

Woman Question

PAPER BY J. NEWTON FIERO AT ANTI-SUFFRAGE
MEETING, MAY 11TH, 1894.

It were a rash man to attempt "By either force or skill to turn the current of a woman's will," and it must therefore be conceded on all hands that when the majority of the women of New York favor the extension of suffrage, it will speedily become an accomplished fact. Since men will grant this privilege when women demand it, as they have conceded heretofore more than could be reasonably required, through their disposition to treat the gentler sex not only with justice but in a broad-minded and liberal spirit.

The question is not whether men will exclude women from a right to which they are absolutely entitled, but a broader and more comprehensive one. Will women be benefitted by the suffrage, or will its exercise tend to their real disadvantage? If it is to be valuable to them, men will yield it with pleasure. If it is to be injurious or disadvantageous to them, then men will refuse to grant the dangerous privilege even though it is claimed as a heaven-born right, and refuse it because of their interest in, and respect for women.

The average man, as in duty bound, treats this question in its relation to him as a son, a husband or a father and as he regards women in the light of mother, wife or daughter, and cannot escape looking at the question from the point of view that he owes a duty of care and protection to what is physically, at least, the weaker sex. True, many women are both independent and self-supporting, but the discussion of this subject must proceed with reference to the condition of the great mass of women and to their relations to each other and to the race, and not solely with a view to the interests of the minority who are self-supporting, or for any other reason indifferent to the attention, protection and courtesies of the sterner sex.

As was justly observed on a very recent public occasion by a polished and accomplished orator, the question is from its nature one of extreme delicacy and cannot be treated in many of its aspects with the frankness its importance demands, since much must be left unsaid that has an important bearing upon the determination of the question, but its main features, as to the benefits or disadvantages of the suffrage to the gentler sex, are open to full discussion.

Woman is not qualified for the ballot or likely to be benefitted by its exercise for physical and physiological reasons:

Plato in his ideal Republic, in order to arrive at a conclusion as to the propriety of woman's sharing in the duties citizens owe to the state, asks, "Is she capable of sharing, either wholly or partially, or not at all, in the actions of men," and seems to regard her right to participate in the affairs of Government to be determined by the answer of the question he proposes: "Whether she can share in the toils of war and the defence of the country?"

The right to take part in the political affairs is one of the same class of duties as the performance of duty as jurors in courts of justice, and service, voluntary or compulsory, in the army and navy, and from time immemorial the person exercising political control in time of Peace have been held responsible for the preservation of the Government by force of arms in time of war.

The protest against the suffrage rightly speaks of its burdens and responsibilities, since with the right to vote is closely connected the enforcement of purity of the ballot, the inquiry into the honesty and capability of public officials and the proper administration of affairs of Government. To all these, women are manifestly and confessedly unequal. Physically, women are not fitted for the task of protecting and upholding any form of Government. They may be active in putting it in operation by their ballots but must yield the burden and cast aside the responsibility when the circumstances demand strength and endurance in camp or on the battlefield. These are, however, necessarily and logically connected with the right to the ballot and are burdens and responsibilities which must reasonably be assumed as inseparable from it. Women must therefore recognize the natural limitations upon her strength and fitness to discharge the duties of citizenship.

From what may reasonably be termed a business standpoint, involving the legal rights of women, there is certainly little to be desired by way of improvement or reform and nothing to be gained by her active participation in politics. The old restrictions upon the rights of women to hold property independent of their husbands and to deal with it in the same manner as men have been entirely swept away, and women stand before the law in every respect entitled to at least the same rights and privileges as the sterner sex. In addition there is a survival of all the old rules devised as a protection to women, well illustrated by the retention upon the statute books of the

right of dower which every married woman has in the real estate of her husband, so that he is unable to dispose of his real property without her consent, and the right on the part of the wife to demand and receive from the husband support and maintenance according to his rank and station in life and his ability to provide for himself and family. Thus, in no respect is woman hampered by law as regards material affairs, but rather highly favored by its provisions and the reason so frequent and persistently alleged that women should be granted the ballot, that she may be able to protect herself in her property rights, is entirely dissipated by the progress of modern law reform in the direction of legal emancipation of women, so that in truth and fact she is entitled not only to absolutely control her own property but to certain rights in that of her husband, of which she cannot by any act of his be divested or deprived.

In the natural course of events and order of things the right of suffrage, by means of which women is expected to provide for and protect herself at the polls, must react against her so far as her legal rights are concerned, by compelling men to lay aside all considerations of compliment, chivalry or courtesy and assert their rights, to at least an equality with reference to property interests. It can scarcely be possible that women can at the same time appeal to the sense of justice in men by reason of their helplessness and in the same breath insist upon their rights at the ballot box which are to be enforced by their political power.

There still remains the sentimental side of the question,—difficult of treatment and scarcely possible of adequate presentation,—well expressed in a recent pithy discussion of the question in these words, "It seems a pity that the barriers to harmony and sympathy between men and women, which have been building for the last fifty years, should be increased by this new effort, in as much as the sexes cannot exist without each other as long as the world lasts. American women, of all others, should shrink from encouraging distrust in their husbands and fathers and looking upon them as they are learning to do in the light of lineal descendents of the forty thieves."

If women are no longer to rely upon the fact that they are to be treated with consideration because they are the weaker sex physically, but insist upon certain alleged rights and privileges because they may be able at the ballot box to govern and control Legislation, they must certainly expect but scant courtesy outside of matters of strict justice and can scarcely be

reasonably expected to receive at the hands of men that chivalrous treatment with regard, not only to their rights but as to privileges, which is now so cheerfully accorded them. In this aspect, assertion of power must, in every respect, be disadvantageous to women, since they are certainly not so well qualified to carry on the machinery of politics and the administration of the affairs of Government as are men, by reason of their nature, education and experience.

It is insisted that the advent of women in the field of active political life would tend to purify elections and reform legislators, which is by no means likely, since it is much more probable that in the contact with political methods at the polls and in the details of legislation, women would be dragged to the political level of men then elevate the existing standard of political morality. Even where it otherwise, it would seem that the price would be too great to pay for a reform of this character, if, in order to accomplish it, women must not only exercise the right of suffrage, but as its logical outcome, must attend the primaries, arrange for local assemblies and political meetings, be active at the caucus and upon the stump and take upon themselves, not only the right and privileges but the burdens and responsibilities of the ward politician as well as of the statesman.

It is for these, among other reasons, that women have not heretofore desired, and do not, as to the majority, now insist upon the right of suffrage, and this question must ultimately turn, not upon whether suffrage is their natural right or whether it may prove expedient to the administration of governmental affairs, but upon its effect upon women as such, whether beneficial or the contrary, and until the gentler sex are fully satisfied that they will receive some substantial and material benefit from the burdens and responsibilities of the suffrage, the majority will continue to protest against having cast upon them a right which will subject them to personal annoyance, serious inconveniences and material disadvantages, without corresponding benefits. Until such time, Man as the natural guardian and protector of women will insist upon shielding her from burdens and responsibilities fit to be borne alone by that sterner sex which is endowed by nature in such a manner as to be physically adapted to govern as statesman, or, if need be, maintain as soldiers the integrity of the political institutions for which it should be solely responsible.