

FEMALE SUFFRAGE

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Female suffrage by Goldwin Smith

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BY
GOLDWIN SMITH.

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1875.

PREFACE.

THIS Paper has been reprinted by desire of some Members of the House of Commons. It has been revised, and some sentences have been added to meet new arguments on the other side, while special allusions to the legislative phase of the question last session have been omitted.

I cannot take notice of personal attacks, especially when they proceed from ladies. In answer to appeals to party allegiance I have to say, in the first place, that the Bill for removing the Electoral Disabilities of Women comes from the Conservative side of the House, and is apparently, like the enfranchisement of the residuum, not unconnected with the objects of a reactionary policy. In the second place, what is of much more importance, I have to say that I owe allegiance to party in politics, not when it invades the family and home.

A friend, seconding the request that the Paper should be reprinted, writes to me: "The argument that weighs most with me is the incalculable danger of disturbing the tacit concordat on which the relations between the sexes now repose. By virtue of that concordat women get more privileges and fewer burdens, while men take rights and burdens for themselves. Whatever tends to upset this compromise tends to bring on a struggle in which the weaker must needs go to the wall."

G. S.



FEMALE SUFFRAGE.

THE Bill for removing the Electoral Disabilities of Women has received less attention than the subject deserves. A good deal of personal pressure has been applied in favour of the Bill, and there are probably not a few among its pledged supporters who are far from seeing clearly all the consequences of their vote. The very foundations of society are touched when change is proposed in the relations of the sexes.

In England the proposal at present is to give the suffrage only to unmarried women being householders. But the drawing of this hard-and-fast line is at the outset contested by the champions of Woman's Rights; and it seems impossible that the distinction should be maintained. The lodger-franchise is evidently the vanishing point of the feudal connection between political privilege and the possession of houses or land. The suffrage will become personal in England, as it has elsewhere. If a property qualification remains, it will be one embracing all kinds of property: money settled on a married woman for her separate use, as well as the house or lodgings occupied by a widow or a spinster. In the counties already married women have qualifications in the form of land settled to their separate use; and the notion that a spinster in lodgings is specially entitled to the suffrage as the head of a household, is one of those pieces of metaphysics in which the politicians who affect to scorn anything metaphysical are apt themselves unwarily to indulge. If the present motion is carried, the

votes of the female householders, with that system of election pledges which is now enabling minorities, and even small minorities, to control national legislation, will form the crowbar by which the next barrier will be speedily forced. The framer of the Bill, in fact, himself tells his dissatisfied supporters that the limitation to unmarried women is introduced only to hoodwink the House of Commons, which must be very manageable if it can be so easily duped. It is for married women especially that the boon is sought by the authors of the movement, whose favourite argument is the elevating effect which would be produced on the marriage bond by making political interests common to man and wife.

Marriage itself, as it raises the position of a woman in the eyes of all but the very radical section of the Woman's Rights party, could hardly be treated as politically penal. And yet an Act conferring the suffrage on married women would probably be the most momentous step that could be taken by any legislature, since it would declare the family not to be a political unit, and for the first time authorise a wife, and make it in certain cases her duty as a citizen, to act publicly in opposition to her husband. Those at least who hold the family to be worth as much as the state, will think twice before they concur in such a change.

With the right of electing must ultimately go the right of being elected. The contempt with which the candidature of Mrs. Victoria Woodhull for the Presidency was received by some of the advocates of Female Suffrage in America only showed that they had not considered the consequences of their own principles. Surely she who gives the mandate is competent herself to carry it. Under the parliamentary system, whatever the forms and phrases may be, the constituencies are the supreme arbiters of the national policy, and decide not only who shall be the legislators, but what shall be the course of legislation. They have long virtually appointed the Ministers, and now they appoint them actually. Twice the Government has been changed by a plebiscite, and on the second occasion the Budget was submitted to the con-

stituencies as directly as ever it was to the House of Commons. There may be some repugnance, natural or traditional, to be overcome in admitting women to seats in Parliament, but there is also some repugnance to be overcome in throwing them into the turmoil of contested elections, in which, as soon as Female Suffrage is carried, some ladies will unquestionably claim their part. Supposing Parliament to declare sex no longer a political disqualification, it is difficult to see on what ground Peeresses in their own right could be prevented from taking their seats in the House of Lords.

There are members of Parliament who shrink from the step which they are now urged to take, but who fancy that they have no choice left them because the municipal franchise has already been conceded. The municipal franchise was no doubt intended to be the thin end of the wedge. Nevertheless there is a great step between this and the national franchise; between allowing female influence to prevail in the disposition of school rates, or other local rates, and allowing it to prevail in the supreme government of the country. To see that it is so, we have only to imagine the foreign policy of England determined by the women, while that of other countries is determined by the men; and this in the age of Bismarck. In case the great European conflict, for which everybody is armed, should come, it seems not difficult to predict the fate of a nation whose councils should be swayed by its women.

The writer of this paper himself once signed a petition for Female Household Suffrage got up by Mr. Mill. He has always been for enlarging the number of active citizens as much as possible, and widening the basis of government, in accordance with the maxim, which seems to him the sum of political philosophy, "That is the best form of government which doth most actuate and dispose all parts and members of the commonwealth to the common good." He had not, when he signed the petition, seen the public life of women in the United States. But he was at once led to reconsider what he had done, and prevented from going further, by finding that the movement was received with mistrust by