

An editor speaks

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AN EDITOR SPEAKS.

By PIERRE BÉGUIN.

"Civic equality for men and women, a problem which has not yet been solved in Switzerland."

"The question of women's suffrage has existed in Switzerland for a great many years. Attempts to institute it were made recently, on a local plane, but they were unsuccessful. Nevertheless, before the end of the year, this question will be submitted to the whole of our people. Concurrently, special consultations will take place in one of our Cantons. On these two occasions it will then be seen whether such a perfection of democracy can, at last, be decided upon, or whether, at any rate, the evolution of public opinion is favourable towards this innovation."

In order to be able to appreciate properly the import of this problem, it is necessary to recall two essential facts. For one thing, there are numerous countries in which both men and women vote and are nominated for elections, but which are not, for all that, more advanced States than our own; this, because the right to vote in them is not a real thing, and the citizens, men and women, do not enjoy any real liberty of choice. One may quite justifiably — and this is our own case — affirm that a democracy in which the right of voting is practised freely by men only is a more authentic democracy than that in a country where the right to vote is merely apparent, as is the case in the so-called "People's" democracies, where only one, sole official list can be voted on.

For another thing, we would like to recall the fact that in the seventy or so modern States in which civic equality is granted to women, this innovation was decided upon by an authority, either parliamentary or governmental, but never by the mass of men voting in the secrecy of the ballot. Had the men been consulted, it is not at all so sure that all would have taken an affirmative decision. Anyway, no one can confirm this, as no proof exists. The originality, however, of direct democracy such as exists in Switzerland, consists in this very fact that no important reform can be decreed without the consent of the citizens and, for the time being, the citizens are all men. Thus, the matter presents a more difficult aspect than elsewhere, in the sense that the decisive authority is represented by a people consisting solely of men, and that this people is asked to renounce from a privilege and to share it with a people of women.

During the last few years, this question has been raised several times on a local plane. In various Cantons it was proposed to make a start by granting civic rights to women in regard to ecclesiastical or Communal matters. It was then thought that it would prove easier to achieve the aim in view if these attempts were restricted to partial and limited reforms. But each time that this problem was put to the people, the men said "no", whether this occurred in German- or French-speaking Switzerland, in the Catholic or the Protestant Cantons.

It must be admitted that this situation is not satisfactory and that, very often, it is even paradoxical. All trades and professions are now open to

women. They are doctors, engineers, architects, lawyers and, sometimes, theologians. They manage business concerns. They pay taxes. Quite often they do military service. Women are to be found presiding at Courts of Justice, where they can deprive a delinquent of those civic rights which they do not themselves possess. In their capacity as Civil Servants they may be called upon to control the activities of a political authority — municipal, for example — of which they themselves cannot be members. In short, the evolution of customs and manners, as well as of the social situation, is such that a discrimination, which might perhaps have been thinkable in an era when women led secluded lives in the role of mothers of families, is no longer justifiable.

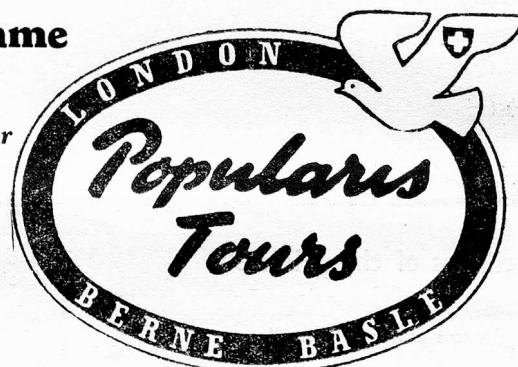
All these are arguments that cannot be rejected by anyone. Their validity is recognized very generally. But there still remain two essential oppositions to be conquered: that of the farmers, who are attached to the traditional forms of life, and that of the workers, who, in an age of mechanised labour, are often tempted to find in a political life, which is accessible to them alone, an element of personal prestige which their occupational life fails to give them. An analysis of all the ballots which have taken place on this subject during the last few years shows clearly that the nuclei of resistance to feminine suffrage are to be found in the countryside and in the workers' quarters of our large cities.

The present year will not end without this problem having been submitted to the people, on two occasions at least. First of all, the Swiss People will have to decide on a Project granting civic rights to women in regard to Federal affairs. Then, the Canton of Vaud has decided to suggest to its citizens a similar reform in respect of matters concerning the Canton of Vaud. These will be two tests. It may be anticipated that the suffragist cause will gain ground. It will be very interesting to see if a victory can be gained right away, or if further delays will have to take place.

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