

The Anarchist Library
Anti-Copyright



Bondwomen

Dora Marsden

Dora Marsden
Bondwomen
1911

Retrieved 08/08/2022 from repository.library.brown.edu (2)
Originally published in *The Freewoman*: No. 1, Vol. 1, November
23, 1911 and No. 2, Vol. 1, November 30, 1911.

theanarchistlibrary.org

1911

We are convinced that, at the present time, our interpretation of the doctrine has merely to be stated clearly to be frankly rejected by, at least, three women in every four.

Probably these replies will raise more objections than those they were put forward to meet, but if such is the case it will be not merely what was expected, but what is hoped.

is prevented by law from securing release. The paid person may be satisfactory or not. If unsatisfactory, what redress is there for the employer? No redress! but a possible remedy in corporal punishment, such as is administered to soldiers in barracks in similar circumstances. And the employee against a tyrannical employer? No power to refuse to sell her labor! power only to form a trade union of paid wives! The entire theory is ludicrous in its absurdity. No! Personal relationships between equals must be entered into on terms of equality. And this brings us to the real feeling, which is expressed in the animus against domestic occupation for so large a proportion of women. The feeling has its roots in the elementary fact that, in order to attend to a house, a woman has to give up the work which represents to her, at most, independence and self-expression, and, at least, self-support. In giving up her work the woman gives up the obvious means of support over which she has control, and she becomes dependent upon the energy and work of some other individual. Feminism would hold that it is neither desirable nor necessary for women, when they are mothers, to leave their chosen, money-earning work for any length of time. The fact that they so often do so largely rests on tradition which has to be worn down. In wearing it down vast changes must take place in social conditions, in housing, nursing, kindergarten, education, cooking, cleaning, in the industrial world, and in the professions. These changes will have for their motive the accommodation of such conditions as will enable women to choose and follow a life-work, apart from, and in addition to, their natural function of reproduction.

So it is from a full recognition of the fact that feminist doctrine is a hard one for women, that the pat of the Freewoman will be beset with difficulties, with temptations both from within and without, that we are led to the further recognition of the futility of preaching it to the women who are essentially ordinary women, who do not already bear in themselves the stamp of the individual.

Contents

Bondwomen	5
Commentary on Bondwomen	10

she should so strive will be well for her children. Many will say that this responsibility on the mother is too hard. What are the responsibilities of the father? Well, that is *his* business. Perhaps the State will have something to say to him, but the Freewoman's concern is to see to it that she shall be in a position to bear children if she wants them without soliciting maintenance from any man, whoever he may be; and this she can only do if she is earning money for herself, or is provided for out of some common fund for a limited time. Some women and men here suggest a compromise. They suggest, in order that the women shall at once retain dignity and receive maintenance, that they shall act as housekeepers to the men who provide this maintenance, and receive money for their domestic services. There are endless objections to this, even as a voluntary arrangement. In the first place, a growing number of women, while hoping to have children, refuse to sacrifice their career to domestic work, much as they like it. In the second place, many women detest domestic work, which is wholly alien to their natural capabilities. Many of them think that they have capabilities of an order which make them regard domestic work as inferior work. To surmount this difficulty, well-intentioned people have been trying, by artificial adjuncts, to raise the status of domestic work. To these we would point out that the distaste felt is not due to social estimation in which it is held, high or low as this may be, but is due to a temperamental distaste for it. The well-intentioned people, now utterly bewildered, are pretending that housework has fallen into disrepute because it is unpaid work, forgetting that the best of the worker's work is always unpaid. In their bewilderment they have gone so far as to set up a monstrous theory that wives should become the paid employees of their husbands! Beyond this, folly can no further go!

And yet Suffragists, and advanced persons among women generally, make use of this theory. Imagine the circumstances! The man would be compelled by law to pay a portion of his salary to a person whom he is prevented by law from dismissing, and who

Freewoman, however, while granting this in part, would go on to say, "In spite of our position, we feel within us the stirrings of new powers and growing strength. If we can secure scope, opportunity, and responsibility, we feel we can make realizable to the world a new revelation of spiritual consciousness. We feel we can produce new evidence of creative force, which, when allowed its course, will encompass developments sufficiently great to constitute a higher development in the evolution of the human race and of human achievement". We believe that it is to the Freewomen we have to look for the conscious setting toward a higher race, for which their achievements will help to make ready, and their strivings and aspirations help to mould. For this they do not require protection; they need liberty. They do not require ease; they require strenuous effort. They do not wish, by law or any other means, to fasten their responsibilities on others. They themselves are prepared to shoulder their own. They bear no grudge and claim no exception because of the greater burdens Nature has made theirs. They accept them willingly, because of their added opportunity and power.

In the attainment of all these things the vote will lend its small quota—small because it is of the letter and not of the spirit. The spirit comes from within: It can be fostered, but it cannot be created before its time, and when its time has come it cannot be unduly repressed, oh Suffragists!

It is not so long as it seems, but from these hopes and dreams of the future it appears a long cry back to the problems of the domestic questions of to-day. If the Freewoman is not going to be the protected woman, but is to carve out an independence for herself, she must produce within herself strength sufficient to provide for herself and for those whom Nature has made her the natural guardian, her children.

To this end she must open up resources of wealth for herself. She must work, earn money. She must seize upon the incentives which have spurred on men to strenuous effort—wealth, power, titles, and public honor. To this end she will have to strive, and that

Bondwomen

IT is a wholly pertinent matter that the temerarious persons who launch THE FREEWOMAN should be asked, "Who are the Freewomen?" Where are the owmen of whom and for whom you write who are free? Can they be pointed out, or named by name? There must be, say, ten in the British Isles. The question is pertinent enough, but it is difficult to answer, because its answer must of necessity become personal. We might, perhaps, hazard the name of one Freewoman who has become a sufficiently national figure to make her mention impersonal—Ellen Terry. There at least is one, and for the rest the inquisitors must be content with being enabled to arrive at the conception of Freewomen by way of a description of Bondwomen.

Bondwomen are distinguished from Freewomen by a spiritual distinction. Bondwomen are the women who are not spiritual entities—who are not individuals. They are complements merely. By habit of thought, by form of activity, and largely by preference, they round off the personality of some other individual, rather than create or cultivate their own. Most women, as far back as we have any record, have fitted into this conception, and it has borne itself out in instinctive working practice.

And in the midst of all this there comes a cry that woman is an individual, and that because she is an individual she must be set free. It would be nearer the truth to say that if she is an individual, she *is* free, and will act like those who are free. The doubtful aspect in the situation is as to whether women are or can be individuals—that is, free—and whether there is not danger, under the circumstances, in labeling them free, thus giving them the liberty of action allowed to the free. It is this doubt and fear which is behind the opposition which is being offered the vanguard of those who are "asking for" freedom. It is the kind of fear which an engineer would have in guaranteeing an arch equal to a strain above its strength. The opponents of the Freewomen are not actuated by

spleen or stupidity, but by dread. This dread is well founded upon ages of experience with a being who, however well loved, has been known to be an inferior, and who has accepted all the conditions of inferiors. Women, women's intelligence, and women's judgments have always been regarded with more or less secret contempt. This contempt rests upon quite honest and sound instinct, so honest, indeed, that it must provide all the charm of an unaccustomed sensation for fine gentlemen like the Curzons and Cromers and Asquiths to feel anything quite so instinctive and primitive. With the women opponents, it is another matter. These latter apart, however, it is for would-be Freewomen to realize that for them this contempt is the healthiest thing in the world, and that those who express it honestly feel it; that these opponents have argued quite soundly that women have allowed themselves to be used, ever since there has been any record of them; and that if women had had higher uses of their own they would not have foregone them. They have never known women [to] formulate imperious wants, this in itself implying lack of wants, and this in turn implying lack of ideals. Women as whole have shown nothing but "servant" attributes. All those activities which presuppose the master qualities, the standard-making, the law-giving, the moral framing, belong to men, while women have been the "followers", "believers", the "law-abiding", the "moral", the conventionally admiring. They have been the administrators, the servants, living by borrowed precept, receiving orders, doing hodmen's work. For note, though some men must be servants, all women are servants, and all the masters are men. That is the difference and distinction. The servile condition is common to all women. Consider, for instance, the wife of the politician. She plays around irresponsively, helping out the politician's work; the parson's wife—she is the hard-working, unpaid assistant of her husband; the working-man's wife eke's out a straightened existence for herself by allocating the modest wages which the workman, and not she, has earned. Women's very virtues are those of a subordinate class. Women are long-suffering, adaptable, dutiful, faithful,

individual and personal vision of life in any sphere has the essential attribute of genius, and those who have not this individual realisation are without genius. They are therefore followers—servants, if so preferred. We called them Bondwomen. We maintain that to accept the fact that great numbers of individuals are born without creative power in regard to any sphere of life whatever, argues no more cynicism than it would to accept the fact, and the statement of it, that coal is black and snow is white. It is a fact to be proved by simple observation. Our contention is that life should supply the conditions which would enable this native endowment of vision to make itself communicable to others, and we consider that so many women appear ordinary, not because they are born ordinary, but because they are bundled pell-mell into a sphere in which they can show no special gift; and because they are expected to be so bundled, they are deprived of that training which would enable them to make their individual revelation communicable, that is, of their chance to become artists. Nor for one moment do we wish to support the view that all women will be free, any more than all men are free. It will be difficult enough for freewomen to be free, and to force women, who neither are nor wish to be free, into the responsibilities of freedom is as futile as endeavouring to make two and two into five. It cannot be done. This explains why a feminist must make her appeal to freewomen, and not to "ordinary" women. The doctrine of feminism is one so hard on women that, at the outset, we can only appeal to those who have already shown signs of individuality and strength, and it is just here that the cult of the freewoman becomes plainly distinguishable from that of the Suffragist. If it is the work of the Suffragist women to guard the rear, it is that of the Freewomen to cheer the van.

The cult of the Suffragist takes its stand upon the weakness and dejectedness of the conditions of women. The cult of the Suffragist would say, "Are women not weak? Are women not crushed down? Are women not in need of protection? Therefore, give them the means wherewith they may be protected". Those of the cult of the

human poultice is to have great utility, it does not offer the conditions under which vivid new life-manifestations are likely to show themselves, either in the “comforter” or the “Comforted”.

Commentary on Bondwomen

IT turns out that the editorial attitude for this week will have to take the form of a commentary on that of last. According to correspondence, it would appear that in Bondwomen we gave the idea that we consider that only those women who are gifted to the extent of genius can be Freewomen, and all the rest, according to our version, must be Bondwomen, i.e., followers, servants. What, asks a very reasonable correspondent, who wishes to remain anonymous—what is to become of the “ordinary women”? Is not your championing of the strong, of the masters, as unnecessary as it is easy, and your postulating the existence of servants as an established fact, as unhelpful as it is cynical? Cannot the gifted take care of themselves? To use your own instance, has not Ellen Terry made herself free by the simple right of her genius? Are you not treating as negligible considerations the only ones where help such as you can give would count? Are you not engendering a revolt against a sphere wherein most “ordinary women” must of necessity spend their lives? Are you not, by depreciating the value of housework, supporting the view that housework is of little worth, and making it less likely that it should be recognised as a properly-paid profession? A sheaf of questions and objections! Let us see. Returning to the first, that we put forward the view that women’s freedom is bound up with genius—well, that is a view we are prepared to uphold. To be a freewoman one must have the essential attribute of genius. Last week we implied it, and this week we state it, and, having more space, we take this opportunity of defining genius. Genius is an individual revelation of life-manifestation, made realisable to others in some outward form. So we hold that anyone who has an

and with an unlimited capacity for sacrifice. Even if in such matters as sex, where women are considered more “moral” than men, because women recognize intuitively that men *think* more, they pay their homage as from a lower to a higher authority, by allowing men to frame their standards even *in* morals. It is because woman is thus, and not otherwise, that she is so useful to man—his “comforter”. For man, woman has become a kind of human poultice, or, more poetically, the illusion softening reality. This, coupled with the fact that she is also man’s “female”, accounts for all the poetic adulation which men have offered to women. But it is not to poetry, but to blunt prose, that one must turn to get at man’s real estimate of woman’s place in the scheme of things. Hear what he says in plain prose, when woman presumes to speak of equality and “freedom”. Out of his own experience of her, he knows her to be a follower, one who has always been ready to sacrifice herself to him and his interests. He would have sacrificed himself for nothing, save his own ideas; but she has always reveled somberly in sacrificing herself for anything and anybody, for duty, for peace, husbands, parents, children. And this, after all, is what speaks far more eloquently than a tome of arguments to the ordinary man. It tells him that nothing has ever crossed her mind regarding herself which has appeared to her too good to be sacrificed to anything on earth, itself excepting. He therefore quite naturally argues that she has acted like a second because she felt herself a second.

How women have fallen into this position is a moot point. It is yet to be decided whether they ever did fall—where man and women have not been, from their creation, master and servant. If otherwise, and if woman did “fall”, the reason why is yet to be assigned. It is quite beside the point to say women were “crushed” down. If they were not “down” in themselves—i.e., weaker in mind—no equal force could have crushed them “down”. There can be no over-reaching *in the long run* with mind. In the long run, mind plays on its own merits. It can neither receive nor give quarter. Those who are “down” are inferior. When change takes place

in the thing itself—i.e., when it becomes equal or superior—by the nature of its own being it rises. So woman, if ever equal, must have sunk on the ground of inferiority. Whether this inferiority arose through the disabilities arising out of child-bearing, or whether it arose through women giving up the game—i.e., bartering themselves for the sake of the protection of men—it is difficult to say. Probably in her desire for love continued, for protection, for keeping the man near her, she slipped into the rôle of making herself useful to him, serving *him*, giving him always more love and more, more service and more, until, on the one hand, she acquired the complete “servant” mind, and he, on the other, gained the realization that her “usefulness” was of greater moment to him than the fret of the tie which retained him. At the present time, when man’s adventurousness and experimental mind has made much of her “usefulness” useless, woman finds herself cut off from her importantly useful sphere, equipped with the mind of a servant, and the reputation of one. She thus finds herself in a position in which she is compelled to do one of two things—i.e., remain solely as the man’s protected female, or, making what may or may not be a successful effort, endeavor to take her place as a master. It is this effort to find her place among the masters which is behind the feminist movement; and such a statement of the feminist case is a refutation of all those who maintain that there is no duality of interest between men and women.

At the present time, there is duality, and duality in this connection will cease to exist only when women sink back into the position of females with nothing beyond, or when they stand recognized as “masters” among other “masters;”, considering their sex just as much incidental concern as men consider theirs.

But to return to the Bondwomen. It seems difficult to realize how the females of a virile race could have been content to remain a permanently subordinate position. It can only be accounted for upon and understanding of the stupefying influence of security with irresponsibility. And this is what “protection” always means

for the “protected”. To begin with, by securing the “protection” of a man, a woman rids herself of the responsibility of earning her own living. Following upon this beginning, so many pleasures accrue that under their influence women are soothed into such a willing acceptance of their position that they are unable to see the unspiritedness of it. Moreover, besides having “protection” and maintenance, they achieve physical maturity; they have the great adventure of having children; they secure companions and avoid the loneliness of existence; they have flattery which smooths it, and they live easily under a ready-made code and under the sanction of the communal blessing.

For this protected position women give up all first-hand power. Really, the power to work and to think. All the power to achieve is merely derivative. They allow to slide past them those powerful incentives which keep up the strain of effort—that is, individual public honor, wealth, titles, decorations, bits of ribbon. These go to men. To women are offered the great soporifics—comfort and protection. How difficult and hard is a woman’s choice made! It is almost too hard. Nothing but one thing—the sense of quality, the sense that a woman has gifts, the sense that she is a superior, a master—can give her the strength to slip the comfort and protection and to be content to seize the “love” in passing, to suffer the long strain of effort, and to bear the agony of producing creative work. Having this sense, they will learn that freedom is born in the individual soul, and that no outer force can either give it or take it away; that only Freewomen can be free; or lead the way to freedom. They will learn that their freedom will consist in appraising their own worth, in setting up their own standards and living up to them, and putting behind them for ever their rôle of complacent self-sacrifice. For none can judge of another soul’s value. The individual has to record its own. A morality begotten in a community where one-half are born servants may glibly say that it is woman’s highest rôle to be the comforter of men and children; but it is the truth, and men and women must both learn it, that while to be a