

CB Drawer 4 d hu cloze 39 1894.

Irishwomen's Reform League

THE

Economic Aspect

OF

Woman Suffrage.

By EPHEDROS.

CORRIGAN & WILSON, 13 Sackville Place, Dublin,

The Economic Aspect of Woman Suffrage

BY EPHEDEOS

Have Women any Grievance?

THE enfranchisement of woman is a political reform, and as such our conservative natures shrink from it. But all reforms are introduced with the object of rectifying an existing wrong or removing an existing injustice, and it is by their success or failure in achieving that object that they are approved or condemned. Yet, before giving our support to any reform, it is advisable to inquire whether the supposed injustice and wrong have any real existence. If, for example, woman's life is at present a bed of roses and the lot bestowed on her by the chivalry of man all that she could desire, we may well shelve the question of woman suffrage and turn instead to the task of remedying the real social ills as to the existence of which there is no doubt. But if, on the other hand, it can be clearly shown that women are overworked, underpaid, and employed at dangerous and revolting work, we should then admit the need for reform and proceed to inquire whether the particular reform proposed, namely, woman suffrage, is able and likely to remove or alleviate the evils brought under our notice.

The Economic Standpoint.

Now, although woman suffrage is a political question, it is necessary to discuss it from an economic standpoint; for in order to obtain sound comprehension of politics, it is essential to have some knowledge of the economic basis on which society stands, and further to have a profound conviction of its importance. Therefore, fully to appreciate the woman question, we must first investigate the economic conditions under which woman live; and when we reflect that there are over a million more women than men in these islands, and that 27 per cent. of the self-supporting population of the United Kingdom are women, we realise at once the importance of gaining a knowledge of woman's life as a worker, her wages, her hours, and the nature of her duties.

Woman's Condition as a Worker.

If any reader should ever visit the little town of Broomsgrove, he should not devote all his time to viewing the old church, the fine houses of the nail-masters, and the beauties of the surrounding country. If he wishes to see the real life of the inhabitants he should inspect one of the little sheds built at the back of each of the little cottages in which the workers live. In these sheds he will find women hammering away monotonously and incessantly as they bend over their forges and anvils. They are engaged at the work of making tacks, and for every 160 or so tacks they make they receive a penny, thus earning about six shillings by their week's arduous toil. Similar scenes delight the eye at Cradley Heath, another of the little sweating hells sprinkled so plentifully over this country, whose people never, never, *never*, shall be slaves. Chain making is the industry carried on at Cradley Heath. Here, a woman by working about twelve hours a day in a dingy shed, her hands blistered and her face burned by the flying sparks, can earn as much as five or six shillings a week. Much of the work performed, such as the making of chain-harrows, is not woman's work at all, as it necessitates the use of heavy hammers. Young girls, mere children in fact, by working the bellows attached to each of the forges, can earn threepence a day, and the woman who forges dog chains with swivel and ring complete gets three farthings for each chain she makes. Yet these same chains are sold for one shilling and sixpence, and it is interesting to speculate who pockets the difference.*

Again, six shillings a week is all that can be earned by the girls who ply needle and thread from twelve to seventeen hours a day in the filthy, dilapidated, verminous, sweating dens of London, Leeds, and Leylands. But in the slack season their weekly earnings may amount to only two shillings, and they are subjected to various annoyances, the bullying of the overseers, fines inflicted (notwithstanding the Truck Act) for being a minute late in the morning, and instant dismissal if they purchase their needles and thread from anyone but their masters, who sell them these commodities at two or three times the normal price. Even at fairly skilled labour, such as dressmaking and millinery work, a woman can earn only about ten or eleven shillings a week. Yet such a wage, small

* Since the establishment of Wages Boards, some increase of wages has been secured by the chain workers.

as it is, seems princely when compared with the three or four shillings received by the women who devote the week to the task of carding hooks and eyes. The wage of the women workers in the potteries varies from eight shillings to twelve shillings a week. Girls who work thirteen or fourteen hours a day beading shoes and making infants' bonnets are rewarded with six or seven shillings at the end of the week; and the girls who make boys' vests with two pockets and five button-holes are paid at the rate of one shilling and ninepence per dozen. And it probably never occurs to the average gentleman, as he lights a cigar or cigarette, that the female tobacco worker earns about a shilling a day, and that the woman who made his match-box is paid 2d. for every gross (144) she makes.

The above-mentioned occupations are not what is known as dangerous—that is to say, the women employed at them have nothing to fear except death from overwork and starvation. But the women engaged in the white lead factories run the risk of, and frequently succumb to, acute lead poisoning. The victims after a few months in the factory are stricken down with colic, constipation, vomiting, pains in the head and limbs, and partial blindness. After a few days of delirium and convulsions, they die in a comatose state. Of course all the employees are not cut off in this way, but most of them never recover the effects of their sojourn at the white lead factory. Readers who imagine that those employed at dangerous trades are always well paid, will be surprised to learn that it takes these women all their time to average seven shillings a week all the year round.

Its Economic Result.

Such is the treatment accorded to the untrained woman who seeks to earn an honest living by her toil. In the circumstances it is hardly a matter for wonder that so many young girls, after one shuddering glance at the sweating den and the poisonous factory, turn to the one trade at which they think a woman can command a fair wage. Indeed, the wonder rather is that the sweater and manufacturer can find girls willing to stay in their dens and workshops while the streets outside call for recruits.

Women on the Streets.

Nevertheless, the girls who take to what has been called the oldest profession in the world, usually find they have made a

change for the worse and not for the better. Instead of fulfilling the round of pleasure like *La Traviata*, they soon find themselves in the clutches of the *entrepreneur* and the procurer, who treat them even worse than their old employers. Some, of course, remain independent and can manage to support themselves, even though their landladies, knowing the girls are at their mercy, charge them a pound a week for a room worth about five shillings, and give them board on the same liberal terms. The majority of girls, however, being inexperienced and knowing that the law and public opinion are hostile to them, are glad enough to have the advice and protection of the procurer and her male friends. Their new chaperons charge them for board and lodging at exorbitant rates, sell them the cheapest clothes at four times their value, and sometimes compel them to purchase a new outfit every few weeks. The object of all this is to put the girls deep in debt and to keep them there; and thus the victims, with a heavy debt hanging over their heads, become practically slaves. They are bullied and ill-treated, driven out at night to their revolting work and sometimes even shadowed lest they should endeavour to escape. All their earnings go into the pockets of their owners, and if they are unable to bring home a sufficient sum they are not infrequently beaten and ill-used. But their attractiveness passes with their youth, and its passing is commonly accelerated by disease and by the drink that they all take in the endeavour to forget for a time the vileness of a life they all loathe. As their value and price thus declines, they are passed on to poorer and poorer houses, and have to submit to a lower and lower class of patrons, until finally the fresh young girl, after about five or seven years of this life, becomes a besotted and prematurely aged wreck, without self-respect or decency, friendless and irreclaimable, and despised and rejected even by the lowest and vilest men. Her only hope, now, is to do unto others as others have done unto her and to get some girl newly apprenticed to the trade into her clutches and so live parasitically on the superior attractiveness of her younger companion.

The White Slave Trade.

But economic necessity does not drive a sufficient number of girls from the white-lead factories and the sweating dens on to the streets. Even though many employers and theatrical managers deliberately underpay their woman workers, on the understanding that they shall supplement their wages by

prostitution, still the supply is too small to meet the huge demands of our Modern Babylons. It consequently becomes necessary to resort to other sources. The *souteneur* and procurer here exhibit remarkable astuteness and business-like enterprise. They fill our newspapers with attractive advertisements for nurses, masseuses, governesses and companions, and show surprising dexterity in kidnapping the girls who answer them. They infest our railway stations and swoop down on the inexperienced and friendless female traveller, entice her to some brothel where she is seduced and compelled to pace the streets to earn money, not for herself, but for her masters. Disguised as benevolent old ladies they make the acquaintance of girls in restaurants, in shops, and even in churches and parochial halls, and lure their innocent and unsuspecting prey away to the foulest haunts of our cities. Every year numbers of young girls are lost to their parents in this way. Search and inquiry prove unavailing, for the victims of the white slave trader are frequently exported to some foreign country. Here they are ignorant of the language and consequently more completely at the mercy of their owners. Many are shipped like cattle to Buenos Ayres or Rio de Janeiro, where they are herded together in streets grimly called by the people "the streets of blood and tears."

One German writer has traced the routes by which the maidens of his native land are transported to the ends of the earth. They sail westward from Hamburg to the ports of America, to Bahia, Montevideo and Valparaiso, to New York and New Orleans, where they disembark for Texas and California, 6,000 miles away from the Fatherland. They go eastward to Bombay and Calcutta, Singapore and Shanghai, and southward to Alexandria and Suez. These German girls are found among the snows of Siberia as well as under the Southern Cross; they fill the Mussulman's harem as well as the Christian's brothel. The trade in white slaves is thus seen to be an international one. Its agents are everywhere and it flourishes in all countries, with the notable exception of Australia. But, then (curious coincidence), women have the vote in Australia.

The New Bill.

However, a bill has now passed Parliament which is warmly supported by all parties, which it is supposed will prove a panacea for the ills of white slavery. The procurer can now be arrested on suspicion, and those convicted may be flogged. This no doubt attaches serious inconveniences to the pastime

of kidnapping young girls, and the procurer's profession may cease to thrive as it does at present. But this bill will no more do away with white slavery than the factory acts did away with sweating. The great majority of the girls on our streets (some authorities say 90 per cent.) are there from economic causes. They must have food, clothes and shelter, and they can get these necessaries of life nowhere else. They do not like the occupation and take it up only under the stress of poverty and want. Unless, therefore, it is rendered possible for every woman to earn a living wage by a reasonable amount of not uncongenial labour, there will never be a very considerable shortage in the number of recruits for the streets. A law enacting that every employer of female labour who did not give his workers an adequate living wage should be imprisoned and flogged would be far more likely, by thus striking at the root of the evil, to bring desolation on Piccadilly after nightfall. The new bill, if it effects what its promoters intend, namely, the abolition of the procurer, will quite probably increase the number of prostitutes, since the huge sums taken on the streets will then go direct into the pockets of the girls themselves and the profession consequently become much more lucrative and attractive. Of course the girls will still be fleeced by landlords and landladies, who can claim, justly enough, that the presence of such persons on their premises depreciates the value of their property by driving respectable people from the neighbourhood. Nevertheless, the girls could easily satisfy the demands of the most rapacious landlady and yet have a comfortable surplus for themselves, as we may learn from the fact, authenticated by the police, that there are many men in London making from £15 to £20 a week by keeping five or six girls on the streets. In short, though the procurer's occupation may be gone, prostitution, with all its attendant social ills, will still flourish like a green bay tree. All we have done is to clip off a few of its blossoms: the root still remains untouched.

The Married Woman Worker.

Hitherto we have deliberately avoided all discussion of the economic position of the married woman, as an investigation of the matter would infallibly lead us on to such thorny questions as the relative merits of monogamy and polygamy, of "free" and "bought" love, of the taxation of bachelors and the endowment of motherhood—all intensely interesting pro-

blems in their way, but not vitally connected with woman suffrage. The claim of woman to the franchise derives its force not so much from the treatment accorded to her as a wife as from the treatment accorded to her as a worker. It is the deplorable plight of the woman who has to earn her own living that constitutes the great and unanswerable argument in favour of woman suffrage. But it must not be assumed that the wife never works at any but domestic duties. It is estimated that nearly a million married women work for their living in England. Some are widows thrown penniless on the labour market by the death of their bread-winners; some are wives whose husbands are by themselves unable through unemployment or low wages to provide sufficient money to support the family; others again are driven to supplement the small housekeeping allowance given them by husbands who bestow the greater part of their wages on the publican and the bookmaker. The married woman thus compelled to seek employment finds herself at a great disadvantage. She cannot support herself and her family on the wage a single woman could live on, and she is thus easily undersold by her unmarried competitor. Worse than this, she has to compete with girls who live at home comfortably with their parents and are glad to earn a few shillings pocket money by their own efforts. With the weekly wage that suffices such girls, she has to feed and clothe herself and her children and keep a roof over their heads. The domestic conditions of such a family must be wretched. The children and the home are neglected, while the mother is out making some other home clean and tidy by beating carpets and scrubbing floors at one and sixpence a day.

Would the Vote Benefit Woman?

Woman's position in the economic world is thus seen to be lamentable, and the need for reform is clearly demonstrated. But, it may be asked, would the enfranchisement of women rectify this state of affairs? Would giving them the vote add one shilling to their wages? Or could not woman's condition be ameliorated by male legislation? Moreover, it might be urged that women would vote much as the men do at present, and that consequently a double number of voters would elect the same member and things remain exactly as they were before, except for the additional expense and trouble of our elections.

Non-Voters are Disregarded by Party Politicians.

Now, all this reasoning overlooks a very obvious point, namely, that M.P.'s and ministers pay no attention to the requirements of people who have no votes, as every moment of the limited time at their disposal is occupied in winning the favour and support of those who have. If butchers and bakers had the vote, and if candlestick-makers had not, it is very unlikely that our legislators would trouble to remove the grievances of the latter, while the former were clamouring for their ills to be attended to, and could, moreover, turn the legislators out of office at the next general election if their demands were not complied with. To take a real instance, does any sane being imagine that Home Rule would now be occupying so much attention in Parliament, if the Irish had no votes, and consequently no representation? In short, party politics is a competition for catching votes, and the non-voter is naturally disregarded.

Hence, even though every woman voted for the same member as her male relations, yet we should at once notice an immense change on reading the electoral addresses of the candidates and the list of bills to be introduced by the Government. Every would-be M.P. would make a bid for female support, by promising to look after woman's interests at Westminster; and the Cabinet would be eager to pass such measures as would secure the good-will of the female electorate, lest their votes should be transferred to the Opposition.

How the Vote Benefits the Working Man.

Another conceivable objection is, that the possession of a vote does not prevent the working man from being overworked and underpaid, and that, therefore, it would not benefit the working woman. The reply to this is, that the vote *is* slowly, but surely, improving the condition of the working man. Since his enfranchisement, it has been computed that in most trades his wages have risen from fifty to a hundred per cent., while his hours of work have been reduced, and his comfort otherwise considered. To-day, he secures a very fair share of the attention of our Governments. A glance over the legislation of the last seven years will show the numerous efforts made to capture his vote. Besides, even though male workers may slave at Cradley Heath and Bromsgrove, yet, if the nailmaker's and

chainmaker's wife had a vote as well as he, his voting power would be doubled, and so probably would be the exertions of the Government on his behalf. But though the working man's wage has risen, woman's wage (according to that excellent authority, Mr. Sidney Webb) has remained much the same—except, indeed, in some countries such as New South Wales, where the law secures for seamstresses a minimum wage of £1 a week; but in England (where living is dearer) girls in the tailoring trade earn five or six shillings a week by turning out complete sailor suits for boys at the rate of 5d. per suit. But then, women have the vote in New South Wales.

But do not men consider Women's Interests?

But it may be urged that men do, as a matter of historical fact, consider woman's interests. The Married Woman's Property Acts were passed by a parliament of men, and the laws for the suppression of white slavery are the work of male legislators.

It will be eminently instructive to examine the exact circumstances under which these laws were passed. The Acts giving wives a right to their own property were not given freely and spontaneously, but were won only by long agitation, and after much disappointment and delay. The obvious injustice of the laws then in force proved to be no inducement to our Governments to bestir themselves. Married Women had no vote and as a result received scanty attention. The ultimate passing of the Acts was a measure of long-postponed justice, and men deserve little praise or credit for tardily undoing a great social wrong they had themselves brought about. Male chivalry in fact proved a negligible factor in practical politics when women's wrongs needed redress.

How the Criminal Law Amendment Act was passed.

The Parliamentary history of the Acts dealing with the white slave trade throws still more light on the methods of our politicians. This trade is a British industry of old standing. In the early eighties there was agitation for its suppression, and a Commission of the House of Lords, which dealt with the matter, strongly recommended that an act should be passed to remedy this social evil. When the horrors of the trade were thus brought publicly under notice, it might be

supposed that a bill was speedily passed through all its stages by our beneficent legislators. A bill, it is true, was introduced, but there was no driving force behind it. "Neither political party," wrote Mr. Stead, "saw any means of making capital out of it, and the result was that session after session the Bill was introduced in due course and then included in the massacre of the innocents at the end of the session." To put it bluntly, the victims of the white slave trader had no votes, and consequently were not objects of interest in the eyes of our politicians. The Bill, after much delay, was ultimately forced through Parliament by the energy and ingenuity of Mr. Stead. His plan of campaign was original and daring. By means of a procuress he purchased for sums ranging from £1 to £3 several young girls just over thirteen years of age to be used for immoral purposes. Armed with this conclusive evidence of the facility with which this traffic in human beings could be carried on, he published in the *Pall Mall Gazette* a series of inflammatory articles, which successfully aroused public opinion throughout the country. The very ministers who had previously assured Mr. Stead that the passing of the Bill was an utter impossibility were now compelled by the storm of popular indignation to abandon their attitude of lethargic indifference, and the Criminal Law Amendment Act was added to the list of our statutes.

The history of the new Bill relating to the white slave trade is very similar. The Government, though fully approving of the measure, declined to take it up. In consequence of this refusal, it had to be introduced as a private Bill, and though the member in charge moved its second reading over one hundred times, it was always blocked. However, it has now passed the Commons, since pressure of public opinion forced the Government to "star" the bill; but little credit is due to the members, for, as the London Council of Public Morality complained, it was not found possible "to get any real Parliamentary help for the Bill." Only 20 members out of 670 expressed their willingness to support it. So much for the zeal shown by male legislators for remedying woman's distress.

Summary and Conclusion.

The obvious conclusion from what has been said above is that women at present suffer from economic evils and that there is little chance of our Governments passing remedial measures unless the women are able to command attention by

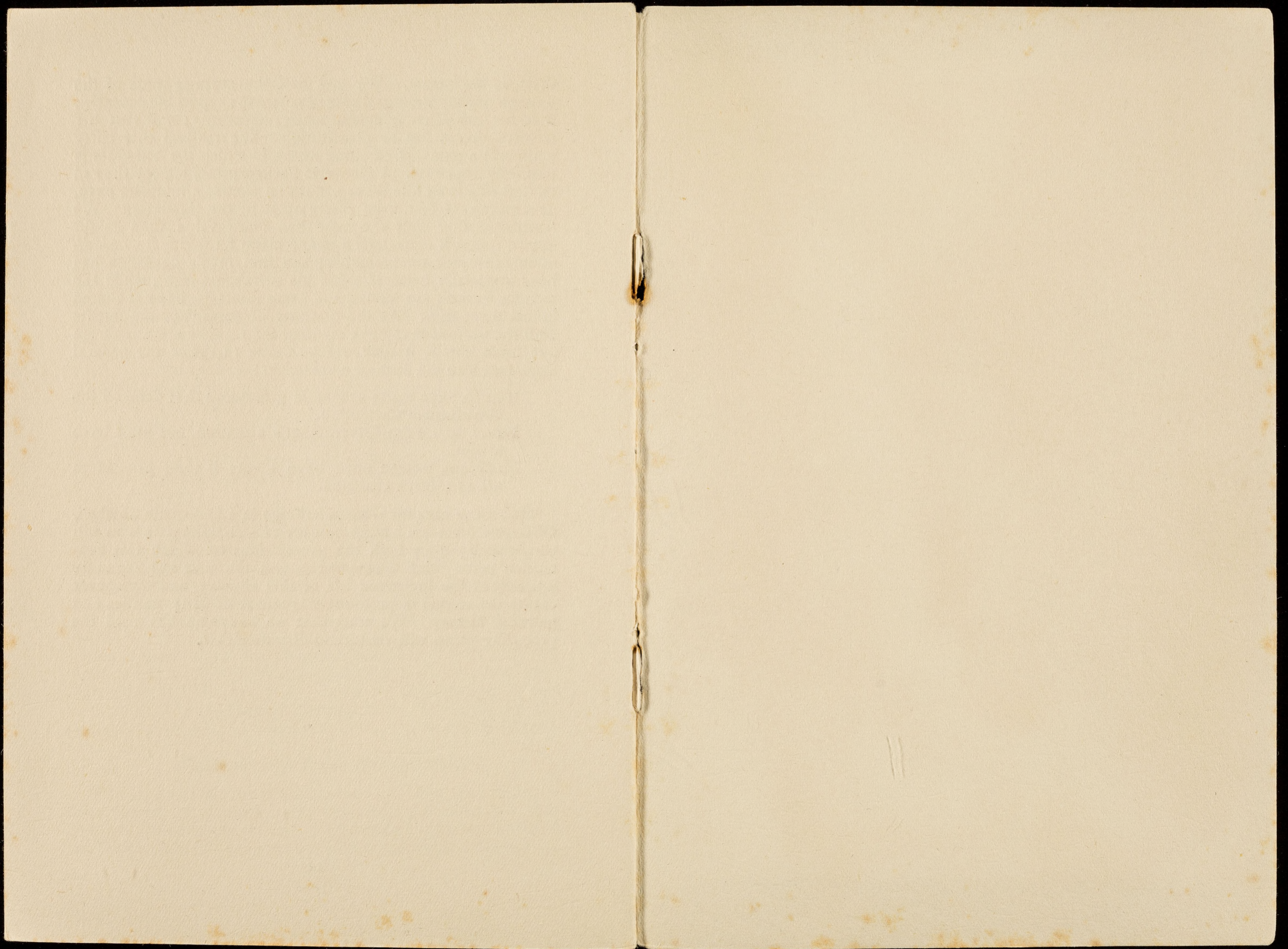
their voting power. We saw that the average wage of the woman worker is altogether inadequate to support life decently; that her condition is consequently deplorable; and that her poverty drives her to prostitution. We realised that party politics is a game of catching votes, in which the non-voter is naturally neglected. A glance at Parliamentary history showed us that this is no idle theory, but that women's interests have, as a matter of fact, been disregarded by our legislators. We learned further that the vote has more value than might appear; that it represents a strong claim for political consideration otherwise unobtainable; and that man's condition has been materially bettered since his enfranchisement, while the woman worker, not having the same interests, has not shared in his prosperity. As the quantity of subsidiary arguments and illustrations may have diverted the reader's attention from our main thesis, it may not be amiss to throw the general argument into the form of a syllogism:—

Women have many economic grievances that demand the Government's attention.

But to secure the Government's attention, one must have a vote.

Therefore, women must have a vote if their grievances are to receive attention.

This is the case for woman suffrage in a syllogistic nutshell. Of course there are a large number of anti-suffragists who will emphatically deny both the propositions on which this conclusion rests. But whosoever denies the first is profoundly ignorant of the industrial life of this country, and whosoever denies the second is profoundly ignorant of party politics and political history. We trust that no one who has read the preceding pages will venture to dispute either.



Irishwomen's Reform League

(Dublin Branch of Irishwomen's Suffrage Federation)

NON-MILITANT

LAW-ABIDING

Miss INGLIS, *Hon. Sec.*

Miss CARRE, *Hon. Lit. Sec.*

Office—29 SOUTH ANN STREET

(Off GRAFTON STREET)

DUBLIN

Suffrage Literature of all
kinds on Sale, also the
Weekly Suffrage Papers

LENDING LIBRARY OPEN DAILY TO THE
PUBLIC AT OFFICES

Yearly Subscriptions—10s.

6 Months—6s.

or 1 Vol. 2d. per week

New Members and Workers earnestly desired