

The Hour and the Woman

Annie Muzzey

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A Woman in so far as she beholdeth
Her one Beloved's face;
A Mother with a great heart that enfoldeth
The children of the Race:

A body free and strong with that high beauty
That comes of perfect use, is built thereof:
A mind where Reason ruleth over Duty
And Justice reigns with Love.

A self-poised royal soul, brave, wise and tender,
No longer blind and dumb;
A Human Being, of an unknown splendor
Is she who is to come.
Charlotte Perkins Stetson.

PERHAPS to no one more than to the writer herself are these prophetic lines applicable, though she aimed to picture only her ideal woman. To arrive even in a remote degree at the realization of one's ideals is, in itself, a distinction that compels admiration and inspires reverence. The human craving to find in poet and philosopher a living embodiment and exponent of the thought flashed upon one's consciousness, is well satisfied in Charlotte Perkins Stetson, whose word and work are synonymous.

For a number of years the original verse of Mrs. Stetson has been floating about in the newspapers, which, with all their faults, are more or less fair records of the upward thought and movement that show at what point of recognition we are in our march of human progress. It did not matter that the now world-famed poem, "Similar Cases," was first printed in a periodical of limited circulation among a few radical thinkers who dared to aspire to a higher order of life than is possible in the existing state of things. It did not matter that "The Nationalist" itself went down before the adverse winds that have wrecked many other brave crafts setting sail for the port of Freedom. This poem that first took passage in the ship-of-war, which by the way, went down only to rise with ten-fold power in other forms has since made its world voyage on its own strong, bright wings, claiming swift recognition even with the "Neolithic Man," who is sufficiently susceptible to its truth and humor to appreciate the satire on his own "clenching argument," and to give hope that he, too, in the slow evolution of the race, will "have to change his nature."

Other poems of equal force and brilliancy, over the same signature, have, from time to time, appealed to our slumbering sense of truth and justice in respect to common customs which we had accepted without thought; as things to be regretted, perhaps, but still endured. The keen, delicate lance that with one dart pierces to the very center of sores that we have kept covered, has been felt many times through the poems, under various familiar titles, which have come to us in fragmentary ways during the last half dozen years. To find them collected in the first pamphlet editions sent out from San Francisco in 1893 and 1895, was a real delight which lost nothing in flavor to some of her admirers because they could be shared with others for a half dollar. A more expensive, revised, and enlarged edition has been issued within the last year. It is called "In This Our World," and in it Mrs.

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Stetson's admirers will find new claimants for favor.

But just now our business is with Mrs. Stetson's latest work, "Women and Economics,"¹ a philosophic study of the economic relations between men and women—a study which aims, as the author says in her preface "To show how some of the worst evils under which we suffer, evils long supposed to be inherent and ineradicable in our natures, are but the result of certain arbitrary conditions of our own adoption; and how, by removing those conditions, we may remove the resultant."

The primal evil which Mrs. Stetson points out in our social life, is the economic dependence of woman on the sex-relation. From this false and unnatural position, sanctioned by human law and sustained for centuries as an inviolable custom, has proceeded the multitude of social perversions which the present age has set about eradicating by this, that, and the other so-called reform. While granting that the sexuo-economic relation has had its use in the earlier evolutionary stages of humanity, the time has come, in the view of Mrs. Stetson, for a radical change in the status of woman who can no longer find her sole environment in man.

"The inevitable trend of human life," she says, "is toward a higher civilization; but while that civilization is confined to one sex, it inevitably exaggerates sex-distinction until the increasing evil of this condition is stronger than all the good of the civilization attained, and the nation falls. Civilization, be it understood, does not consist in the acquisition of luxuries. Social development is an organic development. A civilized state is one in which the citizens live in organic industrial relations. . . ."

"The sexuo-economic relation serves to bring social development to a certain level. After that level is reached a higher relation must be adopted, or the lifting process comes to an end; and either the race succumbs to the morbid action of its own forces, or some fresher race comes in and begins the course of social evolution anew. Under the stimulus of the sexuo-economic relation one civilization after another has climbed up and fallen down in weary succession. It remains for us to develop a newer, better form of sex-relation and of economic relation therewith, and so grasp the fruits of all previous civilizations and grow on to the beautiful results of higher ones. The true and lasting social progress beyond that which we have yet made, is based on a spirit of inter-human love, not merely the inter-sexual, and it requires an economic machinery organized and functioned for human needs. The sexuo-economic relation drives man up to where he can become fully human. It deepens and develops the human soul until it is able to conceive and fulfil the larger social uses in which our further life must find expression. But, unless the human soul sees these new forces, feels them, gives way to them in loyal service, it fails to reach the level from which all further progress must proceed and falls back. Again and again society has so risen, so failed to grasp new duties, so fallen back.

"Today it will not so fall again, because the social consciousness is at last so vital a force, in both men and women, that we feel clearly our human life cannot be lived on sex-lines only. We are so far individualized, so far socialized, that men can work without the spur of exaggerated sex-stimulus, work for some one besides mate and young, and women can love and serve without the slavery of economic dependence—love better and serve more. Sex-stimulus begins and ends in individuals. The social spirit is a larger thing, a better thing, and brings with it a larger, nobler life than we could know on a sex-basis solely."

It must not be supposed that Mrs. Stetson's clear and sustained argument militates at any point against marriage in its truer and diviner sense. On the contrary, the whole trend of her reasoning is towards such freedom, such independence, as shall make possible between the individual man and woman a union based on the highest sentiment of love and social use, rather than on the low, common plane of selfish passion and economic dependence. None too scathing is the scorn and shame with which the lower and baser motives of marriage, so-called, are held up to our view by this bold, logical thinker who fearlessly strips the illusion of false sentiment from what passes in the world as love and wedlock. The process may be a little startling, but the flash of light which penetrates and riddles the sham, reveals to us all the more clearly the beauty and perfection of the true.

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It is not a fair treatment of "Women and Economics" to give its bald, bare statements, wrested from the chain of argument that harmonizes and shows the logical sequence and consistency of its conclusions. The best that can be done is to ask every reader to lay aside all preconceived views and prejudices on the particular subject in hand, and to bring to the study a calm, impartial spirit of inquiry that does not shrink from admitting truths even when they undermine the long-cherished theories and beliefs of heredity and education.

The conventional thinker will inevitably be shocked by Mrs. Stetson's ungloved handling of a relation which has been from time immemorial regarded as, on the one hand, sacred and beautiful, or, on the other, wanton and unmentionable. But it is sometimes necessary to be shocked before we can be moved to that dispassionate, unbiased consideration which will qualify us to distinguish between the real and the fictitious value of time-honored customs and institutions. A great step is gained by the woman who reads this book, if she catch a glimpse of larger horizons, and begins to realize that any personal love which limits her vision to mere temporal ends and fills her life with doubt, anxiety, anguish, fear, dissatisfaction, and unrest, is unworthy of the name of love, and must either be lifted to a higher plane or be set aside altogether. What Byron calls "the blind necessity of loving" does not compel any human being to merge all individual hopes and aspirations and possibilities in the unsympathetic sphere of another life when from every side comes the appeal of nobler objects for which to live and toil and sacrifice, the demand for the larger good that embraces and benefits all.

In this affirmation there is not a breath of irreverence for love and marriage in the truer sense. Rather is there a declaration of freedom to reject the false and meretricious, and to exalt the real and abiding union of man and woman, founded not on the mere selfish and external relations, but on the deeper spiritual sympathy and purposes that find in each the impelling force of larger inspiration and accomplishment.

No doubt, on this point, the author of "Women and Economics" has yet a further and fuller word to speak. She is too thorough an evolutionist to stop on the threshold of a subject which she has here barely opened to the shocked eyes of the conservative thinker, satisfied with a form that has no in-breathing power of life and substance.

When Mrs. Stetson has waited long enough for the storm of protest against her radical utterance to subside, we shall look for the reconciling and fulfilling word of which this book is but the avant courier—a sort of John Baptist, in wild skins, going before to stir the "Neolithic Mind" which is crying:

This is chimerical! Utopian! absurd!

There is another problem connected with this profound subject which some of us do not find settled by the brilliant argument that makes "Women and Economics" what one of its critics has called "the book of the age," and another has named "a force that must at last be reckoned with."

The question of economic independence for women is one very difficult to dispose of in a day when strong able-bodied men go about the streets begging for work that shall save them from the almshouse or the penitentiary.

It is true that Mrs. Stetson gives us in high light the ideal picture of that kingdom of righteousness in which every member of the human family shall have an equal place and opportunity for the development of individual powers of use and happiness.

This, indeed, is the end toward which all earnest, sincere workers are striving. But not until the industrial world is re-organized and resystematized upon the platform of the golden rule, can woman enter upon her career of absolute economic independence without adding to the accumulated train of evils in the mad struggle, when every hand clutches at both its own and its brother's portion. Possibly, to anticipate the best, the sudden assumption of every woman to economic freedom and industrial rights might precipitate the revolution which is to usher in that reign of "peace and good will" forecast by all the prophets.

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Meantime no woman in sexual relations need consider herself a dependent on such relation. The matter is in her own hands. When she makes her own individual law in the sex-union it will be respected. For the rest, if she will follow her highest convictions of right, without too many words about it, she will arrive at a clearer vision of her own place and power. It is certainly not the man's place and power. It is a new insight, a new impulse that we want and not the accumulated force, in the same direction, of women acting as men.

Mrs. Stetson herself, is giving a fine example of free womanhood in following her own high ideals, with a sincerity and directness that wins the admiration of even those who do not agree with her.

As a masculine critic² remarks, "No one can easily overpraise the vigor, the clearness, and the acuteness of her writing." And he adds, "She writes, indeed, like a man, and like a very logical and very able man."

This is a mistake. She writes simply like Charlotte Perkins Stetson, a woman who, in the school of experience, has learned her lessons, not automatically from the text-books of custom and tradition, but with spiritual insight and a keen analytical sense that penetrates to the heart of things, that insists on a reason for existing conditions, as well as upon the logical process of reaching a higher state. If there are errors in her vision she will be swift to acknowledge them when discovered, for truth is what she seeks. Unquestionably she brings to her study of human life the force and vigor and independence derived from the strong ancestral Beecher stock from which she springs; for the powerful influence and direction of heredity cannot be denied even with our higher claims to heredity from God. Added to a noble birthright, a wise training has given to the world a woman of individual character; one free enough and brave enough to speak her honest understanding and judgment on a matter which the world of modern men and women have accepted without thought, or with finger prudishly pressed on lips that murmur secretly over conditions regarded as inevitable and unalterable while nature endures.

To some persons perhaps to the majority there appears a certain hardness and rudeness of touch in Mrs. Stetson's treatment of wifehood and motherhood, which is instinctively resented. But a closer study of her attitude toward these relations will reveal an unusual reverence for all that is deepest, purest, and holiest in them. It is only the false sentiment that is riddled and cast out in her keen analyzing process. As a revelation of the spirit of true motherhood turn to the not too familiar:

MOTHER TO CHILD.

How best can I serve thee, my child, my child,
Flesh of my flesh and dear heart of my heart!
Once thou wast within me I held thee I fed thee
By the force of my loving and longing I led thee
Now we are apart!

I may blind thee with kisses, and crush with embracing,
Thy warm mouth in my neck, our arms interlacing,
But here in my body my soul lives alone,
And thou answerest me from a house of thine own
The house which I builded!

Which we builded together, thy father and I
In which thou must live, O my darling, and die!
Not one stone can I alter, not one atom relay,

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Not to save or defend thee, or help thee to stay,
That gift is completed!

How best can I serve thee? O child if thou knew
How my heart aches with loving! How deep and how true,
How brave and enduring, how patient and strong,
How longing for good, and how fearful of wrong
Is the love of thy mother!

Could I crown thee with riches! Surround, overflow thee
With fame and with power till the whole world should
know thee;
With wisdom and genius to hold the world still,
To bring laughter and tears, joy and pain at thy will
Still thou mightst not be happy!

Such have lived and in sorrow. The greater the mind,
The wider and deeper the grief it can find;
The richer, the gladder, the more thou canst feel
The keen stings that a lifetime is sure to reveal,
O my child! Must thou suffer?

Is there no way my life may save thine from a pain?
Is the love of a mother no possible gain?
No labor of Hercules search for the Grail
No way for this wonderful love to avail?
God in Heaven Oh, teach me!

My prayer has been answered the pain thou must bear,
Is the pain of the world's life, which thy life must share.
Thou art one with the world though I love thee the best;
And to save thee from pain I must save all the rest,
Well with God's help I'll do it!

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Thou art one with the rest, I must love thee in them,
Thou wilt sin with the rest and thy mother must stem
The world's sin. Thou wilt weep and thy mother must dry
The tears of the world lest her darling should cry.
I will do it God helping!

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And I stand not alone, I will gather a band,
Of all loving mothers from land unto land,
Our children are part of the world! Do you hear?
They are one with the world, we must hold them all dear.
Love all for the child's sake!

For the sake of my child I must hasten to save,
All the children on earth from the jail and the grave,
For so, and so only, I lighten the share
Of the pain of the world that my darling must bear
Even so, and so only.

When we have a race of mothers entering fully into the spirit of this poem, then we shall have taken indeed a long step toward that divine order of love which is the end of all our human striving. So far from undervaluing the vocation of maternity, which has been conceded as the one unquestioned right of womanhood, it must be acknowledged by even her severest critics, that Mrs. Stetson exalts and broadens the office and power of motherhood. But there must be the condition of free, brave womanhood to insure such a race of mothers.

However distant may appear the day when the principles of "Women and Economics" shall be put to a practical test, we may congratulate ourselves on the impulse to thought which has been given by the book. It is well to consider all possible underlying causes of unhappy conditions which are bewailed, but accepted as the mysterious providences of an inscrutable Law. For the rest each must determine individually in how far he or she may give unqualified support to any radical movement toward a higher social state. It remains to be seen whether women, more than men, will resist this relentless attack on the time-honored institution of marriage as a means of livelihood, vested as it is, with the sacred rites of the holiest of compacts. But all changes from lower to higher levels are pushed by the power of thought, and if the sex relation is lifted, in common perception, from the sensual plane, and made to stand in its true character for something greater than mere worldly considerations, then the author of "Women and Economics," by her bold stroke, will have contributed her share to the upward impetus.

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