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Is the Growing  
Independence of Women  
a Good Thing?

BY

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## Is the Growing Independence of Women a Good Thing?

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**T**HE first thing I want to say on this vast and living subject to-night is a word as to the method in which it ought to be treated. People sometimes seem to think that mere personal and local observation is enough to qualify them for pronouncing judgment on living social movements. But a little thought ought to dispel such a delusion. In every science the individual investigator must make use of the results of other investigators. Particularly is this the case in the social sciences. Snap-shot judgments, based on hurried local observations, have little value in these subjects. The mind must be kept open, prejudice must be suppressed, a conscientious effort must be made to get at all the facts, if the complex problems of society are to be discussed intelligently and practicable suggestions made for their solution.

For various reasons the subject on which I am to speak to-night arouses the prejudices of both men and women. Everyone has an opinion on it. Violent feelings are aroused wherever it is eagerly discussed. And the very violence and dogmatism which men and women exhibit on the one side or the other justify one in feeling that on this subject beyond most others the patient, historical, evolutionary method of treatment must be followed. If the opponents of woman's growing independence would

only take the trouble to study in brief outline the history of the evolution of humanity in Europe and America for the last 2,500 years, they would discover that the woman's movement is only a part of the great liberation and democratic movement of the Western world, and that, having such an impetus behind it, it can no more be stopped than the sea can be stopped from climbing up the shore when once the tide has begun to flow. And on the other hand, if those who are working for the emancipation of woman could see their movement as part of a great world-movement; could feel, as a study of the past would justify them in feeling, that their craving for greater independence is not a mere personal whim of a few bold women in the present time, but a growing instinct in all humanity, a deep need of the human constitution, an inevitable outgrowth from the spiritual life which lifts humanity above the lower animals, they would, perhaps, be more calm and hopeful for the future of their movement than they sometimes are. Every great movement has its roots in the past, and can be understood and estimated rightly only in the light of its whole history.

It is simply impossible for any man, saturated with democratic sentiments and ideals, to survey the history of woman's status in the world without a sense of humiliation and shame for his own sex. In every sphere of life woman has been compelled to occupy an inferior position. In the family, *e.g.*, where her functions are so important, what status has she held? Until recent times she has never been regarded as the companion and equal of her husband. She has been his subordinate, his plaything, his drudge. At certain periods of history

she has been hunted and captured like an animal. She has been bought and sold like a chattel. She has been bargained for, by the representatives of different estates, in order that her marriage might cement the two properties together. The marriage-relation, whose whole spiritual value consists in its voluntariness, has been forced upon her by father or brother or uncle or guardian for purely utilitarian ends. She has been a pawn to be moved hither and thither as the players felt was in the interest of the game. Until recent times the laws of divorce have been almost invariably in the interests of the husband. The divorce laws of the Roman Empire are a famous exception, but everywhere else custom established the right of the husband, as the owner, to dismiss his wife whenever he pleased. Even the laws of the Bible, humanitarian as they generally are, only attempt to relieve the harshness and injustice of the ancient custom. The Arab of the present time, a genuine survival from the ancient world, has only to lead his wife to the door of his tent and tell her to go and the divorce is complete.

Then, again, in the occupations and opportunities of life, woman has been confined, until recent times, within the narrowest round of labors and privileges. Among barbarians and savages she has always been a drudge. The men of our own Indian tribes considered it manly to hunt and fight, but not to work, and so the Indian's squaw became his slave, butchering the animals he had killed, making his baskets and moccasins, and carrying his burdens when he went on a journey. And not only has woman been confined to the most menial tasks, but the door of educational opportunity has been shut

against her. Mrs. Mary A. Livermore tells us that when she applied for admission to a school in New England, one of the most enlightened parts of the world, she was told that she ought to go home and learn to cook and sew, and leave the higher branches of learning to her superior—man. Even in the wealthier and nobler families women were denied the wider opportunities of mental culture. Jane Austen, the famous English novelist, had to conceal the fact of her authorship, because to write books was considered a ruthless violation of the conventions within which woman was supposed to live.

In Government, woman's position has been no better. She has been denied the right of helping to make the laws under which she and her children had to live. A few women have arisen to power here and there, both in the ancient, mediæval and modern times, as for example, Deborah, among the Hebrews, Aspasia, in the Athens of Pericles, Zenobia and Cleopatra during the Roman Empire, the Borgia women in the history of Italy, Queen Elizabeth and Queen Victoria, among our own Sovereigns; but, on the whole, woman has been a political nonentity. A few have gained power by sheer force of character and exercised it in a direct open way; a few others have inherited power, and, by virtue of their position, exercised considerable influence; but the majority of the women who have had influence on public life and government have been compelled to gain it by intriguing in the dark through men whom their charms had overpowered.

Even in religion, where woman's aptitude seems to be unique, she has been allowed very little shaping power. Grave theologians have doubted and debated whether woman had a soul or not. The

monk of the Middle Ages considered her the emissary of the Devil. Not only was she forbidden to lead the devotions of the people, but sometimes, when she was allowed to be present at worship, she was put behind a screen that she might look on at that in which she was not permitted to take part. Our highest term for God—"Our Father"—echoes the ancient idea of the superiority of the male; so much so indeed that Theodore Parker, the great preacher of Boston, in his beautiful volume of prayers changed it into the phrase, "Our Father and our Mother—God." In our own time and country woman is said to keep the churches alive, but what place has she in the supreme deliberations of church bodies? In the Presbyterian Church she may not be an elder or sit in Presbytery or Synod or General Assembly. In the Methodist Church she has no place in the Local or General Conference. In the Anglican Church she is not represented in the Synod or the Pan-Anglican Council. No woman had a seat in the Committee of the Presbyterian, Methodist and Congregational Churches which recently brought to a conclusion its deliberations as to the union of these three churches. And with the exception of a few of the smaller Protestant denominations, no woman is admitted to all the privileges of the Ministry.

Thus, we see that in every important sphere of life, woman thus far has been compelled to occupy a narrow and inferior position. Where the strong hand of man has not forced her into the status of a slave or a drudge, and she has been allowed a relatively free life, she has been taught to think of herself as dependent on man, and of her duty as summed up in the obligations of love and tenderness

towards the man who protected and supported her. This whole story of woman's position in the world must be kept in mind when we undertake to pronounce judgment on the struggle of women for larger independence in the present day.

Is this growing independence, then, likely to be a good thing? When I go on to answer this question in the affirmative I do not mean to say that all the consequences of the movement are good or will be good. It has never been given to any great movement to do good and good only. Out of the life and teachings of Jesus, *e. g.*, there grew an ecclesiastical organization which held all Europe in its tyrannical grasp, and kept back the moral and intellectual progress of the Western world for hundreds of years, but no one doubts that in spite of this development the Western world has been profoundly enriched by the life and teachings of Jesus. Out of the Protestant Reformation there came wild, lawless sects which used the new religious freedom as an occasion for loose living and thinking, and a new critical spirit, which resulted often in scepticism and atheism, but no reasonably unprejudiced person can doubt for a moment that the Protestant Reformation was a great stroke for the higher life of man, and that the moral and intellectual progress of North Europe and North America go back to the dramatic moment when Luther stood alone but undaunted before Bishop and Emperor in the famous Diet of Worms. Out of the enfranchisement of the labor-classes in England there has come now and then a lawless revolutionary spirit which has done something to unsettle the peace of the country and divide the people into hostile parties, but no thoughtful student

doubts that on the whole the enfranchisement of the labor-classes has been a long step in human progress.

And so it will be with the movement for woman's larger independence. It will probably arouse extreme prejudices and passions among those who work for it. It will lead to wild and sensational demonstrations such as have recently been made in London. It will carry some speakers in the heat of their arguments so far that they will overlook the real differences that must always separate the sexes because of their different physiological functions. It will, perhaps, bring about a too hasty abandonment of moral and social conventions that have still a core of worth in them on the part of the more free and daring spirits of the progressive party. But the person who allows these extreme things to prejudice him against the whole movement, or who judges the whole movement by its most sensational aspects, simply shows his inability to judge sanely of social phenomena. The woman's movement is no mere hysterical demonstration worked up by a few over-nervous and under-occupied women. It is the latest phase of the movement for emancipation and wider life which began when man first broke through the shell of mere animalism and became a living soul; when instinct blossomed into reason; when imagination first lifted man out of the local and the present to which the animals are, so far as we know, rigidly confined, and sent him journeying far and wide through the past and the future and over lands and seas on which his foot had never touched. It is the latest phase of the struggle for personality which, in the Anglo-Saxon world, has had so many dramatic moments in its long history—



the signing of the Magna Charta, the Civil War under Cromwell and the Puritans, the Bill of Rights, the Reform Bill, the various labor laws of the 19th Century, and in recent years the sudden emergence out of the underworld, as it were, of 50 labor members of Parliament in the last British elections. If we divorce the movement for woman's larger independence from this whole struggle of humanity for a larger spiritual life, and for the emancipation of the many from the domination of the privileged classes, we shall neither understand it as to its motives nor estimate it at its true worth. It is no mere local phenomenon. It began when, in the course of his evolution, the human being became a living spirit, and with such a driving power behind it who can doubt that the ultimate results of the movement will be a gain for humanity?

(1) I believe in woman's growing independence, because, in the first place, it will be good for woman herself. To believe that more education, more responsibility, more opportunity, more power will have a bad effect on woman in the main, would be equivalent to believing that God made a mistake when he mixed in the human clay the spark of spirit which is the source of all our higher wants. More education and responsibility and power may destroy or diminish some of the qualities that have always been associated with the gentler sex. They will destroy, for example, the past ideal of woman as a sort of ivy clinging to man for protection and support, and looking to him for her ideas and her moral and spiritual guidance. They will destroy or transform woman's submissiveness, her cloister-like innocence, her readiness to believe, her sublime patience under the neglect or the maltreatment of

those who contracted to care for her, her contentment with a life of mere routine and with a second-hand spiritual existence. In other words, they will destroy the qualities that have grown out of woman's weakness and dependence.

But while the weakness and dependence of the female sex have appealed powerfully to chivalrous men in all ages, to those who were not chivalrous her weakness and dependence were only temptations to exploit her labor and her person. The dependence of woman on man for economic support and for mental life has been one of the instruments of torture by which woman has suffered from the beginning ; for through it man has been able to make her both his domestic drudge and the victim of his brute passions. Where the husband was a true gentleman, or where the wife had powerful relations, woman's weakness did not prevent her from securing her rights. But where the husband was not thoroughly moralized and the wife had no powerful relations, her weakness, her ignorance, her lack of developed personality, her submissiveness of spirit were daily temptations to man to exploit her and abuse her, and no one who has lived long or observed widely need be told that the temptations were not always resisted. I do not doubt the beauty of many of the qualities that have grown out of woman's dependence on man for her economic and spiritual being — the tranquility of mind which was made possible by a quiet domestic life, free from the fierce competition of the outside world, and ignorant of the worst evils of society ; the fidelity of character which secured her perfect fulfilment of all the obligations of the home ; her readiness to forgive injuries and to make herself the

guardian of her husband's health of body and mind ; her childlike trust in the teachings of her parents and her husband and her priest or pastor. Everyone has known noble and saintly women whose whole training was received in the older thought-world and who lived contentedly within the narrow limits against which the modern woman protests. But one has to take into consideration what these qualities growing out of woman's dependence on man, have cost the sex as a whole. The chivalry of man has been ample protection in all ages for a few women, but it has never been a protection for more than a few. The rest have suffered at man's hands all sorts of injustices and indignities, and now and then, brutalities, simply because they were refused that education and economic opportunity and developed personality which are protecting women to-day, both in the married-relation and in single life.

I do not doubt, therefore, that more independence will be good for woman. It will protect her against those men who have no chivalrous feelings. It will enable her to bring to the home, if she marries, a greater capacity to administer its activities. It will extend the range of her interests and thus make it possible for her to keep in touch with her children as they grow into manhood and womanhood. It will deliver the women who do not marry from the necessity of depending for their support on the tardy gifts of inconsiderate fathers or brothers or relatives. And when we add to these more or less external advantages, the greater wealth of personality, the richer inner life of thought and feeling and purpose which broad education and wide responsibilities bring, who can doubt that, in spite of the

losses which it may entail, the growing independence of woman will make life more free, more certain, more rich in its contents for women themselves than it has been in the past?

(2) Nor do I think that the benefit to man will be any the less certain. Emerson has a sentence somewhere to the effect that if we tie one end of a chain around the neck of a slave, the other end will sooner or later wind itself around our own neck. By enslaving others we inevitably enslave ourselves.

Now I am quite convinced that the spiritualizing of man depends to a very large degree on the emancipation of woman. What was it that compelled the Sultan of Turkey and the Emperor of Germany, a few weeks ago, to concede to their people powers which before they had persistently denied them? Everybody knows the answer. It is the increased political personality of the people they govern. A new self-consciousness has come to these two nations, and before this new self-consciousness the tyrant and the egotist tremble. So is it in private life. We respect the people who have achieved a firm personality; we abuse, or despise, or pity, according to our natures, those who are weak or lacking in personality. So is it in the relations between the sexes. So long as women are weak, untrained and undeveloped in personality, the men of tyrannical nature will exploit them and abuse them, and as long as men exploit and abuse women, they must remain unspiritualized themselves. Of all the things that soften and moralize man, the effort to be just and delicate and refined towards woman, a being physically weaker than himself, is, perhaps, the most influential. And I know nothing that will make man more just and

refined in his relations with woman than the feeling that she is his equal and companion, that her personality, while differing from his, may be as rich in its contents and as capable of development as his own. Who that has visited hundreds of homes as I have done in the course of my various pastorates has failed to see that the lack of personality in woman, the failure of woman to expect and to demand respect for herself, have developed in the husband overbearing, and, perhaps, cruel and brutal qualities which a stronger woman might have held entirely in check? And who can fail to see that the countless victims of man's sensuality in our large cities owe their degradation to the lack of respect on man's part for woman's personality, and the lack of reverence for her personality on the part of woman herself?

For these and other reasons I believe, therefore, that the growing independence of woman will be a good thing for man. It will curb his tyrannical tendencies; it will refine him through his increased respect for the moral and spiritual qualities of a being physically weaker than himself; it will develop in him a moral sentiment towards humanity as a whole which has only too often been lacking in him because he has been accustomed to deal with the humanity that stood nearest to him in too inconsiderate a way; and finally it will quicken in him new qualities which will enlarge the range of his personality, for it seems to be true as the sociologists say, that every great man has something of the woman in him as every great woman has in her something of the man.

(3) I cannot pursue my subject much further to-night, but a word in closing about woman

in the State must not be omitted. The problem of woman's suffrage is to me only a part although a very vital part of the whole question of woman's emancipation. So far as her abstract right to a vote is concerned, no enlightened publicist now disputes it. No valid reason has ever been offered why woman should not vote and bear the responsibilities of Government as well as man. She can manage stores and schools and universities and newspapers and hospitals ; she can go to the field of battle as a nurse if she cannot fight in the trenches ; she can organize great public movements and manage them as well as men manage theirs. Why, then, may she not learn to vote as intelligently as men do ? The real question is what will be the influence of women in public life ? Is not the franchise too wide already ? Would not the extension of the suffrage to women only intensify the power which the political boss has gained over us through his control of the ignorant vote of large cities ?

Our answer to these questions will depend on our general feeling concerning the success of modern democracy. If we think that manhood suffrage has been a mistake and that the few know better what the many want than the many do themselves, we shall be opposed to the extension of the suffrage. But if we think that democracy promises better things for us in the future than it has yet accomplished ; if we believe that the best way to help people is to put them in a position to help themselves and then make them bear the responsibility of their failure to help themselves ; if we are convinced that democracy with all its shortcomings makes more for justice and social progress than a despotism or a

paternal government we shall not be afraid of the consequences of extending the suffrage to women. It is as yet rather difficult to tabulate the results of the woman-vote in countries where woman has been enfranchised, but one clear gain seems to have been made in Australia where, we are told, the vote of women has driven out of public life men who were notorious for their evil-living. If no other gain were made, that in itself would constitute a long step forward in human evolution.

The results of the recent elections in Denver, Colorado, where the women voters returned Judge Lindsey of the Juvenile Court to the position he has made famous, against the influence of both political parties, also show how the vote of women will be likely to affect political life in time to come.

But even though the enfranchisement of woman is too recent in any country to afford us a large mass of favorable statistics, on general principles I believe the effect of woman's suffrage will be good. It takes a man and a woman together to manage well a home and a family. And the home is the State in miniature. The State is not a mere police-institution. It embraces more and more of the interests of life. It passes and enforces laws which touch the life of all alike—men, women and children. It increases its functions every decade and requires the experience and wisdom of all parties concerned if it is to perform properly its growing responsibilities. We have found out that the rich cannot or will not legislate satisfactorily for the poorer classes. Why should we find it hard to believe that men cannot legislate satisfactorily for women?

For these two reasons, then, I believe in women's suffrage. In the first place she has an abstract

right to it as nearly all serious people now admit. In the second place while I am not sanguine enough to expect that women's vote will solve all our social problems instanter, I believe that her deep concern in a few supreme interests of life will make her in the long run a very valuable factor in the State. Surely it is not without significance that both in the ancient and the medieval world "Justice" was painted as a Woman!

