

	PAGE
HANNAMARY'S PENNY	<i>H. Glynn Ward</i> 141
KCHOKS	144
BOOK REVIEWS	150
CITIES AND CHILDREN	<i>E. A. Browning</i> 161
IN DEVASTATED FRANCE	<i>Beatrice Harraden</i> 170
THE QUOTATION FIEND	<i>Ethel Smyth, Mrs. Doc.</i> 179
DR. MONTESSORI	<i>B. Moul</i> 183
THE DRAMA OF THE DAY: 'IN THE NIGHT'—'TEA FOR THREE'— 'MR. TODD'S EXPERIMENT'—'PETER IBBETSON'—'PYGMALION'	<i>S. R. D.</i> 191
AMERICA AND THE GIRL'S BOOK	<i>Roclanâ Grey</i> 199
SONNET	<i>A. Bührer</i> 205
A PLOUGHMAN'S DAY	<i>Olive Hockin</i> 207
YVES	<i>Harriet Pleydell</i> 213
VICTORY	<i>Doris S. Goodwin</i> 222
ECHOES	223
SEA-FANTASY. Poem	<i>Jean Guthrie-Smith</i> 230
BOOK REVIEWS	231

# THE ENGLISHWOMAN

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## THE DIFFERENCE SUFFRAGE HAS MADE

IT was a favourite statement of the Anti-Suffragists before we had really won our battle, but as soon as the outcome of it had become a certainty, that Votes for Women 'would make no difference.' This was the *leit-motif* of Lord Bryce's anti-suffrage speech in the House of Lords in December, 1917. We, however, who had been suffrage workers for many years, knew that even before a single woman had voted, the certainty that some millions of women would presently become voters made a great and instantaneous difference in the outlook on nearly every woman's question. When the Representation of the People Bill was still before the House of Commons, the Women's Suffrage clauses having been agreed to by immense majorities, made up of majorities of every party into which the House was divided, we felt the ground so solid beneath our feet that we pressed vigorously for an important improvement in the Bill, namely, the application to the Municipal voter of the same principle which had already been accepted by the House in regard to the Parliamentary voter, that the wife of a householder should be placed upon the register exactly as if she had been a householder in her own right. The Government at first refused to sanction this extension of the principle which they had themselves adopted

## THE ENGLISHWOMAN

in regard to the more important franchise. But the women continued to press their claim, and there were vigorous protests in our favour in all parts of the House of Commons. The debate being adjourned, we used the interval before its resumption to bombard the minister in charge of the Bill with letters, telegrams, and memorials in favour of giving the wife of a householder the same claim to the Municipal franchise as she already enjoyed as regards the Parliamentary franchise. We won easily; the Government withdrew its opposition, and the clause as amended was accepted without a division. Thus, without the existence of a single woman voter, but simply on the strength of her coming into existence in the next few months, the number of women on the municipal registers of Great Britain and Ireland was increased from about one million to over eight-and-a-half millions. Still, Lord Bryce and other Anti-Suffragists went on singing their old song that Suffrage made no difference.

Another evidence of the difference Suffrage had made even before any women had voted was the quiet removal of the grille in front of the Ladies' Gallery. The unfortunate women who sat behind it had been assured by successive First Commissioners of Works that it existed entirely for the comfort and convenience of its victims. It was, however, obviously a symbol of women's political subordination, and was quietly removed in anticipation of the certain end of this subordination as soon as the Reform Bill was through in the Commons. At the same time women were given the right to seats in the Strangers' Gallery. Part of the grille, I understand, is to be put up in the London Museum, and part is reserved among the curiosities of the House itself. It may be hoped that wherever it is kept, a few waxwork dummies will be placed behind it, so that its original use and intention can be appreciated by future generations.

When the Representation of the People Act was before the House of Lords, a further improvement was made in it from the women's point of view in regard to the woman University voter. The Commons had adopted

## DIFFERENCE SUFFRAGE HAS MADE

without amendment the recommendation of the Speaker's Conference that women members of Universities should receive the University franchise, but this left out of account the women who had studied in Oxford and Cambridge; and had received the Vice-Chancellor's certificate that they had passed examinations which would have entitled them to degrees if they had been men. An amendment moved in the House of Lords was accepted which placed these women in the same position as regards the University franchise as if they had been members of the University. This has greatly strengthened the women's case for membership of Oxford and Cambridge, and both ancient Universities have shown their appreciation of the new situation by appointing syndicates to examine into and report on the subject. There are strong hopes that the refusal to women of the position and privileges of membership of the two older Universities will in a few months be abandoned. A Commission appointed by the Government to inquire into and report upon the financial situation of Oxford and Cambridge and their claim to Government assistance has been appointed, with two ladies upon it: Miss Penrose, of Somerville College, Oxford, and Miss Clough, of Newnham College, Cambridge. Some years ago, before the war, I remember a debate in the House of Lords on the subject of the desirability of the appointment of a new University Commission, in which not one word was said by any noble lord to show that he was aware that there were any women students in Oxford and Cambridge. Times have changed indeed since then.

A comparison of the legislative harvest on questions having special reference to the welfare, status, or opportunities of women in the fifteen years from 1900 to 1914, and the less than two years between February, 1918, and November, 1919, reduces to an arithmetical certainty the fallacy that the vote makes no difference. The years of the War are purposely omitted, because domestic legislation was so very largely suspended during that

## THE ENGLISHWOMAN

interval that it seems unfair to add them. If they were added, they would obviously, however, only add to the strength of my argument. Taking, then, the period between 1900 and 1914, we find only two measures of first-rate importance which were aimed at improving the welfare, status, and opportunities of women: these were the Midwives Act of 1902 and the Qualification of Women (County and Borough Councils) Act, 1907. This last was followed by what may be called consequential Acts, on similar but not identical lines, for Scotland (1907), Ireland (1911), and in 1914 by another Act creating for men and women alike a residential, as distinct from a ratepayers', qualification.

A few words on the above-named Acts are called for. The case for legislation to ensure the proper training of midwives for their calling was overwhelmingly strong. It was calculated that in 70 per cent. of the births in Great Britain the women were attended by midwives. No provision whatever was made by Parliament to secure that they had had a proper training; maternal deaths were unnecessarily high, and in some districts alarmingly so, especially from puerperal fever. The case for legislation was, therefore, overwhelming, and especially so in that the subject was free from all possibility of Party bias. But it took a considerable group of very able women twelve years' hard and incessant work to get this obviously desirable Act on the Statute Book. There was a certain amount of opposition to it from male doctors not occupying very distinguished positions who were nervous of anything which improved the status and professional position of the midwife. Nearly all members of Parliament had some such men among their constituents, and this was one of the difficulties which the group of those who were working for the Act had to overcome. The opposition to the Bill was represented by voters; the main body of those who were keenly in favour of the Bill were non-voters; however, at last the Bill became an Act; but it was not without, notoriously weak places in its constitution—places which the promoters of the Bill were well aware

## DIFFERENCE SUFFRAGE HAS MADE

of, but were afraid to attempt to amend on account of the risk of arousing successful Parliamentary opposition. Among these weak places was the non-provision of any source from which the fees of a medical practitioner could be provided in the event of the midwife finding it necessary to seek his aid; there was also no provision made for finding travelling expenses for the Central Midwife's Board. No amending Act was passed until women had become voters.

The Qualification of Women (County and Borough Councils) Act, 1907, removed the disqualification formerly attached to sex and marriage, and rendered eligible on county and borough councils wives living with their husbands and daughters living with their parents. It was passed during the brief Premiership of Sir Henry Campbell-Bannerman in 1907, the necessary legislation being announced in the King's Speech at the opening of Parliament in that year. It was the first time in the 700 years of British Parliamentary history that an extension of the civil liberties of women had ever occupied such a position. The Act referred to above, though non-contentious in the Party sense, required fourteen years' very strenuous work from an exceptionally able society, combined with the fortunate accident of the reign of an open-minded Prime Minister, to obtain the acceptance of Parliament.

Now we pass to the very different harvest reaped in the twenty-three months from February, 1918, to December, 1919, after the passing of the Representation of the People Act. In every one of the cases about to be quoted the necessary legislation went through both Houses quickly and quietly, without the wearing, exhausting work which had absorbed so many capable women in the days when we could not count a single vote between us.

After the passing of the Representation of the People Act, which made women voters, there passed through Parliament rapidly and easily:—

1918. *The Eligibility of Women Act*, which rendered the election of women as Members of Parliament a possibility. The Bill passed almost without opposition.

## THE ENGLISHWOMAN

through both Houses. But it did not become law until about three weeks before the General Election. The time for the selection of constituencies and for the necessary preparation was all too short. Nevertheless, there were seventeen women candidates, one of whom, the Countess Markievicz, was elected in Dublin, but has not taken her seat. On November 28th, 1919, Lady Astor was returned for Plymouth by a very large majority. She won by a majority of more than five thousand, and polled more than one thousand votes over both the other candidates combined. It is understood that the naval and military absent voters very materially increased her majority. All this is very encouraging. Lady Astor has a great position, and women look to her with mingled pride and high expectation.

1918. *Affiliation Orders (increase of maximum payment) Act* amends the Bastardy Laws Amendment Act of 1872, which fixed 5s. a week as the maximum sum which a father could be made to pay for the maintenance of an illegitimate child, and increased this sum to 10s. a week.

1918. *Midwives Amending Act* removes or patches up some of the weak places in the Act of 1902; it provides for the payment of a medical practitioner if called in, and for other necessary expenses connected with the administration of the Act. The Minister in charge of the Bill, Mr. Hayes Fisher, now Lord Downham, said in the House: 'We all want to attract to this great profession ... a high class of midwives ... we want them more in number ... and we want to improve them in status.' Nothing of this sort had ever been heard from the Government Bench before women had votes.

1919. *Sex Disqualification Removal Act*. This Act goes some of the way, but not the whole way, towards the fulfilment of the pledge given by the Government in 1918 to remove all inequalities in the law between men and women. The much more thorough-going Bill, introduced by the Labour Party in the same Session, passed through all its stages in the House of Commons notwithstanding Government opposition, but was torpedoed in

## DIFFERENCE SUFFRAGE HAS MADE

the House of Lords, and the Government Bill substituted. This Bill, the weakest part of which is its failure to give women the right of entry into the Civil Service, as recommended by the Royal Commission of 1918, nevertheless contains important provisions in the direction of equality. It renders women capable of serving on juries, of being appointed Justices of the Peace, of entering the legal profession, and it removes all doubt as to the powers of Oxford and Cambridge to admit women to membership.

1919. *Mothers' Succession (Scotland) Act* establishes for the first time in Scotland the right of a mother to succeed to the estate of an intestate child.

1919. *Nurses' Registration Bill* was adopted as a Government measure. Trained nurses, without the vote, had been working for registration for thirty-two years. The Bill was taken up by the Ministry of Health, and was carried into law within eighteen months of women's enfranchisement.

If our readers will compare the two Acts passed in the fifteen years with the six Acts passed in twenty-three months, conviction must be carried to every open mind that Suffrage has made a difference. The astonishing thing is that any one with an ounce of political experience should ever have doubted it.

MILLCENT GARRETT FAWCETT.