

WOMAN'S RIGHTS IN AMERICA

A RETROSPECT OF SIXTY YEARS

1848—1908

BY

MRS. CAROLINE F. CORBIN

THE ILLINOIS ASSOCIATION

OPPOSED TO THE EXTENSION OF SUFFRAGE TO WOMEN

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IN July, 1848, just sixty years ago, the first call for a public meeting "to consider the social, civil, and religious condition and rights of women," was issued by four women in the State of New York. This is usually considered the beginning of the Woman's Rights movement in America. It is not generally understood that the commencement of the work of securing legal property rights for women, antedated this call by twelve years; that it was commenced, not by women, but by men, was carried forward by men, and crowned with success through the labors of men.

As early as 1836, Judge Hertell presented to the legislature of New York, a measure to secure property rights to married women. The bill had been drawn under the supervision of the Chief-Justice of the Supreme Court and one of the official revisers of statutes. It aroused much discussion, but failed to pass. It was advocated, however, by Paulina Wright Davis and Ernestine L. Rose, two women of that extreme type of so-called reformers, now known as socialists or anarchists; a type then represented in New York by a few noisy agitators who called themselves philanthropists. So unpopular was woman suffrage at that time, that it is more than probable that the advocacy of these women was partly responsible for the defeat of the bill. It served, however, to mark the fact that from the beginning of the woman movement there has always been two distinct forces at work—the calm, evolutionary growth of sentiment in regard to the importance of woman as a factor in the social and civil development of the Christian state, and the fanatical, unreasoning, and destructive claims of those who would overturn the state altogether, and with it all the institutions of Christian civilization.

The orderly and humane sentiment in favor of woman's rights, however, continued to progress. It was manifested in efforts for the higher education of women under the leadership of such men and women as Horace Mann, Emma Willard, Mary Lyon, and scores of other educators, less known but not less earnest in their activities. All these philanthropists plead for the improvement of educational facilities for women, in order that they might be better

prepared for their work as wives and mothers; especially that they might train the coming generation in mind and morals and social philosophy to be equal to their enhancing destiny as American citizens. They openly deprecated the idea of making politicians of women. On the other hand, the advocates of the political rights of women—woman suffragists, as they had begun to be called—urged the education of women along the same lines as those established for the education of men. They scorned women's seminaries and colleges, and demanded that the universities and professional colleges for men should be opened to women on equal terms, in order that women might become doctors, lawyers, preachers, and teachers of the higher branches of learning, equally with men.

In the meantime, two men in the State of New York, impelled by the fact that each had a relative, the one a wife and the other a young daughter, who might in the event of their death or of financial disaster, be bereft of property which they held by personal inheritance, renewed the agitation for the legal rights of women, and in 1848, carried their bill through the legislature. There is ample evidence that these men were not influenced by women, in their endeavors, and that political rights for women were quite out of the scope of their purposes. About the same time, several other state legislatures were moved by similar considerations to take the same action—namely, Rhode Island, Connecticut, Texas, New Hampshire, Indiana, Wisconsin, and Iowa. In not one of these states had the cause of woman suffrage a shadow of influence, at that time. Such legislation sprang from a simple sense of justice on the part of the free men of America toward the women who are their partners or their heirs in the rights of a free country.

Sixty years ago, for it will be noticed that the epoch was equally marked in the progress of the two movements in behalf of women, the country was poor, and especially in the Western States then being rapidly settled and just forming their institutions, the expedient of coeducation seemed to promise a speedier advance in the education of women than could be attained in any other way. It thus happened that the two movements, which were in reality wholly separate in their origin and motive, seemed to coalesce, and a number of state universities and a few of private origin adopted coeducation. The suffragists, with an assurance in which they have never been wanting, claimed this as a great step in progress, and one wholly due to their exertions. Then, for a time, it seemed that the doctrine of the political rights of women was making a great advance; and when two or three states in the far west, whose popu-

lation was scattered for the most part in newly-planted villages along the Rocky Mountains—under strong populist and Mormon influence—granted full suffrage to women, it really seemed as though the so-called emancipation of women loomed in the near future.

But a new force was preparing to enter upon the field. For forty years the quiet, home-loving women of America had been silently but closely watching the course of events to see what was likely to be the outcome of all this agitation in behalf of woman. In that time, they had formed deep and decided convictions upon the subject. They could see in the demand for woman suffrage only an attempt to thrust upon them, in addition to their own most important and exhausting duties, those labors and responsibilities of which they had hitherto been relieved by the men of their households, under that specialization of the work of the two sexes which they believed to be of divine ordination. They were averse to public action, unaccustomed to conventions and platforms, but their moral sense was aroused, and for their conscientious convictions they were ready to make some painful sacrifices.

The inception of this movement was nearly simultaneous, though wholly unrelated, in the East and the West. Its first stirrings came to the surface in 1880-85. It commenced by quiet opposition, through petitions and personal pleas, to the suffrage bills which were introduced into legislatures, by remonstrances in the public press, and by the private circulation of literature to newspapers, legislators, libraries, and prominent men and women in the various states. Year by year, the movement grew. For the first decade, it was wholly unorganized, although there was a lively and cordial correspondence between the anti-suffragists in different parts of the country. But at the end of that time, associations and committees began to be formed, until at present in every state where the suffrage movement shows dangerous strength, a counter movement is quietly set on foot. Many thousands of anti-suffrage documents are printed and distributed every year, and it is well known throughout the country that the women who direct the movement are of high character and standing, often including some of the ablest and most influential in their section of the country. As a result of this activity, the suffrage movement has not gained a legislative victory of any importance during the last ten years, while its defeats are numbered by hundreds.

At the very beginning of the anti-suffrage movement, it attracted a considerable number of that class of women who had been promi-

nent in philanthropic enterprises and had received government appointments upon the boards of educational and charitable bodies. These women called attention to the fact, that in their very responsible positions they enjoyed special privileges and advantages because they were *not* voters. [See "*How Women May Best Serve the State*," by Mrs. Barclay Hazard.] Most popular governments are conducted by political parties, and a keen rivalry exists between them. Every voter is intently scanned, and if he wishes any favor from the government it must be obtained through his party, and not by appeal to the country at large; and his request is sure to be antagonized by the opposing party, without reference to the justice or reasonableness of his claim. Time and again, such appeals for just and beneficial measures have been disregarded from party motives. But it was soon found that if such appeals came from the women interested, acting individually and from no political motive whatever, but simply in behalf of the public good, there was little difficulty in having them granted. Women have thus come to occupy an independent position above all parties—a position of which the right to vote would rob them immediately. These women, therefore, said at once, and time has only added emphasis to their statement, that *women possess far more influence in the state for all moral and unselfish purposes, without the ballot, than they would have with it.* It is only for purposes of selfish ambition, political intrigue, and noisy notoriety, that the ballot avails anything to woman. It may fairly be said that the practical experiments that have been made with woman suffrage have substantiated this statement. Women who are unselfishly devoted to the public good are gradually coming to form a third party, independent of all political parties, and wielding an influence above them all. In this way, they have an assured position of their own, while as party politicians they must rise or fall with the fortunes of their masculine co-workers.

Coeducation has also developed some unexpected results. From the point of view of economy, it is no doubt a success; but that there are embarrassing circumstances, arising from the social intercourse of youth of both sexes, without the restraints of home-life or parental care, is manifest from the earnest attempts at "segregation" in some of our largest institutions. Intellectually, also, there has been found to be a serious difference between the adaptability of girls and boys for certain courses of study. From classes in architecture, mining, engineering, civil or electrical, and others of similar scope, including those increasingly popular ones that involve advanced manual training, it has proved to be for the best good of

all concerned, that girls should be excluded; while in many cases, courses in domestic science, hygiene, the chemical values of food, and cooking, and in some instances, the care and nursing of invalids and children, have been substituted.

But, perhaps, the most important conclusion, established by this retrospect of sixty years, remains to be noted.

It will easily be recalled that the year 1848 was that of the attempted socialistic revolution in Europe, which developed so formidable a power and came near rivaling the catastrophe of 1793 in importance. It is now well known and admitted that woman suffrage is not only a tenet of Socialism, but one of its fundamental principles; the one, indeed, that is most indispensable to its success, since any "revolution" that affects but one-half the race, must of necessity be futile—abortive. Absolute "equality" of all human beings is all that will satisfy the socialistic requirements. It was from this sentiment, so widely diffused in Europe in the middle of the last century, that the woman-suffrage movement in America took its rise. Comparatively few Americans were aware of the fact, at the time of its inception. Still fewer realized that so vital was the connection between the offshoot and the parent stock, that no other means of opposing Socialism could be so effective as to combat and frustrate its efforts to achieve the industrial and political independence of women. In the opinion of many of the closest observers, the cause of woman suffrage would have been dead in America, long ago, if it had not been for the energetic support, open or covert, which it has received from the Socialistic propaganda. With Socialists, as we have said, the question of woman suffrage is of the deepest and most vital import. It is indispensable to their schemes. It is for this reason that women are everywhere welcomed to their councils, made prominent upon their platforms, encouraged to take part in their secret intrigues, and indeed in their armed assaults. The main objects of Socialism, so far as women are concerned, is to revolutionize entirely her position in regard to all social and political life. A recent newspaper article puts the case very fairly thus:

"It is a physiological fact that in justice to herself, her children, and to society at large, the child-bearing woman ought not to be compelled to labor for her own support. Her maternal duties constitute an insurmountable handicap in the labor market.

"The present social order meets this condition of things by providing that the father of her children shall, through the institution of marriage, labor for her support and that of their children, he

attending to the external duties of their united life, and she to the domestic affairs. If woman is to become industrially independent of man, some other way of providing for her support during her child-bearing years must be devised. Socialism puts this responsibility upon the state, together with that of caring for the children. What then becomes of marriage and the home? Is there any escape from the conviction that the industrial and political independence of woman would be the wreck of our present domestic institutions?"

It is precisely this end at which Socialism aims. This is the true significance of its outcry for "equality" between men and women, for "equal work" and "equal pay," without regard to those characteristics and conditions of sex that practically modify, to a great extent, the amount and character of service; the demand for free marriage, free divorce, and the removal of all legal or social restrictions upon the relations between men and women.

Anti-suffrage women have not failed to take into the account, the embarrassments that have arisen from the changes that are going on in regard to the employment of women in those occupations which have hitherto been regarded as belonging exclusively to men. They believe these changes, adverse as they are to the wage-earning capacity of men, and therefore most inimical to the true interests of the home, are temporary, and that they will yield in time to the increasing sense of the importance and dignity of our domestic institutions, and those varied domestic needs which are now so hampered by lack of capable and efficient service. But whatever the remedy for these evils of a transitional state, they are firmly convinced that it does not lie in the direction of woman suffrage nor any other socialistic nostrum.

Mrs. Cobden Sanderson, the English suffragist who has recently been advocating in America the violent methods employed by the extremists of her party in England, is reported as saying publicly on her return to her own country, that the anti-suffrage movement in America is having a most disastrous effect upon the suffrage cause, and that she could see little hope for suffrage in America, except through Socialism.

But will not American women pause to reckon the price which they must pay to the Socialist propaganda for the so-called emancipation? That price is simply the wreck of the home, the abandonment of all their legal rights to its support and protection and the surrender of their children to the care of the state. This is the question which they face when they listen to the specious pleas and fallacious statements of the advocates of woman suffrage.

ILLINOIS ASSOCIATION
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 TO WOMEN

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