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The Tragedy of Woman's Emancipation

Emma Goldman

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I begin my article with an admission: Regardless of all political and economic theories, treating of the fundamental differences between the various groups within the human race, regardless of class and race distinctions, regardless of all artificial boundary lines between woman's rights and man's rights, I hold that there is a point where these differentiations may meet and grow into one perfect whole.

With this I do not mean to propose a peace treaty. The general social antagonism which has taken hold of our entire public life to-day, brought about through the force of opposing and contradictory interests, will crumble to pieces when the reorganization of our social life, based upon the principles of economic justice, shall have become a reality.

Peace and harmony between the sexes, and individuals does not necessarily depend on a superficial equalization of human beings; nor does it call for the elimination of individual traits or peculiarities. The problem that confronts us, to-day, and which the nearest future is to solve, is how to be oneself, and yet in oneness with

others, to feel deeply with all human beings and still retain one's own innate qualities. This seems to me the basis upon which the mass and the individual, the true democrat and the true individuality, man and woman can meet without antagonism and opposition. The motto should not be forgive one another; it should be, understand one another. The oft-quoted sentence of Mme. de Stael: "To understand everything means to forgive everything," has never particularly appealed to me; it has the odor of the confessional; to forgive one's fellow being conveys the idea of pharisaical superiority. To understand one's being suffices. This admission partly represents the fundamental aspect of my views on the emancipation of woman and its effect upon the entire sex.

Emancipation should make it possible for her to be human in the truest sense. Everything within her that craves assertion and activity should reach expression; and all artificial barriers should be broken and the road towards greater freedom cleared of every trace of centuries of submission and slavery.

This was the original aim of the movement for woman's emancipation. But the results so far achieved have isolated woman and have robbed her of the fountain springs of that happiness which is so essential to her. Merely external emancipation has made of the modern woman an artificial being who reminds one of the products of French arboriculture with its arabesque trees and shrubs—pyramids, wheels and wreaths; anything except the forms which would be reached by the expression of their own inner qualities. Such artificially grown plants of the female sex are to be found in large numbers, especially in the so-called intellectual sphere of our life.

Liberty and equality for woman! What hopes and aspirations these words awakened when they first uttered by some of the noblest and bravest souls of those days. The sun in all its light and glory was to rise upon a new world; in this world woman was to be free to direct her own destiny, an aim certainly worthy of the great enthusiasm, courage, perseverance and ceaseless effort of the

tion in life is just and fair, but, after all, the most vital right is the right to love and be loved. Indeed if the partial emancipation is to become a complete and true emancipation of woman it will have to do away with the ridiculous notion that to be loved, to be sweetheart and mother, is synonymous with being slave or subordinate. It will have to do away with the absurd notion of the dualism of the sexes, or that man and woman represent two antagonistic worlds.

Pettiness separates, breadth unites. Let us be broad and big. Let us not overlook vital things, because of the bulk of trifles confronting us. A true conception of the relation of the sexes will not admit of conqueror and conquered; it knows of but one great thing: to give one's self boundlessly in order to find oneself richer, deeper, better. That alone can fill the emptiness and replace the tragedy of woman's emancipation with joy, limitless joy.

tremendous host of pioneer men and women, who staked everything against a world of prejudice and ignorance.

My hopes also move towards that goal, but I insist that the emancipation of woman, as interpreted and practically applied to-day, has failed to reach that great end. Now, woman is confronted with the necessity of emancipation from emancipation, if she really desires to be free. This may sound paradoxical, but is, nevertheless, only too true.

What has she achieved through her emancipation? Equal Suffrage in a few states. Has that purified our political life, as many well-meaning advocates have predicted? Certainly not. Incidentally it is really time that persons with plain, sound judgment should cease to talk about corruption in politics in a boarding-school tone. Corruption of politics has nothing to do with the morals or the laxity of morals of various political personalities. Its cause is altogether a material one. Politics is the reflex of the business and industrial world, the mottoes of which are: "to take is more blessed than to give"; "buy cheap and sell clear"; "one soiled hand washes the other." There is no hope that even woman, with her right to vote, will ever purify politics.

Emancipation has brought woman economic equality with man; that is, she can choose her own profession and trade, but as her past and present physical training have not equipped her with the necessary strength to compete with man, she is often compelled to exhaust all her energy, use up her vitality and strain every nerve in order to reach the market value. Very few ever succeed, for it is a fact that women doctors, lawyers, architects and engineers are neither met with the same confidence, nor do they receive the same remuneration. And those that do reach that enticing equality generally do so at the expense of their physical and psychical wellbeing. As to the great mass of working girls and women, how much independence is gained if the narrowness and lack of freedom of the home is exchanged for the narrowness and lack of freedom of the factory, sweat-shop, department store, or office? In addition is the bur-

den which is laid on many women of looking after a “home, sweet home” cold, dreary, disorderly, uninviting—after a day’s hard work. Glorious independence! No wonder, that hundreds of girls are so willing to accept the first offer of marriage, sick and tired of their independence behind the counter, or at the sewing or typewriting machine. They are just as ready to marry as girls of middle class people who long to throw off the yoke of parental dependence. A so-called independence which leads only to earning the merest subsistence is not so enticing, not so ideal that one can expect woman to sacrifice everything for it. Our highly praised independence is, after all, but a slow process of dulling and stifling woman’s nature, her love instinct and her mother instinct.

Nevertheless, The position of the working girl is far more natural and human than that of her seemingly more fortunate sister in the more cultured professional walk of life. Teachers, physicians, lawyers, engineers, etc., who have to make a dignified, straightened and proper appearance, while the inner life is growing empty and dead.

The narrowness of the existing conception of woman’s independence and emancipation; the dread of love for a man who is not her social equal; the fear that love will rob her of her freedom and independence, the horror that love or the joy of motherhood will only hinder her in the full exercise of her profession—all these together make of the emancipated modern woman a compulsory vestal, before whom life, with its great clarifying sorrows and its deep, entrancing joys, rolls on without touching or gripping her soul.

Emancipation as understood by the majority of its adherents and exponents, is of too narrow a scope to permit the boundless joy and ecstasy contained in the deep emotion of the true woman, sweet-heart, mother, freedom.

The tragic fate of the self-supporting or economically free woman does not consist of too many, but of too few experiences. True, she surpasses her sister of past generations in knowledge of the world and human nature; and it is because of that that

to give and take without restriction it is not love, but a transaction that never fail to lay stress on a plus and a minus.

The greatest shortcoming of the emancipation of the present day lies in its artificial stiffness and its narrow respectabilities which produce an emptiness in woman’s soul that will not let her drink from the fountain of life. I once remarked that there seemed to be a deeper relationship between the old-fashioned mother and hostess, ever on the alert for the happiness of her little ones and the comfort of those she loved and the truly new woman, than between the latter and her average emancipated sister. The disciples of emancipation pure and simple declared me heathen, merely fit for the stake. Their blind zeal did not let them see that my comparison between the old and the new was merely to prove that a goodly number of our grandmothers had more blood in their veins, far more humor and wit, and certainly a greater amount of naturalness, kind-heartedness and simplicity than the majority of our emancipated professional women who fill our colleges, halls of learning, and various offices. This does not mean a wish to return to the past, nor does it condemn woman to her old sphere, the kitchen and the nursery.

Salvation lies in an energetic march onward towards a brighter and clearer future. We are in need of unhampered growth out of old traditions and habits. The movement for woman’s emancipation has so far made but the first step in that direction. It is to be hoped that it will gather strength to make another. The right to vote, equal civil rights, are all very good demands, but true emancipation begins neither at the polls nor in courts. It begins in woman’s soul. History tells us that every oppressed class gained its true liberation from its masters through its, own efforts. It is necessary that woman learn that lesson, that she realize that her freedom will reach as far as her power to achieve her freedom reaches. It is therefore far more important for her to begin with her inner regeneration to cut loose from the weight of prejudices, traditions, and customs. The demand for various equal rights in every voca-

her nature, whether it call for life's greatest treasure, love for a man, or her most glorious privilege, the right to give birth to a child, she cannot call herself emancipated. How many emancipated women are brave enough to acknowledge that the voice of love is calling, wildly beating against, their breasts demanding to be satisfied.

The French novelist, Jean Reibrach, in one of his novels, "New Beauty," attempts to picture the ideal, beautiful, emancipated woman. This ideal is embodied in a young girl, a physician. She talks very clearly and wisely of how to feed infants, she is kind and administers medicines free to poor mothers. She converses with a young man of her acquaintance about the sanitary conditions of the future and how various bacilli and germs shall be exterminated by the use of stone walls and floors, and the doing away of rugs and, hangings. She is, of course, very plainly and practically dressed, mostly in black. The young man who, at their first meeting was overawed by the wisdom of his emancipated friend, gradually learns to understand her, and, recognizes one fine day that he loves her. They are young and she is kind and beautiful, and though always in rigid attire, her appearance is softened by her spotlessly clean white collar and cuffs. One would expect that he would tell her of his love, but he is not one to commit romantic absurdities. Poetry and the enthusiasm of love cover their blushing faces before the pure beauty of the lady. He silences the voice of his nature and remains correct. She, too, is always exact, always rational, always well behaved. I fear if they had formed a union, the young man would have risked freezing to death. I must confess that I can see nothing, beautiful in this new beauty, who is as cold as the stone walls and floors she dreams of. Rather would I have the love songs of romantic ages, rather Don Juan, and Madame Venus, rather an elopement by ladder and rope on a moonlight night, followed by a father's curse, mother's moans, and the moral comments of neighbors, than correctness and propriety measured by yardsticks. If love does not know how

she feels deeply the lack of life's essence, which alone can enrich the human soul and without which the majority of women have become mere automatons.

That such a state of affairs was bound to come was foreseen by those who realized that in the domain of ethics, there still remained decaying ruins of the time of the undisputed superiority of man; ruins that are still considered useful. And, which is more important, a goodly number of the emancipated are unable to get along without them. Every movement that aims at the destruction of existing institutions and the replacement thereof with such as are more advanced more perfect, has followers, who in theory stand for the most extreme radical ideas, and who, nevertheless, in their everyday practice, are like the next best Philistine, feigning respectability and clamoring for the good opinion of their opponents. There are, for example, Socialists, and even Anarchists, who stand for the idea that property is robbery, yet who will grow indignant if anyone owe them the value of a half-dozen pins.

The same Philistine can be found in the movement for woman's emancipation. Yellow journalists and milk and water litterateurs have painted pictures of the emancipated woman that make the hair of the good citizen and his dull companion stand up on end. Every member of the women's rights movement was pictured as a George Sand in her absolute disregard of morality. Nothing was sacred to her. She had no respect for the ideal relation between man and woman. In short, emancipation stood only for a reckless life of lust and sin; regardless of society, religion and morality. The exponents of woman's rights were highly indignant at such a misrepresentation, and, lacking in humor, they exerted all their energy to prove that they were not at all as bad as they were painted, but the very reverse. Of course, as long as woman was the slave of man, she could not be good and pure, but now that she was free and independent she would prove how good she could be and how her influence would have a purifying effect on all institutions in society. True, the movement for woman's rights has broken many old

fetters, but it has also established new ones. The great movement of true emancipation has not met with a great race of women, who could look liberty in the face. Their narrow puritanical vision banished man as a disturber and doubtful character out of their emotional life. Man was not to be tolerated at any price, except perhaps as the father of a child, since a child could not very well come to life without a father. Fortunately, the rigid puritanism never will be strong enough to kill the innate craving for motherhood. But woman's freedom is closely allied to man's freedom, and many of my so-called emancipated sisters seem to overlook the fact that a child born in freedom needs the love and devotion of each human being about him, man as well as woman. Unfortunately, it is this narrow conception of human relations that has brought about a great tragedy in the lives of the modern man and woman.

About fifteen years ago appeared a work from the pen of the brilliant Norwegian writer, Laura Marholm, called "Woman, a Character Study." She was one of the first to call attention to the emptiness and narrowness of the existing conception of woman's emancipation and its tragic effect upon the inner life of woman. In her work she speaks of the fate of several gifted women of international fame: The genius, Eleanora Duse; the great mathematician and writer, Sanja Kovalevskaja; the artist and poet-nature, Marie Bashkirzeff, who died so young. Through each description of the lives of these women of such extraordinary mentality, runs a marked trail of unsatisfied craving for a full, rounded, complete and beautiful life, and the unrest and loneliness resulting from the lack of it. Through these masterly psychological sketches, one cannot help but see that the higher the mental development of woman, the less possible it is for her to meet a congenial mate, who will see in her, not only sex, but also the human being, the friend, comrade and strong individuality who cannot and ought not lose a single trait of her character.

The average man with his self-sufficiency, his ridiculously superior airs of patronage towards the female sex, is an impossibility for woman, as depicted in the "Character Study" by Laura Marholm.

Equally impossible for her is the man who can see in her nothing more than her mentality and genius, and who fails to awaken her woman nature.

A rich intellect and a fine soul are usually considered necessary attributes of a deep and beautiful personality. In the case of the modern woman, these attributes serve as a hindrance to the complete assertion of her being. For over one hundred years, the old form of marriage, based on the Bible, "till death us do part" has been denounced as an institution that stands for the sovereignty of the man over the woman, of her of complete submission to his whims and commands and the absolute dependence upon his name and support. Time and again it has been conclusively proven that the old matrimonial relation restricted woman to the function of man's servant and the bearer of his children. And yet we find many emancipated women prefer marriage with all its deficiencies to the narrowness of an unmarried life; narrow and unendurable because of the chains of moral and social prejudice that cramp and bind her nature.

The cause for such inconsistency on the part of many advanced women is to be found in the fact that they never truly understood the meaning of emancipation. They thought that all that was needed was independence from external tyrannies; the internal tyrants, far more harmful to life and growth, such as ethical and social conventions, were left to take care of themselves; and they have taken care of themselves. They seem to get along beautifully in the heads and hearts of the most active exponents of woman's emancipation, as in the heads and hearts of our grandmothers.

These internal tyrants, whether they be in the form of public opinion or what will mother say, or brother, father, aunt or relative of any sort; what will Mrs. Grundy, Mr. Comstock, the employer, the Board of Education say? All these busybodies, moral detectives, jailers of the human spirit, what will they say? Until woman has learned to defy them all, to stand firmly on her own ground and to insist upon her own unrestricted freedom, to listen to the voice of