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THE OLD STORY.

ESSAY READ BEFORE THE OREGON STATE WOMAN SUFFRAGE ASSOCIATION BY MARY SHANE SMITH.

There seems to be a great misapprehension, even among intelligent people, in regard to the nature of the right of suffrage. It appears to me quite plain that it is only the exercise of that natural right of self-government that was given us by our Creator. But some regard it as a privilege granted to the individual by the state, merely because the experience of mankind has been that a representative democracy is the best form of government. It is therefore considered perfectly right to keep one-half of the people of our Republic in political bondage, because it is thought inexpedient, for various reasons, to grant them representation, although they are deemed capable of bearing their full share of the burdens of the state by paying taxes. Yet this singular piece of injustice is not recognized as such in this enlightened age by a majority of our people.

When the brutal Roman tyrant Caligula determined to compel his distant provincial subjects to pay Roman taxes, he felt it necessary, even in that dark age, to first extend them the Roman franchise. Might not free America learn something of the despot of Imperial Rome?

It is humiliating to every thoughtful lover of free institutions to reflect that millions of native-born American citizens, of adult age and as a class moral and virtuous, are, for no fault or crime, deprived of that boast of America, the "right of self-government"—for that is what suffrage is. It is not a mere privilege. If it were, a majority might at any time disfranchise a troublesome minority, and there would be no redress for the victims unless they could fight more than they could vote; and a wholesome fear that they might fight will always prevent any attempt at such tyranny, even if the sense of right in the majority is not strong enough to secure justice. Indeed, this fear will long prevent the restrictions that must be placed on suffrage in the interest of good and safe government.

No citizen ought to be deprived of his natural right to a share in the government unless it can be shown that his vote is dangerous to the community; but it is not denied that ignorance and vice are very dangerous. Therefore every ignorant and vicious person, man or woman, ought to be deprived of a voice in the government until such time as he or she ceases to be ignorant or vicious, and no longer. It should not be out of the power of any citizen to exercise his or her natural, God-given right; and it should not be in the power of the majority to prevent such exercise, but only to provide for its proper use. If this is true, it is manifestly the most inexcusable injustice to deprive women citizens of their right to vote, for no pretense is made that they are a dangerous class, and the thing for which they are disfranchised is something impossible for them to avoid if they would—an obstacle no human power could ever remove. The injustice would be no greater if the dark-haired men, for instance, were in the majority and would unite and disfranchise the fair-haired ones.

But supposing suffrage to be a mere privilege granted by the state, and not the natural right of all, how came the state to have such a privilege in its gift? Who gave it to the state? "We, the people of the United States, in order to establish justice, insure domestic tranquillity, provide for the common defense, promote the general welfare, and secure the blessings of liberty to ourselves and our posterity, do ordain and establish this Constitution." So the state has, and can have, no power save what the people gave or shall give it as their servant, not as their master.

Well, who are the people? Men only? If so, the Mahometan is right in his hideous idea of woman as a being existing only for the pleasure of man, who alone is possessed of an immortal soul. A pleasant and sensible idea, surely, for Americans.

What were the facts in regard to the very men who framed our Constitution, and who spoke of themselves as "the people"? Did they alone achieve the tremendous results of the Revolutionary War? No! a thousand times no! Brave as they were, they could never have won the day had not the noble, patriotic women at home done double duty. They toiled out-doors as well as in at everything mortal woman could do, that father, brother, husband and son—all who were able to fight—might go forth to drive the hated invaders from the land they loved, and "secure the blessings of liberty to themselves and their posterity." Where would posterity have been without the heroic exertions of these wonderful patriot mothers during the long, dreadful years of war? They preserved the infant nation at home for which the patriot fathers fought in the field. They did quite as much to secure the freedom of these United

States as did the brave men who "counted not their own lives dear unto them," but freely gave all for their country. Does anyone dispute this? The great poet says—

"They also serve who only stand and wait."

And what a terrible waiting was theirs, as well as working! What man is there who would not rather face all the dangers of the battle-field than to wearily toil alone at home day in and day out, year in and year out, doing all his wife's work as well as his own, with no stimulus but the sense of duty? If he hesitates, let him remember the terrible anxiety felt by the patient workers at home for their loved ones, the sickening dread felt day by day lest wounds or death may have fallen them, and then let him answer. If this point be conceded, it cannot be denied that women, equally with men, earned the freedom enjoyed by men, and by them denied to women; and if women really were any proper part of "we the people," then they surely had a right to the "justice" established quite as much as to the "common defense" for which the union was formed. Their interests should have been considered in striving "to promote the general welfare," and "the blessings of liberty" surely ought to have been secured to them and to all their posterity, instead of only half.

But it is easy to see why woman was not dealt with justly then, which was the proper time. Men, having always been subjected to kingly rule, could not be expected to develop at once absolutely just ideas of human rights, comprehensive enough to include woman, "the weaker vessel," who was still supposed to be in duty bound to "ask her husband at home if she would know anything." Paul's words, of merely local application, were still held to have greater authority than those of Jesus, who spoke for all humanity through all time, "Whatsoever ye would that men should do unto you, do ye even so unto them." The old idea of the patriarchal age was still imbedded deeply in the minds of all but a few prophetic souls living far in advance of their age. Each man was an independent king over his own family, and his queen was also his subject.

Thus we acquit those who founded our government of any intentional injustice to their wives and mothers; but we think their descendants, have had time to gain clearer, broader views of what is due their sisters, and to them we look for the fighting of the ancient wrong.

The steady march of the grand ideas of individual freedom and absolute equality has never ceased since those ideas began the conquest of the western world; and they must go on winning victories, gathering strength and power, illuminating minds darkened by ignorance and prejudice, till the gloomy reign of oppression shall be forever ended and the whole wide earth shall own their sway. Then there will be no more any disposition to deprive even the poorest and weakest of God's creatures of any right or privilege. Instead, the strong will glory in giving to the weak every opportunity, every assistance; and the greater the real superiority of one human being over another, the greater will be his effort to lift up the inferior to a position at his side. Man will strive to help woman to a broader, easier path, a more inspiring atmosphere, higher rewards, and in all things a freer, better life. Then women will no longer be contented, as too many now are, to be inferior beings. They will see, as many do not now see, the real dignity of human nature, and its need of, as well as its right to, untrammelled action and free speech and thought, accountable only to the Father of all. Men and women will then see that they rise or fall together; that neither alone can reach the highest excellence, the greatest usefulness; that if the sons are to be noble, the mothers cannot be permitted to be ignoble; that if men are to maintain free institutions, they must imbibe a love of liberty from free mothers, as well as inherit the capacity for greatness from mothers naturally great. History shows that all really great men have had mothers of strong minds and wills, as well as warm, tender hearts; and they have been honored and respected as well as beloved by their husbands—have been practically free, at least in domestic life. And here, I think, is the great point which, once gained, will give us the suffrage as a matter of course.

Men found it necessary long ago to pull down the priest from his false position between God and man, in order that man might learn his duty and find his inspiration directly from the eternal source of truth and light. Even so man must step out of woman's sunlight, and no longer assume to be intermediate between her and God. Man must learn to be willing that woman should do her own thinking, and not merely echo his thoughts and do his will. Not till then will women be really free. Then, and not till then, will our nation really have a "government of the people, by the people, and for the people."

We are all so hedged about by the circumstances

in which we are placed independent of our wills—by our "environment," as the scientist would say—that no act of a fellow mortal ought to add one single turn to the mazes of the labyrinth of human life. At last all will see that it is a cruel wrong to throw one obstacle in the way of any struggling soul; and the weaker, the more ignorant, or the more helpless the being, the greater the wrong. Yet that is what men do unconsciously when they refuse to permit women to think for themselves, to be governed by their own sense of right and duty. It is what they do when they refuse to repeal unjust laws—when they refuse to permit woman to exercise her right to a share in the government, to a voice in the expenditure of public money raised in part by taxing her property. It is what women themselves do when they ignorantly denounce as "unwomanly" those who in the heat of the conflict for human rights are uttering ringing words for liberty and striking valiant blows for freedom; yet they think Deborah, Priscilla, Maria Theresa and Victoria good and great.

Ah, good sister, sitting at ease in your comfortable home, protected, and even supported, it may be—though every woman as well as every man ought to be proud to earn a living—have you ever thought that there are many, very many, who do not, like you, have all the rights they want? Do you not know, what is the truth, that thousands of your sisters every year in free America suffer in purse, in body and in mind from the effects of unjust laws that these women you dislike are striving to blot out by the aid of good men? And even if you do not wish to help them to secure justice, you ought not to oppose their having it if they can get it without you. But you are opposing them; you are helping to fasten their burdens more hopelessly upon their weary shoulders; you are encouraging their oppressors when you talk slightly and contemptuously of those who are trying to secure equal rights. You are doing more than you imagine to put off the reign of justice and right by saying that you do not care for them and that you are free enough.

Right here is the greatest obstacle in the way of securing equal rights. Women have been so long taught to believe in the Miltonic idea of womanhood that they are slow to accept the truth that all women as well as men were created free and equal. They do not understand what freedom is—what its duties and responsibilities are. If they did, they would shame those puny patriots who refuse to exercise their right of suffrage because the polls are not generally pleasant places to go; because their party is ruled by King Caucus; and because they don't care for politics, any way—haven't time, etc. It is the fault of just such men that the things exist of which they complain; and when women once get their consciences roused to a sense of duty in this matter, they will show men how to correct all these evils, and will unite in demanding the ballot, and will do their duty at the polls as they do it elsewhere, because it is duty and ought to be done. When their eyes are opened to their need of freedom and its use to them and their children, they will wonder, as many already do, how they ever could have been so blind; and they will not neglect their other duties, either.

Has anyone so little faith in the native goodness of women as to really believe the silly assertions so often made that they would renounce their wifely and maternal duties if they were as free as their husbands? Such an absurd slander surely does not need refutation. No one who cherishes and reveres the memory of his mother can think for one moment that she could ever have been less than she was had she had greater privileges and broader opportunities. Certainly no one who believes in an all-powerful Creator can imagine that any human laws, compulsory or repressive, can be stronger than the laws of God, written on the hearts of men and women. And as men's hearts are not weaned from their families by exercising their right of self-government, there is no reason whatever to suppose that women would be so strangely and unnaturally affected.

What is the record of the Book? In the beginning of the history of the race, "God created man—male and female created he them, and gave them"—not him—"dominion" over all the rest of the earthly creation; and we see that he endowed them equally, though differently, and gave to both the same feelings and sympathies, the same love of life and liberty, the same aspirations after a higher life, and the same desire for happiness here and hereafter. Man was given the stronger, coarser frame and nature, while to woman, as compensation for her weaker form, was given greater fineness and delicacy of nature. Though man has the larger brain, woman has the keener insight, the finer intuitions. Had not man's nature been perverted by wrong-doing, he would never have usurped authority over her on account of superior physical strength; for if that gave right to rule, man himself should serve the lion,

or elephant, or even a newer, though poorer, relation, the donkey.

Speaking of animals, reminds me that there is not a single instance among them, so far as I know, of the larger male tyrannizing over the smaller female. This proves that it is only because man's nature is perverted that he ever does so. Further proof is found in the fact that, as fast as men come out from under the dominance of the lower and selfish faculties and are swayed by the sense of right and justice, they strike off the fetters that bind woman, and wish her to assume her own proper place as an equal companion. The best men are fast coming to see, with the clearest-headed woman, that she must be permitted to use man's strongest weapon of self-defense, that dread of despots, that friend of freedom, the ballot. Why should she not? Does she not need it? If man thinks it essential to his protection, surely woman, so much weaker, needs it far more. In fact, she is more defenseless than the mothers of any other race. The lioness needs little protection from her lordly mate. The softly cooling mother dove is scarce gentler or more timid than her loving and peaceful companion. But woman, peculiarly liable to innumerable dangers—alas, not from wild beasts only—has no means of defense adequate to her needs, and must depend largely on the generous care of man. This arrangement, however, instead of being unjust, is perfectly adapted to unite the two in the closest bonds of sympathy and affection, and woman returns a full equivalent for all she receives, in the refining and elevating influence she exerts on her natural protector. But the truest, best protectors are those who are not only ready to defend woman with their lives, if necessary, but those who will teach her to defend herself in every possible way, who will put into her hands every weapon of defense they themselves esteem, and who will vindicate her right to them. As no class has ever yet shown itself able to truly represent and properly legislate for any other class, these noble men insist that woman shall be permitted to exercise her natural right so long withheld, and defend herself, her children and her home by man's chief defense, the ballot, to which she is justly entitled. They deprecate, as we do, the political enslavement of women, and they, as well as we ourselves, intend to labor ceaselessly till it is ended.

Those who really fear that woman will be degraded by exercising her God-given right of self-government must strive to cultivate more faith in the Creator, in His wisdom as well as in His goodness. Let them rest assured that He knew what He was doing when He made His last specimen of creative skill. The idea of man's ownership in man died hard, in a desperate struggle, and fire and carnage and devastation. These frightful agents of death have long fought to sustain the divine right of kings to rule their fellow-men, and this weary earth must drink still more of the blood of her children before this hoary monster will finally yield to the irresistible power of the Prince of Peace. It is no wonder, then, that we must labor long and earnestly to destroy an evil more ancient, probably, than either of them—the strange idea of man's ownership of woman. "But already the ax is laid at the root" of the Uvas tree of selfishness, which has always been the blighting curse of humanity, and instead of its noxious odor we already begin to perceive the rare fragrance of the new-budding leaves of the "tree of life, whose fruit is for the healing of the nations."

Eighteen centuries ago a wonderful Light led wise men from the East to a humble manger-bed, where they saw a more wonderful Child in the arms of a tender human mother. Eversince then, gleams of brightness have cheered the weary watcher, piercing the gloom of time, and heralding the dawn of the glorious day of liberty. God appointed no man to go forth as His messenger on earth "to preach deliverance to the captive." He chose a woman, who was the consummate flower of all the slow ages, and made her the mother of His son, that she might give him her own human life and nature. She guided his tottering steps and clasped his helpless hands and instructed his infant mind, until at last, infancy, childhood and youth all safely passed, Jesus received his divine commission, and went forth to found an everlasting kingdom on the eternal principles of love, justice and perfect equality. Thus he ushered in the day so long desired, and in whose sunlight we are so blessed as to live. Where can be found so perfect a rule of life as his divine words, "Do unto others as ye would they should do unto you." What wrong, what injustice, could exist if these simple words were heeded? Ah, do not quote Paul, nor any lesser men since, though their name is legion. Consider what the Savior said, for whatever conflicts with his pure, perfect precepts must go down. On this sure foundation, then, we base our claim to our natural rights, of which we are deprived in defiance of that Golden Rule. We think it would be best for men as well as women, and that it would be eminently expedient; but we ask for freedom first and most of all because it is right that we should have it.

In closing, I would commend to all the grand words of one of America's noblest sons—"Dare to do the abstract right, and trust God to make it expedient."