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WOMAN AND HER INTERESTS

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THE MODERN WOMAN

Helen Keller, in the Metropolitan Magazine.

We women have often been told that the home contains all the interests and duties in which we are concerned. Our province is limited by the walls of a house, and to emerge from this honorable circumscription, to share in any broad enterprise, would be not only unladylike, but unwomanly. I could not help thinking of this the other day when I was asked to go to a far state and take part in some work that is being done for the blind. If I accepted this invitation, should I not be leaving my proper sphere, which is my home? I have thought of it many times since I learned that there are in America over 6,000,000 women wage earners. Every morning they leave their homes to tend machines, to scrub office buildings, to sell goods in department stores. Society not only permits them to leave their proper sphere; it forces them to this unwomanly desertion of the hearth, in order that they may not starve. O my sisters in the mills and shops, are you too tired, too indifferent to read the ridiculous arguments by which your rights are denied and your capacities depreciated in the sacred name of the home and its defense?

from a beef killed by a neighbor. Over every cottage door the words might have been written: "Mr. and Mrs. Man, manufacturers and dealers in general merchandise." Home life and industrial life were one. Today they are widely separated. Industries that used to be in the house are spread all over the world. The woman's spinning wheel and part of her kitchen and dairy have been taken away from her. When she seeks to understand economic affairs and to exert her authority in their management she is in reality only following her utensils.

Home is Where the Work Is.

The spinning wheel, ancient emblem of domestic industry, has been removed to great factories. She has followed it there both as worker and owner. So she still does her part in the great task of clothing the human race. Where the spinning wheel is the woman has an ancestral right to be. For no matter how complex wheel and loom have become she depends on them still to make the blanket that covers her child in its sleep. It is her duty as a house-mother to watch her spinning wheel, to see that no member of the world family goes ill clad in an age when wool is abundant, when cunning machines can make good coats, when a ragged frock on a self-respecting woman is a shame to us all. It is for woman to follow her wheel, to make sure that it is spinning wool and not gringing misery, that no little child is chained to it in a torture of day-long labor. The spinning wheel has grown a monstrous thing. In order to identify it one must study wages, tariffs, dividends, the organization of labor and factory sanitation. The woman who studies these problems and insists on having a voice in their solution is in her home as truly as was her grandmother whose tireless foot drove the treadle of the old spinning wheel. The home is where those things are made without which no home can be comfortable.

Woman's sphere is the home, and there, too, is the sphere of man. The home embraces everything we strive for in this world. To get and maintain a decent home is the object of all our best endeavors. But where is the home? What are its boundaries? What does it contain? What must we do to secure and protect it? In olden times the home was a private factory. The man worked in the field or at his handcraft while the woman made food and clothes. She shared in out-of-door labor; but indoor work naturally became her special province. The household was the center of production, and in it and about it man supplied himself with all that he needed—or all that he had—by rudimentary hand processes. The mill to grind corn was not far away. The leather used by the shoemaker was

robbed her by the peaceful methods of commerce she has nothing to say, because she does not understand business, and politics is not for her to meddle in.

Woman's old "domestic sphere" has become not only an empty shell with much of the contents removed, but a fragile shell in which she is not safe. Beside her own hearth she may be poisoned, starved and robbed. When shall we have done with the tyranny which applies worn-out formulas to modern conditions? When shall we learn that domestic economy is political economy? The noblest task of woman is to get bread for her children. Whatever touches her children's bread is her business.

The Mother Spirit in the World.

Woman from times long gone has been the nurse, the consolator, the healer of pain. Today the sick bed is often in a great public hospital. There she has followed it as professional nurse, and her services have been welcomed and acknowledged. In the hospital wards where she moves, deft, cheerful, capable, there are men unnecessarily laid low by the accidents of trade and children maimed and dying who might be well and playing merrily in the bright morning of life. From the battle fields of industry come the wounded, from the shambles of poverty come the deformed. What enemy has stricken them? How much of all this disease and misery is preventable? Shall the wise nurse stand by the bed of pain and ask no questions about the social causes of ill health? If her own child in her own home is needlessly hurt, she blames herself for her carelessness. In the world home if a child is needlessly hurt, she is equally responsible. By her vigilance in the world home woman can help to bring about a civilization in which every preventable disease shall be rooted out and every condition that causes broken bodies shall be examined and abolished. This is her problem. She is mistress of the sick room, and the sick room is world-wide.

The education of children is acknowledged as lying within the scope of maternal care. The mother is the first teacher before the child goes to school, and in the schoolroom her unmarried sister devotes herself as a professional foster-mother to the children of others. The American nursery is a public building with a flag flying over it. If anywhere, woman is mistress in the schoolroom. So evident is this that in relation to schools she has a certain political privilege. She can vote for the school committee and serve on it herself. But even here she is bound by a very short tether. She has nothing official to say about how much money shall be spent for schools. Her freedom in this respect, as in some others, is the form without the substance. For the fundamental question in the public school problem is the question of money. That must be appropriated by men. Moreover, the laws relating to children—for example, the laws of compulsory education—are made by men. It is not for her to say whether a child shall be taken from school to grind in mill and factory. Yet every child plunged in ignorance, bent by man's work before his time, is a thwarting of her sacred mission to fill the world with children well born, well bred, beautiful, wise, strong for the burdens of life. The schoolroom and all that it means belongs to the central intimacy of home, and all that violates the schoolroom violates the sanctity of the woman's virtues.

Woman's Influence Needed.

It is idle to say that woman could not improve the schools, that the schools are already free, and that every child has opportunity for instruction. The efficiency of the school depends upon things outside the schoolroom. It has been found that you must feed your child before you can teach it, and that the poor home defeats the best schoolroom. Behind the free school we must have a free people. What profits it to provide costly school buildings for anemic, underfed children, to pass compulsory education laws and not secure a livelihood for the families whose children must obey them? What is the common sense of free textbooks without wholesome food and proper clothing? Where is the logic—masculine or feminine—of free schools and free child labor in the same commonwealth? These questions concern the most ignorant woman and the best educated woman, and the solution of them is necessary to the health and comfort of every home.

Woman's place is still the household. But the household is more spacious than in times gone by. Not all the changes of modern life have changed her duties essentially. Her work as spinner, bread giver, helper of the helpless, mother, and teacher of children is no-wise different today, but is immensely increased and intensified. Too often confused by the dazzle and uproar of modern life she is the primal woman still, the savior and shaper of the race. In what a grim, strange abode must she often discharge her old-time functions! Sometime sit is no home at all, but an overcrowded, unless lodging; it is not a shelter, but an industrial prison; it is not a nursery, but a lazaretto.

Countless mothers of men have no place fit to be born in, to bear others in, to die in. Packed in tenements, forgot of light, unheeded and slighted, starved of eye and ear and heart, they wear out their dull existence in monotonous toil—all for a crust of bread!

They strive and labor, sweat and produce; they subject their bodies and souls to every risk, lest their children die for want of food. Their clever hands which have so long been set to the spindle and the distaff, their patience, their industry, their cheapness have but served to herd them in masses under the control of a growing industrial despotism.

Why is all this? Partly because woman does not own and direct her own share of the national household. True government is nothing but the management of this household for the good of the family. Under what kind of government do we live? To this question, her question, woman must find an answer by following her sisters to their places of sojourn. It is for her to know if their home is home indeed, if their shelter is strong and healthful, if every room—in lodging, shop and factory—is open to light and air. It is for her to see that every dweller therein has freedom to drink in the winds of heaven and refresh his mind with music, art, and books; it is for her to see that every mother is enabled to bring up her children under favorable circumstances.

The New Faith.

The greatest change is coming that has ever come in the history of the world. Order is evolving out of the chaos that followed the breaking up of the old system in which each household lived after its own manner. By using the physical forces of the universe men have replaced the slow hand processes with the swift power of machines. If the woman demands it a fair share of the machine products will go to her sisters and their families as when the loom stood at hand in their dwellings. They will no more give all their best years to keep bright and fair the homes of others while their own are neglected. They will no more consume all their time, strength, and mental capacity in bringing up the rosy, laughing children of others while their own sweet children grow up pitiful and stunted. There is motherhood enough in the world to go round if it is not abused and wasted.

Yes; the greatest change is coming that has ever come in the history of the world. The idea that a higher power decrees definite stations for different human beings—that some are born to be kings and others to be slaves—is passing away. We know that there is plenty of room in the world and plenty of raw material in it for us all to be born right, to be brought up right, to work right, and to die right. We know that by the application of ordinary intelligence and common good will, we can secure to every one of our children the means of culture, progress, and knowledge; of reasonable comfort, health, and happiness; or if not happiness, at least freedom from the unnecessary misery which we all suffer today. This is the new faith that is taking the place of the faith in blind, selfish, capricious powers. Religion, the life of which is to do good, is supplanting the old servile superstitions. The spirit of the time we are in has been eloquently described by Henry Demarest Lloyd:

"It is an ethical renaissance, and insists that the divine ideals preached for thousands of years by the priests of humanity be put into form, now, here, and practically, in farm and mine, stock market, factory, and bank. It denies point-blank that business is business, and politics and religion to be business and politics and religion. Business is the stewardship of the commissary of mankind, the administration of the resources upon which depend the possibilities of the human life, which is the divine life."

What is there, then, so cold, so sordid, inhuman in economics that we women should shrink from the subject, disclaim all part in it, when we touch it daily in our domestic lives?

Follies of Organized Charity.

Many young women full of devotion and good will have been engaged in superficial charities. They have tried to feed the hungry without knowing the causes of poverty. They have tried to minister to the sick without understanding the causes of disease. They have tried to raise up fallen sisters without knowing the brutal arm of necessity that struck them down. We give relief to a mother here and there, and still women are worn out at their daily tasks. We attempt social reforms where we need social transformations. We mend small things and leave the great things untouched. We strive after order and comfort in a few households, regardless of the world where distress prevails and loveliness is trodden in the dust.

Our abiding place will be home indeed when the world outside is a peaceful, bright home for mankind. Woman's happiness depends upon her knowledge of the facts of life as much as upon her lovely thoughts and sweet speech and her faithfulness to small duties. In woman is wrapped the hope of the future. The new child, the new civilization, all the possibilities that sleep in mankind are enfolded in her. In her travail is the resurrection of the human race. All this glorious promise can be brought to naught by ignorance of the world in which it is to be fulfilled. To plead with woman, to urge her to open her eyes to the great affairs of life, is merely to bid her make ready her house for the child that is to be born.

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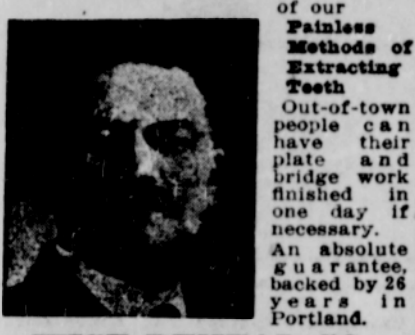
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