

THE WOMAN'S WORLD.

Woman and Democracy.



THE most obvious as well as the most important characteristic of our age is the progress of Democracy. When the present reign began the word Republic took the mind far away across the Atlantic, or far back into the ages of classical antiquity. When it celebrates its Jubilee

the same word points out a people divided from us only by the streak of silver sea which we are proposing practically to dry up, and invites imagination but a little way forward into the future, in order to find its literal scope correspond with the far wider virtual significance which it possesses already. We seem to have returned to the age of the Pisistratids and the Tarquins. The rulers of the past are disappearing. But they are not succeeded by an oligarchy such as succeeded the expulsion of the kings, at a time when the workers of the world were slaves; what we confront is an actual rule of the people; perhaps discarding all semblance that veils its dominion, certainly refusing any limit by which it shall be actually checked. Nor has the word a merely political significance with us as, so far as we can judge, it had in the twin Aryan races who at the same time—but by no mutual instigation—felt some common impulse of awakening vitality, as severed waters feel the touch of spring; banished the tyrant, and enthroned the Demos. For in our Demos, the agora and the forum no longer enclose the battle-field of Freedom. That struggle seeks to penetrate every chink which opens into a fresh department of the life of man. Our home feels the influence of Democracy no less than our Senate and our judgment hall; even by the domestic hearth, and in the solitude of the study, it is still impossible for us to forget that the idea of authority has grown dim. The last vestige of the patria potestas is fading, the subjection incident to age and sex appears to be passing away; the first, indeed, cannot be altogether annulled while the laws of Nature hold, but the second is a thing of the past, and by some complainants is said to be even inverted. The subjection of women, among bad and brutal men, must, of course, be a permanent danger,

for no possible arrangement can prevent women being weaker than men. But when subjection is found only in the train of brutality and crime, its day is past. Our Laureate, writing forty years ago, side by side with the well-known quotation that woman should be to man "as perfect music matched with noble words," told us that it is the part of man to command, and woman to obey. The line marks the date of "The Princess." Some men do command, some women do obey, but obedience is no longer the ideal of marriage. If it be still the ideal of the nursery, that is the only sphere we can claim for it even as an ideal.

The triumph of Democracy is felt not only in all men's acts but in all their thoughts. Our most cherished traditions give way before it. A liberal education in the days of our fathers meant an acquaintance with literature; in the days of our sons it seems likely to mean an acquaintance with science. The change involves more than a substitution of material. It is a revolution of method. The old ideal was selective. The university of the past said, "All knowledge is useful, but all knowledge is not educating. We will choose out and set our stamp upon that information which deserves the name of culture. We open no storehouse where the student may, like Juvenal's braggadocio, look through the wealth of the East and choose out a sixpenny cup. To us he must come not as a purchaser to a shop, but as a child to a parent; we will at once select and impart our instruction, and when he quits us, whatever else he has failed to learn, he shall, at least, be aware that there is such a thing as a hierarchy of knowledge. He shall imbibe with the very air he breathes, the knowledge that certain languages, certain literatures are *classical*; that we summon them to exhibit and unfold in its typical significance what is valuable in all history and literature. In like manner (though with less insistence) we choose out the most abstract principle of science, and let mathematics represent all physical law. We believe that the knowledge of Greek and Roman literature and history holds a clue and supplies a stimulus to the study of all other literature and history, that mathematics imparts the spirit of all physical science; but we are not prepared to justify this belief, or to renounce it when confronted with the finest specimens of our failures. The learner must accept it from us, or can be no pupil of ours."

This voice is of the past. The university of the future must *select* nothing, she can only *collect*. She may, indeed, bring forward the history of Greece, observing to the critical student, as a shopman points out the durability of a stuff to a purchaser, that the victory of Thermopylæ secured Europe, enlisted Æschylus, provided the theme of Herodotus. So much is *science*; these are facts respected by the man of science just as much as any other facts—just as much, but not more. The purchaser looks at his wares, takes out his purse, balances the pro and con, and refuses no trustworthy information before making up his mind. But if he then decide on a coarser stuff, the obsequious shopman must hasten to produce it. If the learner look at his eight or nine hundred pounds, his three or four years of fresh youth, and decide that he could spend them more remuneratively on the history of America than of Greece, or that the study of physiology would pay better than either, Alma Mater must not frown. She must keep no especial complacency for the son who learns the old lesson; the world of knowledge is one vast Republic, one fact is as good as another. "One man, one vote" reproduces itself in the world of learning as "one fact, one link," and in a chain all links are or should be equal.

Even in the very citadel of our moral life, Democracy seems to be triumphant. Our fathers thought that as there was a hierarchy of knowledge in the world without, so there was a hierarchy of discernment in the world within; that there was within the man that which spoke the language of command. Here too, it seems, the principle of equality is to have its way. The command is translatable into counsel; the voice that seems to say "Do, or refrain from doing," if we investigate its origin and its meaning, proves to utter nothing more than an urgent representation of the consequences of action or inaction. The conscience speaks only as the statesman may address the Demos, it may warn, inform, instruct; but command never. Kant deemed that the "categorical imperative" set our feet once again upon the solid rock which the critical analysis of the intellect had seemed to dissolve to cloud, but in our day the imperative is everywhere analysed into the conditional. Every faculty, as every person, must translate a claim on obedience into a maxim of prudence and a suggestion of expediency. There is no authority anywhere. There is only knowledge and the influence which knowledge can acquire by uttering warnings and giving instruction that the average man can receive.

On what side in the struggle between the ideas of the past and future are we to rank the influence of woman? To many the question will seem absurd. It would be merely silly to ask with reference to this or anything else how the influence of men tells upon it. Men are bad and good, wise and foolish, vivid and torpid, venerable and despicable, and any other pair of antitheses you please. Surely the same may be said of woman. Doubtless it may; nevertheless, it is our belief that woman has a special vocation in face of the new democracy. In the new development of female influence characteristic of our day, though this be in itself a part

of the democratic movement, there lies, we believe, an implicit vindication of all that is true in aristocratic feeling: an antidote to all that is false and poor in democracy.

We do not mean by this, as is often said, that women are specially Conservative. It is just as true, it is more true, that they are specially Radical. Women will be always the most unmitigated and fervid partisans of any cause capable of attracting their partisanship. Almost any man sees modifying circumstances in the neighbourhood of principles, the woman who sees them is a remarkable woman. Make women citizens (a measure on the expediency of which no opinion is offered here) and you will no doubt add to the constituency a good many votes which represent a much stronger retrograde impulse than that felt by almost any man. But at the same moment you call into existence a sympathy with the forward movement, which, in its vitality and its momentum, far exceeds what is felt by ordinary men. There are no Radicals like women. How could it be otherwise? It is not merely that women are always weaker than men, and always prepared to take the side of the weak. That is much, but not all. Women inherit in a peculiar degree the feelings of women. The stirrings of awakening aspirations after freedom as they are uttered by a Euripides, reach an Englishwoman or a Frenchwoman through a long series of intensifying gradations; the throb of sympathy with freedom comes from a depth far beyond any individual capacity of emotion. The smouldering indignation of some mute inglorious Joan of Arc bursts into flame in a victim of modern injustice; a Mary Wollstonecraft gives voice to many a dumb tortured heart long since at rest; a Madame Roland utters the hopes and the disappointments of thousands of ancestors who hardly expressed these aspirations even to themselves. Woman has been the slave of man; and now in her newly-won freedom she gives thanks for standing as the spokesman of all the enslaved. And then, again, she keeps the virtue of the slave, the passionate devotion, the self-obliterating interest in another life that slavery does develop whenever, as must sometimes happen, it affords the natural shelter of weakness rather than the repression of desire. So much is true in the notion that her influence is specially Conservative. "The artisan," says Aristotle, "only so far partakes of virtue as he partakes of slavery." That expresses the ideal of many a woman. What the philosopher meant was, that the only chance for the artisan of living a life associated with anything elevated or noble, was to belong to a group, and that the only way for one of the working classes to belong to a group, was to be the slave of a man of leisure. A slave might rejoice in the fame of a Pericles or an Aristides, a free artisan was cut off from any connection with that political life which for the citizen of antiquity was the only life. Something like this, if we use some milder expression than slavery, is the old-fashioned creed for that half of humanity hitherto just as much cut off from public life and every career of interest as the artisan of Athens. A woman has hitherto been felt of value only when she belonged

to a man; and it is the aspect of female character thus developed and exhibited which, mirrored in Art, has taken typical significance in the eyes of the world. A Desdemona, an Ophelia, suggest no resistance even to the harshest injustice. "Man to command, and woman to obey," is the ideal of the poet. Goethe's line—"Dienen lerne das Weib bei Zeiten nach ihrer Bestimmung"—almost translates that of Tennyson. Doubtless many a woman feels the emancipation of her sex as the tearing down of a shelter that encloses all she cares for. These are certainly not a majority of women, we strongly suspect that they all belong to the upper classes; but they are representative women in the eyes of men, and this makes them seem more numerous than they are.

One would have thought it almost too obvious to state that women must be naturally democratic. Sympathy with disorder, reluctance to employ stern measures of repression, are always attacked as womanish weaknesses. The catchwords of polemic argument, trustworthy witnesses at all events as to general opinion, testify to the belief that woman is always on the side of indulgence towards wrong. The consciousness of weakness is an unvarying factor in the character of every woman; the sympathy with weakness is the strongest emotion in every mother. Where a man sees wrong, a woman, if she does not see unpardonable crime, discovers misfortune. Women are just as harsh as men, but theirs is the cruelty of the slave as he breaks his chain, not the severity of the judge who condemns reluctantly. Human beings, if they knew all, would rarely inflict punishment; one half of them always remember this when at their best, and when they forget it, are more vindictive and cruel than the other half. No one can have the virtues of the weak without their faults; bad women are more cruel than bad men, but good women will always be more lenient. And to say that the best of a class will be lenient towards wrong is to say they will side with the governed against the governors, and that in that entangled struggle of good and evil which has always gone on between authority and reform, the strength of woman will not be on the side of authority.

Must we then see in the enfranchisement of women no more than a potent stimulus to feelings already dominant, and opinions already accepted? It would seem as if we must, while we look at the character of average women. But it is not from an observation of its average specimens that we learn the influence of a class. It is from the knowledge of its ideal. What is the danger of modern Democracy? Surely the most ardent democrat will allow that its tendency is to substitute the class for the nation; and if he do not think this an evil, we should say that he only exhibits that danger in its worst form. The consciousness of belonging to a nation is elevating to all who share it. The consciousness of belonging to a class is almost invariably lowering. It is possible to take a petty and selfish view of the interests of one's nation; it is possible to take a noble and elevated view of the interests of one's class. But we should say that in actual fact the possibility has been rarely illustrated in either case. National feeling opens

long vistas, calls up rich varieties of association, emphasises everywhere the enduring, the perennial. Class feeling is temporary, materialistic, external; it approaches so near to vulgarity, that any character which has a vulgar side shows that aspect when class interests are in question. The sacredness of kindred is the truth that men need at all times and all seasons; which under influences that emphasise the separateness of individuality, or merge it in a group formed by interests merely external and material, they need as they hardly need anything else. Surely it is from that half of humanity which contains the mother that human beings should learn the sacredness of kindred. It is from her that they have learnt all that is dangerous in the claim of kindred; she has perverted that bond of closest union which should expand towards and sanctify every other union, as the Jew perverted that commandment which proclaimed one day holy to the Lord in a peculiar sense in order to bear witness that all days were thus holy. But so strangely in this world are good and evil interwoven, that perhaps no one can bring out the deepest meaning of a principle who has not felt the temptation that is latent within it. The love of one means often an icy indifference to the welfare of all besides; the domestic hearth becomes a fountain of vicarious selfishness, of despicable self-satisfaction, an enclosure shutting out all that is expansive, elevated, patriotic. But the escape lies in the same quarter as the peril. In the union that is not more necessary to man than to woman, but the thought of which is more dear to her, lies the germ of all union, ready to expand the moment it finds its appropriate soil. Marriage joins a human being adapted for an intimate and exclusive union to a human being adapted for a broad and inclusive union. In the blending of these ideals is the hope of our race, and so lofty, so large is this hope that we should not despair, although the progress of the ages seems rather to be marked by an oscillation between either, an intermittent loss of what is noblest in both, than by any advance towards their actual blending.

It cannot be said that a woman ever belongs to a class in the same degree as a man does. Her sex is a class in a deeper sense than his, and does not, to the same extent, admit of cross-classification. A mill-girl and a duke's daughter may appear as much separated by their several interests as the brothers of each, but they feel the beckoning of a common future, and when each bends over her first child's cradle the difference is less than the resemblance. They each feel the thrill that is older than humanity, they cannot but lose, to some extent, the full pressure of those severing instincts which are far younger. The timid dam grows bold when danger threatens her cubs, but they know no sire. Nature—prophetess that she is!—does indeed pause a moment, as she lingers over that bird life with which all her fanciful suggestions would seem associated, to fashion forth a miniature type of the home; the nest suggests the hearth. But her progress is away from that suggestion; some superhuman observer, watching the progress of evolution, might deem it a freak of creation. The race, as it approaches humanity, forgets the

mate-life so low down in its development—forgets it till the limit that separates the animal from the man is passed. Maternity is animal, paternity is human. In that distinction lies, according to the new views contributed by science to the history of our race, all the claim of a true aristocracy. The female pedigree is the longest, woman's moral life has a more ancestral claim. It is from the dumb ancestors of humanity that one half the race inherits emotions that still stir and enlarge the whole being. These emotions, so far as they exist in the other half, belong wholly to the realm of spirit; and are the gain of the adult race, an acquisition of yesterday. The first man who discovered that he was a father, it has been said, was a man of genius. Set that speculation aside by side with the unquestionable truth that the first female who knew herself to be a mother was not a woman of genius or even a woman at all, and you see how different must be the relation of man and woman to that family life which is the nurse of all morality. A woman, we often hear it said, seems older than a man at the same age. Is it only seeming? Is it not a plain fact that the moral life is older in the female world than in the male? And as it is older, so it is more intense. In man it is wrought up with thought; in woman with sensation, and sensation is older than emotion, in the individual as in the race. The joy that thrills the mother's heart as her babe's cry is silenced at her breast, the anguish which she has just endured when that cry first greets her ear—all these close, intense approximations of sensation and emotion, by which character is moulded far more than by the wisest thought or the clearest argument, condition the natures of women who are not mothers. By experiences such as these, transmitted through sexual heredity to those who have not known them, is worked the daily miracle which removes the centre beyond the self, which makes the frivolous and the stupid self-forgetful; and in recognising need and helplessness as positive claims, mirrors in some poor trashy existence that Divine outpouring of love and help, unprompted by any hope of return, which is hardly exhibited in any other relations of life even by men and women eminent for virtue.

"Man and woman," says a religious mystic, "are

each to each the image of God." "Tous les hommes," says a Frenchman for whom the word God has no meaning, "sont menteurs, inconstants, faux; toutes les femmes sont perfides, vaniteuses—le monde n'est qu'un égout sans fond, mais il y a au monde une chose sainte et sublime: c'est l'union de deux de ces êtres si imparfaits et si affreux." How can imperfect human beings be to others not more imperfect, the image of the Divine! Assuredly not by any glamour of illusion; the sense of preciousness in the bond lies in the deepest part of the nature, and if that is false, nothing is true. But as gas meets gas and water is born, so from the union of that which is imperfect—miserably imperfect—there arises perfection. Most men, and almost all women, have understood this at some time or other even if they have not experienced it. They have seen, if they have not felt, how all the worst misery of human life is but a confused ignorant sense of its fragmentariness, how it is lulled into peace whenever two become one. Perhaps there dawns no day on this world of trouble and disappointment in which some man and some woman do not look upon it with wondering eyes, asking whither its misery has fled. For ordinary man the experience and the memory pass almost together; the ordinary woman remembers—as Dante remembered Beatrice. In her sense of incompleteness, in her craving for the presence of an opposite nature, in her continual yearning to exchange the *I* for the *We*, lies the true medicine for the ills of Democracy—a medicine not the less healing because it may become a poison. Women have opposed the interests of the family to the interests of the nation, and have taught men to sacrifice the large group to the small. The true woman will strengthen the antithesis—not of the family to the nation—but of the family and nation to the class. Her influence strengthens every organic bond, and leaves those weaker, and only those, which group men as the pebbles on the sea-shore. She represents all that is good in Democracy, for her sympathies must be ever with the weak; but the central principle of the true Aristocracy is bound up in her very existence; for she can never lose the impulses and emotions originating in a moral life older than that of man.

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