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On the Human Being, Male and Female

Joseph Déjacque

1857

In the depths of Louisiana, whither I have been driven by the vicissitudes of my exile, I have read in a United States paper, "La Revue de l'Ouest," a fragment of correspondence between you, P. J. Proudhon, and a Madam Hericourt.

Some words of Madam Hericourt, cited in that paper, cause me to fear the feminine antagonist may not have the strength—polemically speaking—to cope with her brutal masculine adversary.

I know nothing of Madam Hericourt nor of her writings, if she is a writer, nor of her position in the word, nor of her personality. But to argue well concerning women, or to argue well concerning men, earnestness is not all that is necessary. One must have seen much and studied much. One must, I believe, have experienced their personal passions in all stations of society, from the silver-tipped summits where vice is happiness to the depths where misery seeks solace in debauchery, Upon the human rock thus battered by the shocks of life, the logic, the stenciled truth, may be read.

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(Letter written to P. J. Proudhon by Joseph Déjacque in 1857.
Translated from Les Temps Nouveaux by Jonathan Mayo
Crane)

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I should like to see the question of the emancipation of woman treated by a woman who has loved much and has loved many, and who in her past life has associated with both the aristocratic and the lowly; for the woman of the garret. I can penetrate and understand the private or official views and the thoughts of the luxurious grand dame more easily than the woman of the salon can comprehend the open or hidden privations of the daughter of poverty. However, in default of another Magdalen, bathing the feet of crucified humanity with her fecund tears and striving to lift it to a better world, for lack of this voice of civilized repentance, for lack of this woman who proudly and publicly abjuring all prejudices of sex and race, of laws and customs, will bring us back to the former world, I, a human being of the male sex, will endeavor to answer you, Aliboron-Proudhon. For the emancipation of woman is nothing else than the emancipation of humanity—both sexes.

Is it possible, great publicist, that under your lion's skin so much of the ass may be found? You who have in your veins such powerful revolutionary pulsations for all that pertains to labor with the arms or filling the stomach, your transports are no less fiery, but are stupid and reactionary, when you come to consider the emotions of the heart and of the sentiments. Your nervous and unending logic in questions of industrial production and consumption is without force when you consider questions of moral production and consumption. Your intelligence, virile for nil that concerns man, seems emasculated when it is it question concerning woman. With hermaphrodite brain your thoughts recoil upon themselves in powerless efforts to conceive and give birth to social truth.

A masculine Joan of Arc who, it is said, has kept himself chaste for forty years, the maceration of love has ulcerated your heart, the rancor of jealousy has filled you with disgust and you cry "War against women!" as the maid of Orleans cried "War against the English!" The English burnt her alive. The

Say to them that in this condition only can they be able to sustain and support each other in the journey and the light of their love shall pierce the shadows that separate the present from the future, or civilized society from harmonized society. Tell them the human being, in its relative proportion and manifestations, is like the glow-worm, which shines only by love and for love.

Say that. Be stronger than your prejudices; more generous than spiteful. Proclaim Liberty, Equality, Fraternity, the indivisibility of the human being. Do it; it is for the salvation of the public. Declare humanity in danger; call on man and woman to cast prejudiced invaders out of the frontier of social progress; create a second and a third of September against that other masculine nobility, that aristocracy of sex which would rivet us to customs of the past. Do it; it is necessary. Proclaim it with passion, with genius, trumpet-tongued, make it thunder . . . and you will have well won the esteem of others and of yourself.

In a society thus constituted—and you ought to know it, you anarchist who pride yourself as a logician—what would you have to say of the sexual infirmity of either the female or male human being?

Listen, Master Proudhon! Before you talk of woman, study her; go to school. Stop calling yourself an anarchist, or be an anarchist clear through. Talk to us, if you wish to, of the unknown and the known, of God who is evil, of property which is robbery; but when you talk of man do not make him an autocratic divinity, for I will answer you that man is evil. Attribute not to him a stock of intelligence which belongs to him only by right of conquest, by the commerce of love, by usury on the capital that comes entirely from woman and is the product of the soul within her. Dare not to attribute to him that which he has derived from another or I will answer you in your own words: “Property is robbery!”

Raise your voice, on the contrary, against the exploitation of woman by man. Proclaim to the world with that vigor of argument which has made him famous as an intellectual athlete, that man, without the aid of woman, is unable to drag the revolution out of the mire, to pluck it out of the filthy and bloodstained rut into which it has fallen; that alone he is powerless; that he must have the support of woman’s heart and brain; that in the path of progress they should march forward together, side by side, hand in hand; that man can not attain his goal and endure the fatigue of the journey without the sustaining sympathy and the encouraging caresses of woman.

Say to the man and to the woman that their destinies are to draw nearer together and to understand each other better; that they have one and the same name as they are one and the same being—the human being; that they are, each in turn, the one right and the other the left hand and that in the human identity their hearts are as one heart and their thoughts are inseparable.

women have made you a husband, oh, holy man, long time a virgin and always a martyr.

Father Proudhon, shall I say it? When you talk of women you appear like a college boy who talks very loudly and in a high key, at random and with impertinence, in order to appear learned, as you do to your callow hearers, and who like you knows not the first thing of the matter he is talking about.

After having profaned your flesh for forty years you now profane your intelligence, and passing from pollution to pollution you pour forth your impurities to besmirch women.

Is that what you call manly and honest civility, Narcissus-Proudhon? I quote your words:

“No, Madam, you know nothing about your sex; you know not the first thing about the questions you and your honorable associates agitate with so much noise and so little success. And if you do not understand this question, if in the eight pages of the response which you have made to my letter there are forty illogical conclusions, that shows the truth of what I have said of the infirmity of your sex. I mean by these words—the exactness of which may not be irreproachable—the quality of your understanding which will not permit you to seize the significance of thing;; which we men have at our fingers’ ends. In your skull, as in your abdomen, is a certain organ which is incapable of conquering its own inertia; which requires the male to make it perform its functions. And even then it is not always successful. Such madam, is my opinion, the result of my direct and positive observations. I leave it to your obstetrical sagacity to calculate from it for your thesis the incalculable consequences.”

You wild boar—which is merely an undomesticated hog—if it is true, as you say, that woman can give birth to nothing from either the brain or the abdomen without man’s assistance—and it is true—it is equally true the other way; it is reciprocal; neither can man produce from his flesh or his brain without woman’s assistance. That is logic and good logic, Madelon-Proudhon, that an apprentice who has always been your obe-

dient servant can snatch from your hands and throw in your face.

Emancipation or non-emancipation of woman, emancipation or non-emancipation of man—what does it mean? Is it that by nature one has rights and the other has no rights? Is it that humanity is singular and not plural, masculine and not feminine! Is it that the difference in the sexes is a difference in the nature of humanity. Are the drops of rain which fall from the clouds not the same whether they are few or many, whether they are large or small?

Place the question of the emancipation of woman in line with the emancipation of the serf—woman as well as man; or to say the same thing differently, the human slave—whether in the seraglio or the workshop. This understood and it is revolutionary. But from the privileged man's point of view of social progress, it is senseless and reactionary. To avoid quibbling and equivocation we must demand the emancipation of the human being. In such terms the question is complete.

From day to day humanity gravitates from revolution to revolution towards its ideal of perfectibility—liberty. But the man and the woman will advance with the same step, the same heart fortified by love, toward their natural destiny, the community of anarchy. But man and woman enter thus arm in arm, the face of one shedding its radiance on the face of the other, until they reach the garden of Social Harmony. But the group of the Human Being, the dream of happiness realized, the animated picture of the future, the harmonic tones and the radiant glory of equality offend your ears and dazzle your eyes. Your understanding, distorted by petty vanity, makes you see in posterity a man-statue erected on a woman-pedestal, a man-patriarch and a woman-servant.

Flogger of woman and absolute serf of man, Proudhon Magan, you use your words for a lash. Like a slave-driver you seem delighted to disrobe your beautiful victims (on paper) and flagellate them with invectives. Moderate anarchist, liberal, but

But in an anarchist community, with the arts and sciences developed as they will be developed in our days, nothing of the kind could be seen. Of course there would be, as there are today, some who would be greater producers than others, and there would be some who would be greater consumers than others, but those most active in producing would also be most active in consuming. The equation is natural. Do you demand proof? Take one hundred workmen at random and you will find the greatest producers are the greatest consumers.

The human organism is supplied with certain precious implements the use of which is genuine pleasure. There are the arms, the hands, the heart, the brain—all made for use—and can you imagine a man voluntarily will let such precious tools rust? In the free state of nature with its marvels of industry and science where all calls to activity and joyous life, in such a state do you imagine a human being would seek for happiness in imbecile idleness? Nonsense. It would be impossible.

On the soil of true anarchy, of absolute freedom, there would be such diversity among the people—diversity of age, of sex and of tastes—that none would be without congenial society. Equality is not uniformity. That diversity of people and of each succeeding moment of time is just what makes all governments, all constitutions and all contracts destructive of liberty. How can you bind yourself for a year, for a day, for an hour, when in an hour, a day or a year you may think entirely different from the way you thought at the time of making the contract?

Under the conditions of radical anarchy there will be some women, as there will be some men, of more relative worth than others. There will be children and there will be old folks, but all, without distinction, will be none the less human beings and they should be equally free to move in the circles of their mutual attractions, free to produce and consume as they see fit, without any parental, marital or governmental authority, without any legal regulations to restrain or to hinder them.

prompted by the needs and desires of each individual. The sea of humanity needs no dikes. Give its tides full sweep and each day they will find their level.

Do I need, for example, one sun for myself, one river for myself, one forest for my own, or all the houses in all the streets for my own? Have I the right to become the proprietor of them to the exclusion of others, especially when I do not need them? If I have not that right, is it any more just for me to wish, as under the system of contracts, to measure to each one—according to his accidental ability to produce—just what proportion he should receive of all things; how much of the sun's rays he is entitled to, how many cubic feet of air and of water shall he allotted to him, or the extent of his promenades in the forests; what number or the parts of the houses he may occupy, what streets he may walk in and what streets he must keep out of?

With or without contract, will I consume more than is good for me? Will I take all of the sunlight, all of the air, all of the water? Will I monopolize all of the shade of the trees, all of the streets of the city, all of the houses or all of the rooms of the houses? And if I have a right to the productions of nature, such as the light and the air, have I not also a right to manufactured products, such as the street or the house? Of what use then is a contract that can add nothing to my liberty, but on the contrary most certainly will restrain it?

And as for production, will the activity of my nature be developed all the more by being restrained? It is absurd to assert such a thing. the so-called free workman even in the present state of society, produces more and does his work better than the negro slave. How would it be if he were really and universally free? His productive power would increase one-hundred fold.

But the idlers? you say. Idlers are produced by the abnormal conditions of society. That is to say, when idleness is held in honor and labor in contempt it is not surprising that men are reluctant to engage in labor which repays them in bitter fruit.

not libertarian, you want free exchange of cotton and candles and you seek to protect man against woman in the exchange of affectional human passion. You cry against the great barons of capital, and you would rebuild a proud barony of man on vassal-woman. Logician with misfit eyeglasses, you are unable to read the lessons of the present or the past; you can discern nothing that is elevated or at a distance or in the perspective of the future.

You should know that woman is the mover of man, as man is the mover of woman. There is not an idea in your deformed brain, no, nor in the brain of any other man, that was not given life by woman; not one voluntary motion of your muscles or of your intelligence but what its object has been to attract the attention of woman and to please her, even including that which seems the most contradictory, your insults. Everything beautiful that man has made, everything grand that man has produced, all the masterpieces of art and of industry, all the discoveries of science, the titanic steps which man has taken into the fields of the unknown, all conquests and all aspirations of man are duo to woman who imposes the tasks upon him as a queen of a tournament assigns a task to a knight and rewards him with a smile when he has accomplished it. All man's heroism, all his physical and moral valor comes from love. Without woman he would still crawl on his belly or on all fours and browse on herbs and roots. He would equal the ox in intelligence. He is superior to the beast only because woman has said, "Be so." It is her will that has created him and made him man instead of brute. It is to satisfy the supreme exigencies of the feminine soul that he had attempted sublime things.

See what woman has done for man, and then see what man has done for woman!

Alas! to please her lord and master it is not necessary for her to possess great intelligence and moral force. If she will only mimic the she monkey in antics and grimaces, hang a few bits of glassware to her neck and ears, dress herself in ridicu-

lous finery, pad her hips until she resembles a Hottentot Venus with the aid of whalebone and crinoline, if she knows how to handle a fan like a skimmer, or can make porridge or strum on the piano, that is all her Sultan demands of her, all that is necessary to bring joy to the masculine soul—the alpha and omega of his desires and aspirations. If she can do these things she is rewarded with a lace handkerchief.

She who has regarded such a role as shameful and has shown her good sense by finding beauty in worthiness and by her self-reliant conduct testified to her sane intelligence has been set upon and pitilessly stoned by the multitude of Proudhons, past and present, called a blue stocking and persecuted with imbecile sarcasm and forced to stifle her individuality. For the crowd of heartless and brainless men she has sinned by having too much heart and too much intelligence. They have thrown stones at her and rarely has she the good fortune to meet a man who will take her by the hand and say: “Woman, rise; you are worthy of love; you are worthy of liberty.”

No; what man wants—that is, what he who usurps the name of man wants—is not woman in all her physical and moral beauty, the woman of natural and artistic form, her face beaming with the aureole of grace, her heart sympathetic and tender, her thoughts enthusiastic, her soul enamored of poetic and humane ideals. No, that brainless booby, like a footman at a fair, wants a colored and beplumed wax figure. Like a glutton in an ecstasy before a butcher shop, he wants a quarter of veal garnished with lace.

Disgusted with the man she finds such an idiot, weary of him in whom she has sought in vain for sympathy of sentiment, history tells us—alas! I wish it were only a fable, a legend, a Bible story—the woman passes from the biped to the quadruped. Beast for beast. It is natural after all that she should permit herself to be seduced by a greater beast than herself. Then, at last, nature having endowed her with impulses and affections too robust to be extinguished by repression and ab-

stinence, she turns disgusted from humanity and seeks in temples of superstition, in the devotees’ aberrations of mind and impulse, the food for the passionate hunger of her nature. Failing to find the man of her dreams, she lavishes her affection on an imaginary god, and the priest has replaced the beast of a husband.

Ah! if there are so many abject females and so few real women, what is the cause of it? What have you to complain of Dandin-Proudhon? You wish it to be so.

I admit that you personally have fought valiantly for the revolution; you have gashed the marrow and the trunk of property and have made the noise of tumult resound afar. You have stripped off its husk and left it exposed to the gaze of the populace; you have shaken down like dead branches and leaves your powerless authoritarian antagonists and have shown the emptiness of the revamped Greek theories of the state socialists, your own included. You have drawn with you through the sinuous avenues of reform all the pack of appetites physical and moral. You have traveled the road and took the others with you. You are tired. You would like to rest, but the voice of logic urges you to follow up your revolutionary deductions and march onward, always onward, lest you be overtaken by those whom you have deluded.

Be then frankly an entire anarchist and not a quarter anarchist, an eighth anarchist, or one-sixteenth anarchist, as one is a one-fourth, one-eighth or one-sixteenth partner in trade. Go beyond the abolition of contract to the abolition not only of the sword and of capital, but also of property and of authority in all its forms. Then you will have arrived at the anarchist community; that is to say, the social state where each one is free to produce or consume according to his will or his fancy without controlling, or being controlled by any other person whatever; where the balance of production and consumption is established naturally, no longer by the restrictive laws and arbitrary force of others, but by the free exercise of industry