurd. After he had gone it came over me suddenly that I had no real knowledge of what I had been talking about; I too had only taken up the general cry of the newspapers. I set immediately to work, obtained a map of the park and of the proposed changes, studied and marked them carefully, and on the following Saturday afternoon, when the park was especially crowded with children, I marched my unrepentant friend from the lower to the upper end, pointing out to him, step by step, the havoc which his pet scheme would cause. By the time that we reached the limit of our walk he frankly confessed — being, like most men, not of evil intent — that he was horrified at the destruction proposed. He directly withdrew his support from the movement, and the subject — to my everlasting credit be it recorded — was never again mentioned between us.

This incident illustrates the power that invariably lies, irrespective of sex, in knowing what one is talking about. The writer of the letter quoted failed when she did not know, despite tea-gown and tea-tray, and won easily when she did. It might be suggested by some that a vote on her part would have helped settle the matter more effectually than a walk; but as events proved, there was already enough vote in the question. What was needed was more *voice*.

Many opponents of woman suffrage will agree with the other side, that the question of sex as a physical disability has entered too largely into

the discussions of this subject. If women can work as hard as they do, at almost every employment in life, from factory wheel to circus trapeze, the argument of feminine weakness, as applied to the mere duty of depositing votes, seems more obstructionary than forcible. As to what the subtle and secondary influences upon sex would be,—not the action so much as the reaction,—nobody can foretell. Probably the one side underestimates and the other overstates them. It is certainly the most bitter point of disagreement between the two, and is the one where the conservative hold is the strongest, for it is here that not only does the head argue, but the heart cling.

The question of what services women could render to the State, in return for the full privileges of citizenship, remains undetermined. There is silence on this point if on no other. Men give military and jury service; the fact that all men are not able to do this does not constitute a denial of the duty. Many women when told that the State has need of a certain proportion of soldiers to voters dismiss the remark lightly. But surely they must all have observed during the recent days of excitement and of military rule at Chicago, that there are times in the history of every country when government, if it is government in fact as well as in figure, must measure its strength on the plane of physical force.

Dr. Jacobi says that women, if given the franchise, should perform jury duty. Many will agree with her in this, not because they see in the proposition any economic application of forces, nor because of any clear notion how the plan could be practically and pleasantly carried out, but from sheer unwillingness to accept all and to give nothing. The burden of jury duty would fall principally upon the women whose occupations, paid or unpaid, are connected with house- and home-keeping, for the reason that these constitute the larger number, and their physique is not, as a rule, taxed so heavily as that of the bread-winning women outside. But here, aside from the question of strength and fitness, we touch upon a point of deep significance. When the State summons a man to the courts, it says to him, "Drop your business and serve me; your highest duty is your civic duty." To the woman,—after having excluded the long list of "excused,"—it would be obliged to say, "Leave your domestic affairs and attend to me; the State has the right to summon you peremptorily from your home." This right, by fixing arbitrarily, for uncertain periods of time, the woman's absence from home, would establish the principle that personal duties may at any moment become secondary in a woman's life, and, if put into effect, would clog many a wheel in domestic machinery. The daily round

of a woman's duties, household or personal, is often spoken of slightly, for the reason that, taken singly, the duties often do seem small. But anybody knows how much of the well-being, the comfort, and the good-temper of life depends upon trifles. "Madam," said a philosopher, recently, in answer to a young woman's impatient plea for more poetry and less prose in every-day life, "I am an old man, and experience has taught me that there is much poetry in well-ordered prose."

There are reasons against women serving on mixed juries in the trial of promiscuous cases, which a mere reading of the court and police reports in any daily newspaper will help make evident. Jury duty for women, viewed from this point, changes from a practical into a social and ethical question.

Americans (perhaps better said the people of a republic) are always peculiarly suspicious of men in the community who show willingness to step to the front in public affairs. These men are directly branded by the do-nothings as "ambitious," and their motives are easily discredited. Do American women fail to see the great advantage that for this reason they possess over men, and are they willing to throw it impatiently away? A woman can expend upon public affairs to-day almost as many forces—time, money, and vital energies—as can a man. She may lose a great deal by failure; she can win nothing but inner satisfaction by success. Herein lies the strength of her position. Disinterestedness of motive is a mighty weapon and a strong shield.

If any woman would study what opportunities are within her grasp to-day, let her examine into the life-work of Miss Louisa Lee Schuyler, and learn what she has accomplished, not as a philanthropist, but as a practical politician. It is safe to say that no man in the State of New York knows more accurately than Miss Schuyler what laws have been enacted at Albany during the last twenty years, and the records of the men whose names have been associated with them, in the Senate and the Assembly, to say nothing of the knowledge of municipal affairs. In the interest of some measures for the introduction of which Miss Schuyler was herself responsible, she has worked with unflagging industry, watchfulness, knowledge of detail, and patience, without which they would hardly have been carried through to success. Two laws recently enacted represent the one three

years, the other five years, of unceasing political activity on her part. Miss Schuyler has undoubtedly exceptional gifts in conceiving and shaping philanthropic measures, but her victories have been won, as she herself would be the first to urge, by means of qualities possessed in common with many women who to-day are waiting for the political shackles to fall before they take hold in real earnest of public affairs.

Whatever be the future history of woman suffrage, the recent wide-spread agitation should result in developing a greater interest in public affairs on the part of all women of serious purpose, and in awakening them to a keener sense of personal responsibility to the community at large.

The effect of the movement upon the State, it is to be hoped, will be a franker and more generous recognition of the women who possess strength, ability, and leisure to serve the public good. Without erasing the word "male" from the constitution,—startling phraseology!—the State has ample power to-day to enlarge the scope of their work. In the expenditure of the vast sums of public revenue to which women largely contribute, there are many directions in which the watchfulness of well-chosen, competent women would tend to increase economy and honesty. In the management of State hospitals, asylums, and prisons, women should be allowed an influential voice. Over every public school for girls there should be the superintendence, official but voluntary, of properly qualified women. In municipal matters that concern health and cleanliness, the purifying and beautifying of waste places, the enforcement of tenement-house and poor laws, and the reform of the rules that govern the employment of women and children in factories and shops, the woman's hand should be felt and her special knowledge be utilized. In all these directions, the best qualities of mind, of heart, and of consecrated service could find ample outlet, without any infringement, strain, or discussion of the natural laws that govern the relation, and divide the world's work, between the two sexes.

May the State be induced, through enlightenment or pressure, to take these important matters into consideration, and to act upon them. And may all women, be they suffragists or anti-suffragists, appreciate that the best promise for to-morrow lies always in the best use made of the opportunities of to-day.

Eleonora Kinnicutt.