

Presidential Address

Delivered 17th February, 1949, by Miss C. E. Kirk, J.P.

What Are Our Rights? How Far Have We Made Use of Them?

In July of 1848, Lucretia Mott, who was a Quaker leader, with some other ladies and gentlemen, called a convention to discuss the "social, civil and religious condition and the rights of women."

When they made their first attempt to frame a resolution they found it so difficult that Elizabeth Cady Stanton (who was later to become a wonderful speaker and leader), said "On the first attempt to frame a resolution, to crowd a complete thought, clearly and concisely into three lines, they felt as helpless and hopeless as if they had suddenly been asked to construct a steam engine." There is overwhelming proof in the following statement that, even if they were faced with a very difficult problem, they knew what they wanted and were prepared to defy tyranny for the sake of a better world. The statement reads:—

"RIGHTS OF WOMEN"

"We hold these truths to be self evident; that all men and women are created equal . . .

- "1. The history of mankind is a history of repeated injuries and usurpations on the part of man toward woman, having in direct object the establishment of an absolute tyranny over her.
- "2. He has compelled her to submit to laws, in the formation of which she has had no voice . . .
- "3. After depriving her of all rights as a married woman, if single and the owner of property, he has taxed her to support a government which recognises her only when her property can be made profitable to it . . .
- "4. He has denied her the facilities for obtaining a thorough education, all colleges being closed against her . . .
- "5. He has created a false public sentiment by giving the world a different code of morals for men and women, by which moral delinquencies which exclude women from society, are not only tolerated, but deemed of little account by men . . .
- "6. He has usurped the prerogative of Jehovah himself, claiming it as his right to assign to her her sphere of action, when that belongs to her conscience and to her God . . ."

I have quoted the above that you and I may be reminded, and may also realise, something of what we owe to those women of a hundred years ago.

How do we stand in the matter of rights now? Equality of men and women—well we have not quite achieved that standard of justice yet.



There are still noticeable cases in which men still seem to think that they have all the knowledge that is worth while and now, and again we meet the woman who really seems to believe that if she tells you that "her Bill" holds the opinion that such and such is the case you are bound to believe it too. I have observed that the simple faith of such women is markedly stronger in the early days of the marriage than it is after twenty or even ten, years of living with "Bill." We have a number of positions in which the woman receives less pay than the man for exactly the same work, judged by the same standards.

We now have a direct voice in the making of our laws in that we can exercise our vote either toward electing the man or woman who shall sit in Parliament, or recording our vote against the candidate who does not come up to standard; as W.C.T.U. members we should make every effort to see that suitable women as well as God-fearing men, are elected next polling day. It should be our business to know something of these men and women who come forward seeking our vote. If they have conducted their own businesses dishonestly or without proper business sense it is useless to expect that they will run the affairs of the country either honestly or well; if their general and private moral standard is not high they are not fit to manage our beloved country.

Also we now have the Married Woman's Property Act whereby a woman can still keep her own money or property, though Heaven help her

if she is so unfortunate as to marry an unscrupulous man. More than once or twice I have seen a woman simply nagged out of her belongings. A nagging woman is someone to be avoided but a nagging man is someone to run from.

Woman's position in the realm of education is wonderful compared with the facilities available to those who first realised that women had the right and the ability to be as well educated as men, and were prepared to fight for that right.

All these rights and many more, too long a list to be dealt with here, which have been built upon the foundation laid by Lucretia Mott, Mrs. Elizabeth Cady Stanton and others, in 1848, are ours today.

What are we doing with these rights? First—are we guarding the sanctity of the home? Frequently we hear people deploring the fact that there is "no home life now-a-days." Why and how has this condition of affairs come about? Does not common honesty compel us to reply "because the older people have not faithfully, and as a whole, adhered to the standard of right as set out in the Ten Commandments and the Sermon on the Mount; have not acknowledged the voice of conscience which definitely indicated the white path of Right and the black path of Wrong, allowing themselves and their children" to think that there is a nice little grey path in-between, along which they can travel without harm to themselves or anyone else and without danger of side-stepping into the black path. Want of a realisation of our responsibility to guard the youth in our homes and in our neighbourhood is blazoned forth in a certain amount of disregard for truth and honesty; by the consumption of alcoholic liquors, although it may be very moderately and although they know full well that their example may, and frequently does, bring many a fine lad and lass to a dishonoured grave. Again the example of gambling has been set before the youth of our country by the light way in which those who know better take tickets in Art Unions, striving to white-wash themselves by saying "Oh, it was for a good cause. I never expected to win anything." If that is the truth, why take the ticket, why not give a straight out donation of a shilling or half crown?

What of the literature that is brought into our homes? Have parents and guardians been sufficiently interested in the books and papers the children and young people read? There is plenty of good and amusing literature for children and young