

Marx Hardy Machiavelli Joyce Austen
Defoe Abbot Melville Montaigne Cooper Emerson Hugo
Stoker Wilde Christie Maupassant Haggard Chesterton Molière Eliot Grimm
Garnett Engels Schiller Byron Maupassant Schiller
Goethe Hawthorne Smith Kafka
Cotton Dostoyevsky Kipling Doyle Willis
Baum Henry Nietzsche Dumas Flaubert Turgenev Balzac
Leslie Stockton Vatsyayana Crane
Burroughs Verne
Curtis Tocqueville Gogol Busch
Homer Tolstoy Whitman Twain
Darwin Zola Lawrence Dickens Plato
Potter Freud Jowett Stevenson Andersen Harte
Kant London Descartes Cervantes Burton Hesse
Poe Aristotle Wells Voltaire Cooke
Hale James Hastings Shakespeare Irving
Bunner Richter Chekhov Chambers Alcott
Doré Dante Swift Shaw Wodehouse
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POLITICAL WOMEN.

POLITICAL WOMEN.

BY

SUTHERLAND MENZIES,

AUTHOR OF "ROYAL FAVOURITES," ETC.

IN TWO VOLUMES.

VOL. I.

Henry S. King & Co.,
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1873.

[iv]

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[v]

INTRODUCTION.

In selecting the careers of certain celebrated women who have flung themselves with ardour into the vortex of politics, the author's choice has not been so much an arbitrary one as it might seem, but rather guided by instances in which the adventurous game has not been restricted to the commonplace contentions of the public platform, or the private salon, but played on the grandest scale and on the most conspicuous arena; when Peace and War, crowns and dynasties, have trembled in the balance, and even the fate of a nation has been at stake.

The untoward results of the lives thus devoted – dazzling and heroic as some passages in their dramatic vicissitudes may appear – point the moral of the futility of such pursuit on the part of the gentler sex, and indicate the certainty of the penalty to be paid by those who by venturing into the fervid, exhausting struggle, and rashly courting exposure to the rough blows of the battle of political life, with its coarse and noisy passions, have discovered too late that the strife has done them irreparable injury. In the cases of those selected it will be seen that the fierce contention has commonly involved the sacrifice of conjugal happiness, the welfare of children, domestic peace, reputation, and all the amenities of the gentle life. [viii]

That clever women abound in the present day we have undeniable proof – many as clever, no doubt, as that famous philosopheress Madame du Chatelet, who managed at one and the same moment the thread of an intrigue, her cards at piquet, and a calculation in algebra, but who may still lack the qualifications indispensably necessary to make clever politicians. Perhaps, therefore, we might be allowed to suggest that it would be well for ladies who are ambitious of figuring in either or both spheres that politics and diplomacy are special and laborious pursuits, involving a great deal of knowledge as difficult, and in the first instance as repulsive, to acquire as Greek or chemistry. Yet, fully admitting their capacity to qualify themselves intellectually, and supposing them to attain the summit of their ambition of figuring successfully in public life, a grave question still arises – would they thereby increase or diminish their present great social influence? They have now more influence

of a certain kind than men have; but if they obtain the influence of men, they cannot expect to retain the influence of women. Nature, it may be thought, has established a fair distribution of power between the two sexes. Women are potent in one sphere, and men in another; and, if they are conscious of the domestic sway they already exercise, they will not imperil it by challenging dominion in a field in which they would be less secure.

Root and bond of the family, woman is no less a stranger by her natural aptitudes than by her domestic ministrations to the general interests of society; the conduct of the latter demands, in fact, a disengagement of heart and mind to which she can only attain by transforming herself, to the detriment of her duties and of her true influence. Ever to subordinate persons to things, never to overstep in her efforts [ix] the strict measure of the possible—those two conditions of the political life are repugnant to her ardent and devoted nature. Even amongst women in whom those gifts are met with in the highest degree, clearness of perception has been almost always obscured by the ardour of pursuit or that of patronage—by the irresistible desire of pushing to the extremity of success her own ideas, and especially those of her friends.

Again, let us imagine political life to resemble a great game at cards, the rules of which have been settled beforehand, and the winnings devoted to the use of the greatest number; well, a woman ought never to take a hand in it. Her place should be at the player's elbow, to warn and advise him, to point out an unperceived chance, to share in his success, more than all to console him, should luck run against him. Thus, whilst all her better qualities would be brought into play, all her weaker would not in any wise be at stake.

We would put it, therefore, to the womanly conscience—Is it not a hundred times more honourable to exercise, so to speak, rights that are legitimately recognised, though wisely limited, than to suffer in consideration, and often in reputation, from an usurpation always certain of being disputed?

It has been the author's endeavour to show the truth of these conclusions by tracing the political career of certain well-born and singularly-gifted women—women whose lofty courage, strength of mind, keen introspection, political zeal, and genius for intrigue

enabled them to baffle and make head against some of the greatest political male celebrities of modern history, without, however, winning us over to their opinions or their cause; women who, in some instances, after passing the best period of their lives in political strife, [x] in fostering civil war, in hatching perilous plots, and who, having cast fortune and all the "gentle life" to the winds, preferred exile to submission, or to wage a struggle as fruitless as it was unceasing; until having arrived at the tardy conviction of its futility, and that they had devoted their existence to the pursuit of the illusory and the chimerical, they found at length repose and tranquillity only in solitude and repentance.

In the stirring careers of certain among these remarkable personages, it will be seen that the mainspring of their political zeal was either the fierce excitement of an overmastering passion, an irresistible proclivity to gallantry, or an absorbing ambition, rather than any patriotic motive. This may go far to explain the singular sagacity, finesse, and energy displayed in their devotion to what otherwise appears alike mischievous and chimerical by those three high-born and splendidly-gifted women who figured so conspicuously in the civil war of the Fronde; and, though so much self-abnegation, courage, constancy, and heroism, well or ill displayed, may obtain some share of pardon for errors it would be wrong to palliate or condone, their example, it is to be hoped, will prove deterrent rather than contagious. La Rochefoucauld—a moralist, though by no means a moral man—who well knew the sex, had seen at work these political women of the time of the Fronde. That opportunity does not appear to have inspired him with an unbounded admiration for them from that point of view.

Of the peril and mischief that fair trio inflicted upon Anne of Austria's great Prime Minister and the State he governed we have an interesting personal record. When, in 1660, Mazarin's policy, triumphant on every side, had added the treaty of the Pyrenees to that of Westphalia, the [xi] honour of the conclusion of the protracted conference held at the *Isle of Pheasants* was reserved for the chief Ministers of the two Crowns—the Cardinal and Don Louis de Haro. The latter congratulated his brother premier on the well-earned repose he was about to enjoy, after such a long and arduous struggle. The Cardinal replied that he could not promise himself any repose in

France, for there, he said, the *female* politicians were more to be dreaded than the *male*; and he complained bitterly of the torments he had undergone at the hands of certain political women of the Fronde—notably the Duchess de Longueville, the Duchess de Chevreuse, and the Princess Palatine, each of whom, he asserted, was capable of upsetting three kingdoms.

“You are very lucky here in Spain,” he added. “You have, as everywhere else, two kinds of women—coquettes in abundance, and a very few simple-minded domestic women. The former care only to please their lovers, the latter their husbands. Neither the one nor the other, however, have any ambition beyond indulging themselves in vanities and luxuries. They only employ their pens in scribbling billet-doux or love-confessions, neither one nor other bother their brains as to how the grain grows, whilst talking about business makes their heads ache. Our women, on the contrary, whether prudes or flirts, old or young, stupid or clever, will intermeddle with everything. No honest woman,” to use the Cardinal’s own words, “would permit her spouse to go to sleep, no coquette allow her lover any favour, ere she had heard all the political news of the day. They will see all that goes on, will know everything, and—what is worse—have a finger in everything, and set everything in confusion. We have a trio, among others”—and he again named the three fair factionists above mentioned—“who [xii] threw us all daily into more confusion than was ever known in Babel.”

“Thank heaven!” replied Don Louis, somewhat ungallantly, “our women *are* of the disposition seemingly so well known to you. Provided that they can finger the cash, whether of their husbands or their lovers, they are satisfied; and I am very glad to say that they do not meddle with politics, for if they did they would assuredly embroil everything in Spain as they do in France.”

It was during the minority of Louis XIV. that Mazarin had but too good cause to complain of the three clever and fascinating women he thus named to Don Louis de Haro, who through their political factions, intrigues, and gallantries gave Anne of Austria’s Minister no rest, and for a long period not only thwarted and opposed him, but at intervals placed the State, and even his life, in imminent jeopardy.

Fortunately, in our political history the instances are rare of women who have quitted the sphere of domesticity and private life to take an active part in the affairs of State. We say "fortunately;" for in our opinion such abstention has tended to the happiness of both sexes in England.

In French memoirs, politics and scandal, the jokes of the *salons* and the councils of the Cabinet are inextricably mixed up together, and reveal a political system in which the authority exercised under free institutions by men had been transferred to the art, the tact, and the accomplishments of the female sex. We therein see how much women have done by those subtle agencies. If France was a despotism tempered by epigrams, it was the life of the *salons* which brought those epigrams to perfection; and the *salons* thus constituted a sort of social parliament, which, though unable to stop the supplies or withhold the Mutiny Act, still possessed a formidable weapon of offence in the power of making the Government ridiculous. Such was the difference existing between two quite distinct modes of government; between Parliamentary government and closet government; between the mace of the House of Commons and the fan of the Duchess de Longueville. England, as we need hardly say, has never had a government of this description. The nearest approach to it which she has ever seen was under the sway of Charles the Second, and, accordingly, the nearest approach to French memoirs which our literature possesses is in the volumes of Pepys and Hamilton. To the almost universal exemption of Englishwomen from taking an overt part in political affairs a striking exception must be made in Sarah, Duchess of Marlborough. She is the strongest example, perhaps, in the history of the world—certainly in the history of this empire—of the abuse of female favouritism, and the most flagrant instance of household familiarity on the destinies of mankind. Sarah Jennings, the political heroine of her age, and Viceroy, as she was called, in England, had, however, for contemporaries two other remarkable women, who touched the springs of political machinery quite as powerfully as—if not more powerfully than, save herself, any to be found within the limits of Europe—Madame de Maintenon and the Princess des Ursins. In the respective careers of that other formidable trio of female politicians may be traced the important, the overwhelming, influence, which

female Ministers, under the title of Court ladies, had obtained over the destinies of England, France, and Spain. At that momentous period—the commencement of the eighteenth century—the memoirs of a *bed-chamber lady* constitute the history of Europe. The bed-chamber woman soon became the pivot of the [xiv] political world. The influence of Mrs. Masham first endangered and finally overthrew the power of the great Duke of Marlborough. Some of the characteristics of the reign of Charles the Second reappeared partially and in a very unattractive form under the two first Georges, and have served to impart a tinge of French colour to the memoirs which describe their Courts. But, fortunately for England, neither Walpole nor his royal master were men of refined taste. It would have been hard for a monarch like Charles the Second, or a minister like Lord Bolingbroke, to resist the charms of those beautiful and sprightly girls who sparkle like diamonds in all the memoirs of that time. Their political influence was but small. George the First and his successor pursued their unwieldy loves and enjoyed their boorish romps in a style not seductive to English gentlemen. Politics were surrendered to Walpole; and the consequence was that, although there was plenty of immorality under those gracious Sovereigns, yet the feminine element of Court life had no longer that connection with *public policy* which once for a brief space it had possessed; and the resemblance to French manners in this respect grew less and less, till it disappeared altogether with the accession of George the Third.

During the reign of that domesticated paterfamilias a slight exception, it is true, occurred in the instance of Georgina Spencer, Duchess of Devonshire. Young, beautiful, amiable, and witty, and not altogether free from coquetry, she reckoned amongst her admirers some of the most distinguished men of that day. She fascinated them all without encouraging the pretensions of any; and notwithstanding the jealousy which so great a superiority necessarily excited among her own sex, and despite the [xv] rancour to which the inutility of their efforts to please her gave birth in the bosoms of certain of the men, she preserved a reputation for discretion beyond all suspicion. One circumstance of her life might indeed have cast a slur upon her fair fame if her irreproachable conduct, added to her natural graces, had not condoned a species of notoriety which opin-

ion in England very generally reproveth. The Duchess of Devonshire had friendly relations with the celebrated Charles James Fox, and that friendship had taken the tinge of party spirit. Fox presented himself as a candidate to represent Westminster in Parliament. He had two very formidable opponents, and it was thought that he would have succumbed in the struggle had not several amiable and energetic women made extraordinary efforts to procure him votes. At the head of these fair solicitors was the Duchess of Devonshire. A butcher whose vote she requested promised it to her on the condition that he might give her a kiss. To this she cheerfully consented, and that kiss added one more vote to her friend's poll. Such familiarity was far less shocking to our English manners than the too active and public part taken by a lady of distinction in politics. Very few of her countrywomen before her time had given occasion for a like scandal. [1]

The existence of those literary assemblies in France during the eighteenth century, the most important of which were [xvi] those presided over by Madame du Deffand, Mdlle. de Lespinasse, and Madame Geoffrin, were a characteristic feature of the time. It is a notable fact that the abstention from politics in those assemblies indirectly tended to increase the power and importance of the women who frequented them. Alluding to their influence, Montesquieu caustically remarked that a nation where women give the prevailing tone must necessarily be talkative. Then, however, it was the men who talked and the women who listened. The men talked because they could do little else; women gave the prevailing tone because men of all classes were partly compelled, and partly willing, to gather around them. The nobles being excluded from politics—in which none but the Ministers and their creatures could interfere—exercising no control either as individuals or as a body, naturally gave themselves up to the pleasures of society. Their political insignificance thus increased the power and importance of women.

To a far greater degree was their power and importance increased, on the contrary, during the first decade of the French Revolution, when, from the exceptional position they held, the *salons* of Madame Roland, Madame Necker, Madame de Suard, and others were essentially political—that of Madame Roland being almost an

echo of the Legislative Assembly. But women who love freedom abstractedly for its own sake, and are ready to suffer and die for a political principle, like Madame Roland, are very rarely met with.

Towards the close of the century the female leaders of the hitherto literary and social *salons* were so irresistibly swept into the whirlpool of public questions and events that they for the most part involuntarily became mere political partisans. Among others, but with a considerable modification on the score of the literary element, may be instanced [xvii] Madame de Staël, who by descent, education, and natural bias was inevitably destined to aim at political power. The extent and prominence of that exercised by her must have been considerable, though certainly overrated by Napoleon, in whom, however, it excited such unreasonable apprehension as led him to inflict ten years' banishment from France upon the talented daughter of Necker.

It must not be inferred that we desire to reduce women to the condition of a humiliating inaction. Far from it. In the position we would place them they could never feel, think, or act with greater interest or vivacity. Whilst it is desirable that every kind of artifice or intrigue should be interdicted from the interior of their domesticity, it is quite permissible for them to watch attentively important matters that may be occurring in public life. To that function they may bring their care and their solicitude, in order to follow and second continually the companion of their existence. "Les hommes même," says Fénelon, "qui ont toute l'autorité en public, ne peuvent par leurs délibérations établir aucun bien effectif, si les femmes ne leur aident à l'exécuter." Such was the legitimate influence exercised by the Princess Esterhazy, Ladies Holland, Palmerston, and Beaconsfield, in our day. It is no secret that the late lamented Viscountess Beaconsfield took the deepest interest in every great movement in which her illustrious husband was engaged. Such, too, was the case with Lady Palmerston, in reference to the great statesman whose name she bore. The influence of women in the politics of recent days is something peculiar and new. Our time has seen many women whose share in the politics of men was frank, unconcealed, and legitimate, while yet it never pretended or sought to be anything more than an influence—never attempted to be a ruling spirit. [xviii] By following these examples, the women of England

may make their power felt, without demanding to be put upon the same footing as their husbands.

Woman's reign, it has been truly said, "is almost absolute within the four walls of a drawing-room." It is undisputed in family direction and in the management of children; but the cases are rare indeed where it extends to *public questions* of any kind. The Frenchwoman of the present day is essentially a woman. Her objects are almost always feminine; she does not seek to go beyond her sphere; she understands her mission as one of duty in her house and of attraction towards the world; she is generally very ignorant of politics and all dry subjects, and shrinks from any active part in their discussion. Of course there are exceptions by the thousand; but the rule is that she voluntarily abstains from interference in outside topics, whatever be their gravity or their importance. She may have a vague opinion on such matters, picked up from hearing men talk around her, but the bent of her nature leads her in other ways—her tendency is towards things which satisfy her as a woman. It naturally follows that men do not give her what she does not seem to want. They consult her on matters of mutual interest, they ask for and often follow her advice in business; but in nine cases out of ten no husband would allow his wife to tell him how to vote at an election, or what form of government to support. This distinction is infinitely more remarkable in France than any analogous condition would be in England, because of the existence there of several rivals to the throne, and the consequent splitting up of the entire nation into adherents of each pretender. Yet even this exceptional position does not induce Frenchwomen to become politicians. Some few of them, of course, are so, and fling themselves [xix] with ardour into the cause they have adopted; but, fortunately for the tranquillity of their homes, the greater part of them have wisdom enough to comprehend that their real functions on the earth are of another kind.

The majority of the champions of the enfranchisement of the sex have loudly protested against the hackneyed truisms, formerly so rife, which impute to women every imaginable form of silliness and frivolity; that they, like Alphonse Karr's typical woman, have nothing to do but "*s'habiller, babiller et se déshabiller.*" But it will be well to remember the existence of another class of maxims of even greater weight, which dwell on the subtle influence of women, and of its

illimitable consequences. "If the nose of Cleopatra," remarks the most famous of these aphorists—Pascal—"had been a hair's-breadth longer, the fortunes of the world would have been altered." Has the influence of the sex decreased since the days of the dusky beauty whose irresistible fascinations

"—lost a world, and bade a hero fly?"

Rather, is it not infinitely more subtle, wider, and more prevailing than ever? No one who recognises the skill with which that immense influence may be exercised can listen without astonishment to the flimsy arguments which are usually advanced in support of the question of the political enfranchisement of the sex. That the results of giving this particular form of ability—a power which is irresistible to the highest intellectual refinement—the political arena for its field have not only proved widely injurious to women who have so exercised it, but to those most closely connected with them, it has been the author's object to show.

"And what hope of permanent success," it has been cogently asked, "could women have if they were to enter [xx] into competition with men in callings considered peculiarly masculine, many of which are already overstocked?" We are also brought here again face to face with that evil—the lessening or the complete loss of womanly grace and purity. Take away that reverential regard which men now feel for them, leave them to win their way by sheer strength of body or mind, and the result is not difficult to conjecture. Let the condition of women in savage life tell. Towards something like this, although in civilised society not so coarsely and roughly exposed to view, matters would tend if these agitators for women's rights were successful. Husbands, brothers, sons, have too keen a sense of what they owe of good to their female relatives to risk its loss; or to exchange the gentleness, purity, and refinement of their homes for boldness, flippancy, hardness and knowledge of evil.

Nature, herself, then, has disqualified women from fighting and from entering into the fierce contentions of the prickly and crooked

ways of politics. There is a silent and beautiful education which Heaven intended that all alike should learn from mothers, sisters, and wives. Each home was meant to have in their gentler presence a softening and refining element, so that strength should train itself to be submissive, rudeness should become abashed, and coarse passions held in check by the natural influence of women. High or low, educated or uneducated, there is the proper work of the weaker sex. And, finally, we venture to address her in the words of Lord Lyttelton:—

“Seek to be good, but aim not to be great;
A woman’s noblest station is retreat;
Her fairest virtues fly from public sight;
Domestic worth—that shuns too strong a light.”

FOOTNOTES:

[1] An anecdote of her has been preserved which proves how very general was the impression the grace and beauty of the Duchess of Devonshire made upon men in every station of society. On one occasion of her being present on the racecourse at Newmarket, a burly farmer who stood near her carriage, after having for some time gazed at her in a species of ecstasy, exclaimed aloud, “Ah! why am I not God Almighty?—she should then be Queen of Heaven!” The Duchess preserved her personal charms far beyond the period of life when they commonly disappear among women, though she lost one of her eyes a few years before her death in 1806.

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BOOK I.

PART I.

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