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THE A.B.C. OF VOTES FOR WOMEN.

BY

MARION HOLMES

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Almost invariably the statement that the vote is denied to "criminals, lunatics, imbeciles, paupers, children—and women" raises a laugh. Many women themselves seem to think that a good joke is hidden in the phrase. Yet, seeing that the consequences of disqualification are so serious, it is hardly probable that the sapient persons who drew up this list did it in a jocular mood. They doubtless had in their minds certain well or ill-defined reasons as to why each disqualification was imposed. That being so, it is as well that women, instead of acquiescing in so dubious a joke, should try to find out why their sex is placed in such sinister company, and, having understood, if the action be based on just and reasonable grounds, submit patiently and

humbly ; or, if not, then rebel for the honour and status of womanhood all over the world.

The Value of the Vote.

The first thing to be clearly grasped is the value and power of this right that is denied to us.

It is acknowledged that some of the fiercest fights in history have waged round the question, "To vote or not to vote." The South African war of a decade ago, for which we paid such heavy toll in blood and money, was ostensibly undertaken to gain this very point for the Outlander. Men have fought and rioted, burnt and pillaged, murdered and died to make this right their own. Their very bitterness of the struggle to gain possession of it proves its value and power. Men do not fight and suffer so fiercely for a thing of little worth.

The right of voting confers upon the individual and the nation the dignity of self-government. The voters give to certain individuals the power to make the laws. The laws determine the conditions under which the people shall live. The non-voters have to obey the laws and submit to the conditions without having the power to alter or influence them. In a word, the difference between the voter and the non-voter is the difference between bondage and freedom.

"Criminals – "

The power of the franchise being such then, it is easily understood why criminals and lunatics should not be allowed to exercise it. Their exclusion is based on palpably reasonable grounds.

The criminal is an outlaw, a menace to the safety and well-being of the rest of the community. He is not prepared to recognise and obey the restrictions that it is found necessary to impose for the common good. He desires to gratify his own greed, licence, or cruelty at the expense of others. He destroys and wrecks, instead of builds up and consolidates the fabric of society. Manifestly he must not be allowed to say what laws shall be imposed upon others when he is not prepared to obey them himself.

"Lunatics and Imbeciles – "

The lunatic or imbecile is incapable of forming a clear and sane judgement; he therefore must not exercise power that has an effect upon the lives and happiness of other people. (True, the imposition of this disqualification would seem to imply that all voters had passed some sort of test to prove their intellectual fitness to vote. This is not the case; it applies only to those who are medically certified to be unfit – quite a nice distinction in its way.)

"Paupers – "

The pauper disqualification is based on rather different grounds from the rest. The right to the franchise is, roughly speaking, supposed to be a *quid pro quo* for services rendered to the State. That being so, it is easy to see how these

despised members of society came to be put upon the list.

From the present point of view of the State the pauper is a burden. He does not contribute to the upkeep or prosperity of the country; his maintenance imposes a tax upon the industry of others, and he performs no useful service in return. Therefore he must not be allowed to dictate to his "benefactors" what conditions shall rule. (It will be readily seen that the word pauper—surely one of the ugliest in our language; let us hope it will soon become obsolete!—is used in this connection in its strictly limited sense as signifying the *helpless and friendless* parasite upon a nation's industry. Many voters on the registers could be disqualified on the grounds that their maintenance imposes a tax upon the industry of others, and they give no useful service in return.)

"Children—"

Children, too, are disqualified on palpable and legitimate grounds. Immature judgment and want of experience must not dictate to wiser and more responsible heads. But children necessarily occupy an unique position in the community. From them no services are exacted; it is not expected or desired that they should be self-supporting—in theory that is—in any self-respecting State. They are not compelled to contribute to the revenues, or to suffer the same penalties for misdeeds and breaches of the law that are imposed upon the more fully fledged members of society. The State—to a certain very imperfect extent—recognises that the needs and wants of its children should be the object of its most tender consideration and care.

"—and Women!"

But we may well ask what points of resemblance are there then between woman and the rest of her disqualified companions? Why has sex been made a reason for inclusion in this list?

It cannot be urged against her that she is a natural criminal, or a menace to the safety of the State. Indeed, on the contrary women are naturally more law abiding than men. It is estimated that male offenders against the law are as five to one compared with female offenders. It may be urged that the percentage of women prisoners has shown an extraordinary and phenomenal increase during the last three or four years. But I do not think that any one is prepared to contend that this is anything but a passing state of affairs arising out of abnormal and unprecedented conditions—not a permanent one.

It cannot be said either that women as a whole exhibit the peculiar characteristics of lunatics or imbeciles. There are foolish women truly, but then there are also foolish men, and they are permitted to vote, while the cleverest woman in the world would be turned away from the doors of a British polling booth. Women practise as doctors, nurses, teachers; they hold high positions in the literary, journalistic, and artistic worlds. They conduct important businesses with skill and ability. They are to be found in every department of industry that needs intelligence. Indeed, the most responsible work of the country—education—is very largely in the hands of women. Quite four-fifths of the teachers are drawn from the ranks of the sex that is

placed on the same political level as lunatics and imbeciles.

The reasons too that apply to the exclusion of paupers and children cannot be considered as applicable to women. The State does not provide them with free food and housing and clothing. Many of them are compelled—if they would live—to go out and earn their bread in mills, workshops, offices, hospitals, schools. And the married women in the homes, whose industry apparently counts for nothing, inasmuch as it is not recognised by any monetary standard, are many of them working harder than their sisters in the workshops and factories. The fact too that women are the rearers and guardians of children—a State's most valuable asset—removes from them all fear of being regarded as parasites on a nation's industry. They are compelled also to discharge their full responsibilities; they have to pay the same taxes, rates, and rent as men. They are expected to fulfil all the burdens and duties of responsible citizens—yet they are denied the one privilege that makes citizenship a vital and living thing.

Sex as a Disqualification.

We are driven to the conclusion, then, that men who uphold the justice of women's exclusion, really think there is some natural defect attaching to the sex itself that renders them unfit for this particular form of responsibility. This idea of woman's natural disability seems to have been voiced quite frankly in years gone by. In 1790 a learned writer explained that the people who should not be included in the county franchise were those who "lie under natural incapacities, and therefore cannot exercise a sound discretion, or (who are) so much under the influence of others that they cannot have a will of their own in the choice of candidates. Of the former description are women, infants, idiots, lunatics; of the latter persons receiving alms and revenue offices."

Now of course had it been meant that this position should be maintained, women should have been kept in the mental condition of children; *i.e.*, totally uneducated. The present position that they have attained renders such a statement as the above ludicrous, and that is why it always raises a laugh. But the effect of it is not ludicrous. This linking of sex with mental and moral disqualifications has had the result of lowering the status of that sex in every department in life—industrial, legal, and domestic—with all the penalties and disabilities attaching to an inferior status, and women cannot afford any longer to have it regarded as a joke.

Woman's Industrial Status.

It is in the industrial world that the denial of the power to influence legislation is most keenly felt, and consequently it is there that the glaring inequalities between the voters and the non-voters are most apparent.

Take the important question of all—that of wages. In nearly every kind of work in which men and women compete the voteless women are paid at a rate varying from 25 to 50 per cent. lower than the men. And this not only in the terrible sweated trades where women so largely preponderate (some statistics put the percentage of women in these trades as high as 90), but in the

better paid branches of industry, in Government employ, and in skilled and trained trades and crafts. [1]

I have only space here to quote a few examples out of an inexhaustible list.

The Post Office, the largest employer of labour in the country, pays its clerks at the following rates:

Men, 2nd Division Lower Grade £70 to 250~
Women, 2nd Class £65 to 110
Men, 2nd Division Higher Grade £250 to 350
Women, 1st Class £15 to 140

In the District and Provincial offices the scale is :

	Men.	Women.
First Class Sorting Clerks	45/- to 56/ -	18 to 40/-
Second Class Sorting Clerks	28/- to 35 -	15/- to 25/-

Yet the work done by these variously paid individuals is the same.

In spite of the strong position that women occupy in the educational world, and the fact that they are admittedly at least as skilful and successful in their work as men, there is no Education Committee in England which pays them the same rate of wages.

The exact rate varies in different places, but, as a rule, a difference in the scale of one-half to two-thirds is steadily maintained from boy and girl pupil teacher to fully qualified men and women. (It is interesting and instructive to learn that in Norway the women in Government employ in the Postal Telegraphic Department had their wages raised within a few months of their gaining the right to vote, and in Wyoming, where women have the vote. Equal pay for equal work is the rule at least in the teaching profession).

In the Government factories the same unfair conditions prevail as in other branches of employment. The working men, through their representatives, have been able to wrest a Trades Union rate of wages for all men in Government employ. The women who have no representatives were naturally overlooked when this law was passed, with the consequence that their average wages in many of the Government factories are 15s. a week, whilst for the men the lowest rate is 23s.

And all through the various departments of industry this invidious distinction is to be found. It is not based on any inferiority or inequality in the standard of *work*, but on sex and sex alone. It has been calculated that the average male worker's wage is about 18s. per week, and the average woman worker's 7s. From the Government down to the smallest and meanest exploiter of cheap labour, women are looked upon as fair prey.

The "Protected" Sex.

It is an axiom that economic power follows political power. The history of trades-unionism proves that conclusively enough. Before the enfranchisement of the working man in 1867 none of their efforts could secure the passing of an Act to legalise Trades Unions and to protect their funds. But in 1869, after the working men had gained political power, a provisional measure giving

temporary protection was hurried through, and in 1871 a full Act was passed which conceded most of their demands. The status of the agricultural labourer, both in wages and in social condition, has risen considerably since his enfranchisement in 1884. The miners since they have had direct representation, have wrung concession after concession from the powers that be, and the terrible strikes that 20 or 30 years ago used periodically to paralyse the mining industry have practically ceased.

People—conveniently blind people—who wish to silence the clamorous demands of the women of to-day contend that the men use the power they have gained in the Trades' Unions to protect the women's interests equally with their own. Some even say that they accord them a chivalrous precedence and consideration that would be promptly withdrawn as soon as women were admitted to equal political rights. Lord Curzon has said that one of "fifteen sound, valid, and incontrovertible arguments against the extension of the franchise to women" is that "woman, if placed by the vote on an absolute equality with man, would forfeit much of that respect which the chivalry of man has voluntarily conceded to her, and which has hitherto been her chief protection." He also gives as another of the "fifteen sound," etc.: "The vote is not required for the removal of hardships or disabilities from which woman is now known to suffer. Where any such exist they can be equally well removed or alleviated by a legislature elected by men." [2]

But unfortunately for his lordship's reasoning, facts, disagreeable, hard-headed facts, prove quite the contrary. Man's attitude towards woman in the labour market, whether he stands either in the relation of employer or competitor, is not distinguished by the chivalrous respect that is supposed to be a concession to her weakness, or by a generous desire to legislate for her interests at the expense of his own.

Under the present system it must not be forgotten that men's and women's industrial interests often clash, and it is not given to many people to be just and impartial when the vital questions of livelihood and wages are at stake. The men and women are competitors; work is scarce; the difficulties of earning a living are very great, and the ever present nearness of starvation and unemployment drives the workers into desperate hostility towards their competitors. The average man will welcome any excuse to reduce the number of his trade rivals, and so increase, as he thinks, his own chances of getting work.

Up-to-Date Chivalry.

Trade unionists, instead of using their power to gain for women the same advantages they have gained for themselves, use it often to close avenues of employment against them, often under high sounding excuses, such as fear that their health or their morals will suffer. Everyone will remember the petition of certain miners against the employment of women at the pit brow. They gave as their reason for objecting to it, that the language and customs with which the women were thus brought into contact, were degrading and unfit, and tended to lower their moral standard. Evidently the miner only

uses "language" when at his work—there was no suggestion that in the homes, where we presume the women are brought into even more intimate relationship with them, they are not fit associates. Labour members quite openly state when attempts are made to forbid women to work in certain trades, that they want it done so that there may be more work for men. Mr. John Burns' most frequently advanced remedy for unemployment is the curtailing of the work of women. Mr. Sydney Buxton also admitted only the other day that it was very desirable, in the interests of men, that female labour in the Post Office should be greatly reduced. [3]

Indeed, many men politicians and others seem to think that it really does not matter if a woman starves, so long as a man gets work. Yet the necessities of life are a human need—not a question of sex. And if a woman has to face the struggle for existence, as so many millions of them have to do to-day, hunger and unemployment are as disastrous for her as they are for her brothers.

To leave her in this fierce struggle unprotected, with no weapon of defence such as men possess in the vote, no means of compelling the attention of those who make the law to her needs and desires, is to impose upon her fearful odds. It is against human nature to expect the man who climbs to place and power on the suffrages of his constituents, and who must of necessity consider their demands and interests first and foremost, to give even a secondary place to their trade rivals. He has to consider votes—there non voters can safely be put on one side. And to expect high and unselfish consideration to a competitor, who is driven by her bitter necessities to snatch at any chance of underselling, who is ready always to do his work for a lower wage, is to expect the average British workman to be very little lower than the angels.

Woman's Legal and Domestic Status.

The most cursory study of woman's legal position in this country can only make us thankfully acknowledge that the majority of men are considerably better than the laws they make. Nevertheless, we have to recognise that however kind and considerate individual men may be to their own womenfolk, the Law is the concrete expression of man's attitude towards woman in the mass, and in the eyes of the law woman is a creature of inferior status, the dependent, not the equal of her husband, not entitled to the same rights or the same privileges, either with regard to the ownership or inheritance of property or the guardianship of children.

Undoubtedly woman's legal position has been greatly improved since the Married Women's Property Act became law in 1882—indeed, many politicians claim that the passing of that Act removed all cause for complaint on her part—so easy is it to bear another's ills!—still the idea of man's right of ownership over his wife's person and liberty remains deeply ingrained. [4] Never a week passes but some flagrant case of cruelty or injustice to a wife comes before a court, and is condoned by a paltry fine, or a totally inadequate punishment. "Things have come to a pretty pass in this country," remarked an

indignant husband recently, when ordered to pay a ten shilling fine for assaulting his young wife, "when a man can't thrash his own wife in his own kitchen."

One Parent Only.

A married woman is not the legal parent of her own children. Every child, according to our laws, has only one parent, who can decide its future, where it shall live, how it shall be educated, what religion it shall be taught, how much shall be spent upon it, whether it shall be vaccinated or not. For a child born in wedlock that parent is the father. For one born out of wedlock the only parent is the mother. She alone, in that case, is responsible for the care and welfare of the child ; she alone is held responsible and punished if the child be neglected or suffer from neglect. Indeed, even where fatherhood is admitted by the man the law will not admit it, for a learned judge ruled quite recently that, "no illegitimate child can be recognised as the blood relation of its father."

The divorce law sets up a different standard of morality for men and women. A moral standard is insisted upon for women, and any deviation from that can be punished by divorce; an immoral one is permitted to men.

"With All My Worldly Goods I Thee Endow." [5]

The laws of inheritance and intestacy uphold in the strongest possible way man's prior right to the possession of property. In nearly all cases they ignore the woman until all the male heirs are exhausted. In cases of intestacy landed property goes to sons before daughters. If a wife die without a will the husband enjoys full and lifelong possession of her estates or money. If a husband die intestate the wife is only entitled to one-third of his personal property if he have children, and half if there be no children. In default of other next-of-kin the other half goes to the Crown. In the case of a daughter or son dying intestate the mother inherits nothing; the whole goes to the father, or the father's next of kin.

A wife may spend her whole life in hard work; she may save and deny herself necessities to help her husband to amass considerable wealth, and yet her share in it is absolutely nothing. She can claim nothing, and he can if he choose, for a whim, or in a fit of spleen or spite, will it all away from her when he dies. For all her services rendered as a wife and a housekeeper she can claim only the lowest form of wages – a subsistence wage.

Lady Maclaren points out in her Women's Charter that although the law fixes upon the husband the responsibility of supporting his wife and children, yet it avoids the necessary steps to make this obligation legally effective: –

- (1) By not compelling the husband to work.
- (2.) By not giving the woman any direct claim on his earnings even if he do work.
- (3) By not fixing any scale suitable to his means on which a wife should be maintained so long as the two live together.
- (4.) By not admitting that a wife's work, either as housekeeper or as

assistant in business, has any money value;

(5.) And finally, by not giving to a widow any claim on her husband's property of which his will cannot deprive her.

"Constant and Well-grounded Fear."

Of course there are cases where apparent leniency is shewn to the woman, such as the rule which holds a wife free from criminal responsibility if the crime be committed in the husband's presence. But this privilege of exemption is based on the assumption that in such a case "she acted thus being in constant and well grounded fear, stronger than the fear naturally inspired by the law." A very interesting admission on the part of the law of the power of chastisement and authority vested in husbands, but not exactly a conception of matrimony tending to increase the self-respect and dignity of wives.

However, all these inequalities are inevitable under the present male monopoly of legislative power. The man voter and the man legislator must recognise the man's needs first, and Lord Curzon's touching faith in the willingness and ability of a male electorate to deal not only justly but generously by women cannot unfortunately in the face of such facts be shared by them.

"Some Objections – and the Antis."

In all the multitude of societies that have sprung up within the last few years around the now happily burning question of Votes for women, none has added to the gaiety of nations (and the roll-call of the Suffragettes) as much as that eminently aristocratic body the Anti-Suffrage Society. Their arguments have provided much food for thought – and laughter.

One is reluctant to attribute to them the once frequently-heard injunction to "go home and wash the baby," or "darn the socks," or "cook the dinner," for even the witless loafer is beginning to recognise that the woman's movement is not to be stopped or influenced by such remarks as these. The parrot cry, that the "woman's place is the home," is, however, still brought forward persistently by them, as if it were a well-founded and reasonable argument against the admission of women to political life. "The home is the place for women," they say. "Their interests are the caring and training of children – politics do not concern them. Really, to hear many of the "Antis" talk, one would imagine that all the women of this country were sheltered inmates of happy homes – or that if they were not, it was somehow their own fault. Yet they must know as well as we that there are literally millions of women to whom such a statement is a mockery.

"In Poverty, Hunger and Dirt."

What kind of homes are the noisome, foul dens in which our sweated women workers drag out a miserable existence? Homes in which baby faces are white with hunger, baby feet blue with cold, baby hands set to hard and unfitting toil because the few miserable pence they can earn are necessary for

the family exchequer. What time for the training, and careful rearing of children has the mother, who must work for 16 and 17 hours a day to earn her pittance of a shilling, or even less? The case that was tried the other day in a London Court, when a woman who was summoned for not sending her children to school regularly, explained that she was compelled to do scrubbing at an Infirmary all day, and washing at "home" every night from eight to one or two o'clock, to support her family, is no isolated one of exceptionally bad conditions. It is common enough.

There are thousands of homes in this country that would not exist if the women did not go out and labour with their heads and hands to keep a roof over their own and their children's heads.

Of course, no one is foolish enough, or even desires, to deny that the women as a sex do spend more time in the homes than the men, and that the interests of great numbers of them are largely concerned with matters of home life. But this is an added reason for women having the vote, not one for denying it to them. Politics and the home life are intimately concerned with each other. The price of food, housing, sanitation, food adulteration—nay, even the sleeping and breathing space of the family, the baby's bottle and cradle and clothes—all these are made matters of legislation.

When we hear of statesmen discussing whether babies should be fed on natural mother's milk, humanised milk, or sterilised milk, whether they should sleep in bed with their mothers or in banana boxes, we realise how the most intimate duties of the mother are made the subjects of political discussion. The woman in the home needs to be an ardent politician indeed in these days, or she will be liable to find herself mulcted of many a fine for running counter to rules and regulations that have been passed over her head, with the best intentions in the world of merely doing her duty according to the light that is in her.

A Disappearing "Argument."

The contention that as physical force is the basis of Government woman must not be allowed to take part in it, because she could not, if necessary, compel obedience to the law, is an antiquated method of reasoning that even the "antis" are now beginning to abandon. Carried to its logical conclusion it would mean that the strongest men should be the lawmakers, and that politics should become a matter of fisticuffs or wrestling, in an even more pronounced fashion than it is to-day. Left to itself physical force is a blind and unintelligent power capable of neither government nor control. Mental and moral force directs it, and makes it, according to its direction, either valuable and helpful or dangerous and destructive. Women are just as capable of exercising mental and moral force as men. Government—the power to compel obedience—is not so much a question of strength of arm, as of strength of will.

Physical force can neither kill nor destroy a superior mental or moral force, as has been proved up to the hilt by the recent militant demonstrations of the Suffragettes. No amount of it has succeeded in putting back their agitation, or

destroying their enthusiasm and devotion. No amount of it ever will.

The Adult Suffrage Bogey.

But it is the question of adult suffrage that seems to be one of the greatest stumbling blocks to many of the "antis." "If you give women the vote you are opening the door to adult suffrage," they say. Yet, that this is clearly a matter of personal opinion and speculative surmise is proved at every meeting they hold, for while the majority of the speakers will dolefully prophecy how adult suffrage will follow votes for women as the night follows day; there is sure to be one at least who will endeavour to prove that the granting of this measure will mean the submerging of Liberalism and the stoppage of all progress for generations to come!

As a matter of fact, neither of these prophecies is founded on reason and probability, but on a tyrannical desire on the part of both objectors to withhold power until they are assured it will be used in the way they would each prefer. One can imagine the storm of indignation that would be aroused if the question of how their vote would be cast were openly made the reason, by either of the political parties, for not extending it to any section of men. It would be a wholesome reflection, too, for every working man who would block this reform to remember how every objection urged against extending the franchise to women was urged against its extension to himself by the holders of power in days gone by.

Unworthy Fears.

The fears entertained by Lord Curzon and others of his ilk that women would introduce an unbalanced, deplorable and unduly excitable element into political life, may surely be allayed by the experience of other countries. New Zealand, Australia, the four States of America, are all unanimous in stating that the women's vote has been used to accelerate social and moral reform: that sweated labour, bad housing, immorality, the drink problem, bad conditions affecting women and children, have all been made the subject of attack, and that, as a consequence of its effective help in these matters, the social, political, and moral status of the country has been raised. By what method of reasoning do these chivalrous gentlemen assume that English women will act differently, or in a worse way, than the women of other countries? It is not a very gracious or grateful attitude to assume towards those who have served their country as well as British women have; who have responded with such patriotic generosity when the nation has appealed for their aid in times of war and stress, who, by their high intellectual and moral standard have helped so materially to raise the level of English national life. To imagine that their influence will prove a menace to good and effective legislation is an insult that all self respecting women should resent.

The Matter in a Nutshell.

But all the objections brought against this question after all only serve to

emphasize the fact that the opposers of it are actuated by prejudice, either blind or wilful, not by logic, or a sense of right and justice. For the one great salient truth remains, that no single reason can be adduced for giving the franchise to men that does not apply with equal force to women. Women need the vote for exactly the same reasons that men need it. Without it they have no means of redressing their grievances or voicing their special needs and desires. They deserve it for exactly the same reasons that men deserve it. They perform all the duties of responsible citizenship, they contribute valuable and indispensable service to the State.

In claiming it they are not begging for a privilege—

THEY ARE DEMANDING A RIGHT

MARION HOLMES.

[1] Sweated trades: Homebased industries, unregulated by labour laws, and specifically aimed at absorbing the women workforce which was not hired in the factories. The word hints at over-work and underpay.

[2] George Curzon, 1859 - 1925, elected as MP for the Conservative Party in 1886, made Secretary of State for India in 1891, and later Viceroy of India, but lost the confidence of his superiors and was taken out of office in 1905. Here he (among other things) ardently opposed women's franchise, and was instrumental in forming the Anti-Suffrage League in 1908. When Parliament voted over the 1918 Qualification of Women Act., Lord Curzon voted against it. It was, however, passed.

[3] Statesman Sydney Charles Buxton, 1853-1934. Appointed under-secretary of state for the Colonies in 1892, Postmaster-general with a seat in the Cabinet in 1905. In 1910 he became President of the Board of Trade, where his sympathetic views on the working classes came to show in some of the reform legislations he saw through, most importantly the National Insurance Act of 1911, which aimed at giving ordinary workers assistance with health care, as well as securing aid to the unemployed.

[4] This Act allowed women to own and administer their own property.

[5] From the Book of Common Prayer, and said by the parties getting married in church, "With this ring I thee wed, with my body I thee worship, and with all my worldly goods I thee endow."

Literature

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