

WOMAN IN OUR CHANGING WORLD

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I expect that woman will be the last thing civilized by man.

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IN an article published in *THE DALHOUSIE REVIEW* last January, I contended that women, up to the present time, have made little change in the design of life, which remains predominantly masculine. The Vote has not secured for them the benefits promised by the eager adherents of woman suffrage. As a matter of fact, women vote very much like men. I attributed this to two main causes: first, women have failed to envisage a cause interesting enough to enlist their peculiar sympathies; and secondly, their allegiances have been divided by party propaganda in a political system dominated by men. As I believe that women have a different contribution to make to life from that made by men, I pointed out that it might redound to the ultimate benefit of mankind if the feminine point of view were more adequately represented. To this end, I suggested that women should search for a unifying principle that would make a satisfying demand upon their complete personalities. I intimated that this might lie in their appreciation of all that an intelligent custodianship of human life implied. The custodianship of life, I suggested, was a peculiar feminine province.

Among the criticisms made of this article are two that I think warrant special attention. The first is that it is in the nature of things, biologically, that women should defer to men, and that the majority of women like to follow their lead in the larger issues of life. The second is that the spectacle of women in domestic and social life to-day does not constitute a favorable argument for their participation in larger issues.

The plea that it is natural for women to defer to men is not an adequate argument against the development in them of a stronger sense of the perils that may arise from a negative attitude. We know that in science and in life many natural things have to be modified and controlled. When women once realize that they have a duty that goes beyond the narrow walls

of their homes and the narrow compass of their mental attitudes in the business and social world, they will pursue that duty as conscientiously as the capable housewife chases dust and reprimands her husband for not wiping his shoes on the door mat!

I admit that the women who now realize that a changed attitude on their part is essential are in the minority. But in every advance of life, as we know, it is the relatively few who form the vanguard. And I should like to remind men, who may be repelled by these suggestions, that possibly in the women who feel deeply the need of a more feminine touch in the harsh affairs of human life to-day, they may find Cordelias of salvation. Let us not forget the story of King Lear and his three daughters. Two of them, we know, by their flattery and deception drove him to madness and death, and the third, who spoke the truth and might have saved him, was, until too late, repulsed by him.

The second argument against women's participation in the larger affairs of life is advanced by those who point to the spectacle of women in domestic and social life. And truly there does seem to be much in such a spectacle to justify the complaint frequently made that "women do not change".

Mr. Arthur Stringer wrote as follows in the *North American Review*, Summer, 1939:

The most conspicuous delusion of our open century was the naive belief as to woman's sudden and fundamental change of character. . . Outside the sex issue, woman has as yet no clear-cut plan of life. When man's industrial and political machinery, which should have left her days fuller and freer by giving her ampler time and energy for the development of civic and cultural duties, failed to narrow the gulf between the two sexes and left it, to man's loss as much as to her own, as abysmally unbridged as before, she blithely powdered her nose and turned her face in the other direction. . . She professionalized her prettiness. . . And just about the time the archaeologists were digging their six-thousand-year-old rouge pots out of the barrel-vaulted Temenos of Nebuchadnezzar she proved her kinship with her Babylonian sister by confronting the twentieth century with the flapper. . .

Well, from the days of Nebuchadnezzar, the majority of men have shown a marked predilection for this particular specimen of femininity. "Truth with a woman," declares Mr. Stringer, "seems to be that which, at the moment, she wishes to be true. She refuses to be honest even with herself." But even as he anathematizes her, one feels that he likes her, for the simple reason that in his references to women, he selects the cajoler as the only type worth taking into account! The flatterers

and cajolers, indeed, the Gonerils and Regans, have always seemed to play a more effective part in men's lives than the Cordelias, who speak the truth,—and the consequences have not redounded to their benefit. For these men the working women (whom men's "industrial machinery" has certainly not liberated but driven in multitudes into factory and office), the Jane Addamses and Maude Roydens of society do not exist. One suspects that there is some truth in the statement made a few years ago by a profound German woman writer, Rosa Mayreder, that the supposed "real nature" of women is something built up subjectively in men's minds.

Fortunately, there have always been men who have seen women in quite a different light from that vouchsafed to Mr. Stringer. In this lies hope for the women who cannot consent to be relegated to the ranks of the "eternal feminine", as that is defined by the facile pens and the temperamental prejudices of certain writers of both sexes. These women realize that, without the co-operation of men clear-eyed enough to penetrate beneath surfaces, they cannot succeed in expressing their essential selves in a manner that may redound to the benefit of society. Such a writer was Meyrick Booth, who wrote a decade ago:—

Modern life is failing, and one of the main reasons why it fails is because it cannot enlist the deeper powers of the feminine personality.

Another was William Wordsworth, who described his ideal woman in these words:—

A Being breathing thoughtful breath,
 A Traveller between life and death;
 The reason firm, the temperate will,
 Endurance, foresight, strength, and skill;
 A perfect Woman, nobly planned
 To warn, to comfort, and command;
 And yet a Spirit still, and bright,
 With something of angelic light.

Yet in the spectacle of present life, we must admit that there is some justification for the views expressed by Mr. Stringer and others, superficial though these may be. Mr. B. K. Sandwell, in *Saturday Night* of July 1st., 1939, writes:—

The chief difficulty facing women at the present time is the result of a change of idea. In North America—outside French Canada—the one function of which they have a monopoly, that

is bearing children, is in disrepute, or at least is regarded as much less important than it used to be. Nations which occupy—and may one day have to defend—the finest areas of the earth's surface are afraid of over-population. We would rather have more machines than more men and women. This idea will not last, but in the meanwhile it obviously puts the child-bearing sex at a disadvantage. . . . Men have ceased to give women seats in street cars, because men have changed their feelings about women.

We detect in this the covert sneer at women's invasion of men's field, in which they have cut but second or third-rate figures, and the intimation that, hitherto, men have regarded women only chivalrously—or as this writer says, as worthy of being given seats in street cars—on account of their potential motherhood.

The real causes of the changed attitude of many men to women are not usually probed. A sex antagonism has developed which finds expression in many innuendoes and in numerous letters and articles published in the popular press. Actually, to-day we find sentiments like the following: "The women should go back to their duties where they rightfully belong and give the men an opportunity . . . to take up their accustomed places in the industrial world." I am sure that many men, earning present-day wages, under present-day precarious conditions, and others who are supported by women, would be the last to appreciate it if their women-folk suddenly resolved to perform nothing but household tasks. The good old days when it was profitable for women to remain in the home—when their spinning, weaving, bread, candle and soap-making, during the period when the domestic system of industry prevailed, amply provided for the means of their support—have long since departed. The industrial revolution, brought about by men's inventions, is responsible for the exodus of women from the home. Machinery, which took away from men and women so many of their home tasks, still pursues its Gargantuan course. One machine replaces in its stride a hundred men, and so on. "Certainly only a percentage of the population is needed to do the country's work and keep the wheels of industry and business humming," declares another disgruntled writer. . . . "The present trend would indicate that in future years the greatest percentage of business and industrial workers will be women . . . and there are millions of men out of work, or making small wages, who are eating their hearts out because they haven't jobs. . . . Someone should induce girls to give up business for marriage. . . ."

But the solution suggested here is not as simple as that. Women remain in the labor market because, under present conditions, they can do the required work as well as the men—and they work cheaper. Even if each one decided to take a husband, it is doubtful whether the man she made room for, would care to work at her wages, and, at the same time, become responsible for the support of a wife.

Yet all these protests and animadversions hurled at women (who, we notice, refrain from retaliation) are symptomatic. Men and women alike realize that "the times are out of joint". Although women are less vocal in this connection than men, their attitude is revelatory. They show a marked reluctance to remain in the home. Thus we find many married women eager to find jobs—and using, frequently, subterfuge to obtain them. When they cannot find work, they desert their houses for hours at a time, to haunt department stores, attend picture shows or bridge parties, or, favorite pastime among many, to consult teacup readers or mediums about futures that they fondly hope may be less futile than their present existences. The very millinery such women wear proclaims their fatuity and maladjustment. It is not that a married woman may not find plenty to do at home, but her labors, once so significant, have degenerated into drudgery. She finds herself, too often, the nursemaid of her children and the maid of all work of her husband,—the school, on the one hand, and industrial machinery, on the other, having deprived her of much of the significance of her former work. Here is a comment on the average small home, such as may be found in abundance in the United States or Canada, by Professor John Hyde Preston, published in the May number of *Harper's*, 1938:—

For every little home a man labors somewhere at a job he may not keep for long, and a woman scrubs and washes dishes and hopes for an hour of peace before the baby wakes from its afternoon nap and the older children come from school; and then in the evening this man and this woman, whom God hath joined together, sit tired and worried and debate whether they can squeeze a drink or a movie out of the budget...

Is it any wonder that the many women whom this description fits have developed a form of nervous instability, brought about not only by too much preoccupation with the trivial but by the precariousness of their situation—an instability that expresses itself in those very maladjustments that are so

often held up to ridicule? Or that women in better circumstances, exonerated from menial tasks, become—in many instances—social parasites?

"We suspect," said George Meredith more than half a century ago, "that woman will be the last thing that man will civilize." It is a saying that has stirred the indignation of serious women and won the approbation of the average man. Yet a profound truth is incorporated in this subtle declaration. In order to civilize, man must himself be civilized. Without the co-operation of the clear-eyed man, the woman who realizes that she is not civilized can do little. Woman is not civilized because her complete being is not taken into account in city or state. That which differentiates her as a human being, her motherhood, potential or actual, is not expressed in the "arts of civilization" in an effective manner, because to-day we still have, in the midst of plenty, abundant crop of ill-born, ill-bred, ill-fed, and ill-clad children. We still have crime, pestilence, and famine, slums and war. When the deep implications of her motherhood are fully grasped by mankind, and expressed in city and state, then woman may become civilized, and we may witness the evolution of an age that takes into account the child from his birth, by providing him with a proper heritage and an environment in which his powers can expand to the best advantage. In that sense, no doubt, woman will be the last thing civilized by man.