The Gates of Freedom

Voltairine de Cleyre

1891

"They have rights who dare maintain them." This is my text.

And the purpose of my lecture is threefold. First to state the facts concerning the actual status of woman in relation to society as a whole—what position she really holds in human economy. Not, mind you, what classes of men regard her, not how "she is considered by the law," not what she herself imagines, but the bald fact of what she is.

Second—to show upon what ground we demand certain "rights" in protest against conditions, which, however necessary they may have been in the past evolution of the race no longer satisfy the demands of a higher civilization.

And lastly—to point out the gates through which woman must pass to freedom.

What then is woman? Property! Since the days when Proudhon uttered his famous sentence, "Property is robbery" the word has had an ugly sound in the ears of those who aim to realize the ideal glory of humanity. And I have no doubt that there are those among you—men—whose hearts have outgrown your heads, whose aspirations rise higher than your inheritances, who clothe hard facts with sentimental fancies, as ivy clothes the ruin, some of you who will feel outraged at me that I should declare this ugly actuality—that woman is property.

But facts are facts and stubborn things; and it is better to face a fact, staring it in the teeth, than to shield your eyes until you run against it unaware. Certainly there is no one to whom this truth is more unpalatable than to me—a woman. I remember well the lingering indignation that I felt when I read in the first issue of a scientific quarterly, The Monist, an article on "The Material Relations of Sex," by no less a person than the noted evolutionist, Prof. E. D. Cope, proving the existence of property in woman beyond the possibility of cavil, and, what was worse, held up this condition of hers as an ideal in perpetuity, to cease following after which was for the race to virtually commit suicide.

It is very aggravating, (though perhaps I had better not admit it or the Copes will sneer "emotional sensibility—to be aggravated by a fact, womanish") in other words it is mildly annoying, after one has successfully disposed of a mumbling theologian, or an artful doctor of laws, to then have a scientific man appear upon the scene, and, with all the dispassionate gravity of intellect, proceed to prove that the theologian and the lawyer were right. The worst is, that while priest and law draw their arguments from faith and prejudice, the scientist always backs his up with facts. This was what most chagrined me in the article to which I refer. There is no denying Prof. Cope's facts, the only thing which is left is to dispute his conclusions.

What then were those facts? Learn, O you mothers, for what and to what you are bringing your daughters to the world, educating them to adorn themselves with all the graces of person, of intellect, and of morals! And learn what position it is you yourself hold, in this world which never tires of singing the glory of motherhood! Says Prof. Cope, (after speaking of the struggle of man against nature) "Woman, considered by herself, is subject to identical conditions. Her needs are the same, and her environments the same. But she is not so well endowed as man to supply the one or to meet the other. Her disabilities are of two kinds, physical and mental. The physical are: first, inferior muscular strength, and secondly child-bearing. The latter means more or less incompetence for active work at monthly periods, or several months of gestation and lactation, and some years care of children. The mental disabilities are: first, inferior power of mental co-ordination; and secondly greater emotional sensibility which more or less interferes with rational action." After expatiating upon her resultant inability to cope with man in the competitive struggle for existence, (to which expatiations I shall refer later on,) he proceeds: "But Nature has supplied a most effective remedy. Woman, not being of the same sex as man, supplies a necessity which is almost universal, so that she is placed if she exercise reasonable care, in a position better than that of man in relation to the struggle for existence. The antagonist of man, his fellowman, is eliminated from the list of the antagonists of woman, and that is an advantage which cannot be overestimated. Not only is man removed from the field as a competitor, but he becomes an active helper in resisting the forces of nature. More than this, he is willing, under the circumstances, to divide with her what he extracts from both man and nature. Were these the only benefits which woman derives from man they would constitute a sufficient reason for the usual preference she displays for his protection rather than for a life of independence. But she is herself possessed of a sex interest which is satisfied by such a relation. Not only this but her love of children constitutes a further inducement which is highly effective in bringing about her customary relations with man." … "The support and protection given to woman by man, is, then, clearly rendered as an equivalent for the services she renders him in the capacity of a wife. It is universally implied, if not distinctly stated in the contract between them, that she shall not be the wife of some other man, and that the children she bears shall be [illegible]. " (Emphasis mine.) I wish that every word of these two sentences might plough deep furrows where they fall upon your woman's hearts. I wish you to understand clearly their full significance, realizing what this scientist means by "your services as a wife." He has so worded his sentences as to leave no doubt that the marriage contract is an agreement of man to protect and support woman in return for the gratification of his sexual appetite, and the bearing of children for him, not for her.

What is it then to occupy this position, this enviable position, if we are to credit Prof. Cope, in which the "antagonist of man, his fellow-man is eliminated": this honorable position of wife to which the wise, wise editors of the silly correspondence columns of society journals continually point young girls as the grand desideratum of courtship; what is it to be a woman? To be property! To be sure, you are a little higher kind of property than the rest of man's effects; the chattel-slave was a little higher kind of property than the planter's horse. You supply a somewhat more "universal need" than carriage-driving or even corn-planting. Hence you are somewhat dearer property. Nevertheless you are treated with upon exactly the same basis as the rest of man's live stock. You are housed, fed, clothed, "protected," loved (for men pat even their dogs' heads at times) in return for—what? The superintendence of Man's home, and the definite paternity, care and education of Man's children.

Young girls! If any one of you is contemplating marriage remember that is what the contract means. The sale of the control of your person in return for "protection and support." The sad part of it is, the majority of women think it is all right. I have heard it from the lips of young girls, who, unwitting the meaning of their own words, talked earnestly of disposing of themselves to the individual most likely to house and clothe and protect them best. I have heard well-educated, bright, intelligent girls express themselves complacently concerning the fact that they were of no earthly use in the world save to adorn the display counters of the matrimonial market, where he who came to purchase might choose them. And I have turned away in disgust that they could be content to thus sacrifice their individuality to, as Prof. Cope says, display "her usual preference for man's protection rather than for a life of independence," turned from them in contempt only to go among the self-supporting working girls and find the same old sickening story. These regard with envy their idle sisters, as occupying the true position of unmarried women; and they, themselves, look forward to the same ultimatum; the day when they will no longer compete in the struggle for an independent livelihood, but be wedded, and supported, and protected, and bear children, for some man!

Worse than this prattle of girls, I have heard it from the lips of young married women whose dream of love has changed to ashes in a few short months; I have heard them helplessly accept the burden, so much heavier than they had dreamed, and despairingly say: "It is the lot of women. I am housed, fed, clothed, and protected. It was for this I surrendered the control of myself; and if my husband wishes me to have children I must bear them." "Ah!" said one woman to me, a woman who, though married but five years, had already borne three children, "it seems to me when my husband approaches me as if my heart would turn to stone. But I suppose I can do my duty by him. "Her duty! Saddest of all, I have heard from the lips of white haired grandmothers who had gone down into the cold winter of woman's sacrificial existence, this same old lie, that the burden of indignity, and misery, and very martyrdom which Man puts upon this chattel which he houses, clothes, feeds and protects, is inevitable; and there is nothing for her to do but bear it—patiently. It is needless to repeat the justifications, the flimsy tinsellings, with which men cover up the facts concerning woman's position in relation to themselves. Even Prof. Cope degrades the intellect of his readers by assuring them that it is a much-to-be-coveted position, after distinctly proving Property in Woman. When those individuals who wish to protect women have dressed the truth in draperous adjectives of superlative falsity, such as "too high, too pure, too ethereal, too angelic," etc., ad nauseam, it is, to one who looks with clear eyes at this diaphanous vision which they would have us believe the image of ourselves, far too much like a stage angel, rising, not upon wings, but on a trap.

I say right here, candidly, that as a class I have nothing to hope from men.* No tyrant ever renounced his tyranny until he had to. If history teaches us anything it teaches this. Therefore my hope lies in creating rebellion in the breasts of women. And when I am discouraged it is never because of the attitude of men, since that is always to be counted upon; but because of the apathy, the passivity, the can't-help-it-ness, or the religious slavishness of my own sex. I say religious slavishness because, with a very large percentage of women, the idea of her "lawful subjection" to man is a profound religious conviction, the result of a superfine theological deduction strong along through the Scriptures from Genesis to the Epistles beginning with "Unto the woman He said, I will greatly multiply thy sorrows and thy conception; in sorrow shalt thou bring forth children; and thy desire shall be to thy husband and he shall rule over thee"; and concluding with, "Let the woman learn in silence with due submission, for the man is the head of the woman even

as Christ is the head of the Church." It is true that the major portion of Christian women, who believe the Bible, but don't read it, know very little of those sentences; either they have never heard them, or, having heard, have simply lent to their reading the mechanical service of their ears, letting the sounds slide out as they slid in. Nevertheless this curse ascribed to Jehovah, and this command recorded by Paul, sank deep into woman ages ago—deep into her unconscious nature; that part of her which lies below the domain of intellect, but which in its dark, unknown soil ripens the germs of all her action. Submission has become a part of woman's moral instinct. It is characteristic of woman, that what she believes, she lives; it becomes her. In this way the opinions of Messrs. the Gods, sanctified by much prayer, burning of tapers and smoking of incense, have made the ideal of wifehood uncomplaining slavery. Now why should it be otherwise? If the Law sanctions, and Religion sanctifies, and our ancestors were satisfied, and a large portion of humanity is still satisfied with this condition of affairs, why do we complain? This brings us to the second consideration, viz.: upon what grounds is our protest offered? And in answering the question I appeal from Prof. Cope to Sociology. Now the first decision of Sociology is, that the very fact that a question is being agitated, the very fact that any considerable number of individuals, members of a class, or race, or sex, are, in popular vernacular, "kicking" about something, protesting against class, or race, or sex condition, is proof that the time for change is ripening. It is proof that this especial form of social growth is no longer adapted to the environment; that through many throes of death and birth the old idea of justice is dying, and the new is being born. All progress is marked by this transition from content to discontent, from satisfaction to pain, that is to say, from unconsciousness to consciousness.

Now justice is progressive! It does not follow that justice of one age is justice of the next. On the contrary the burden which our ancestors bore in no wise fits our shoulders; yet that is not to say it did not fit theirs. If Humanity, in its upward course must needs pass through the pack mule stage of development, that is no reason to curse it on the one hand, nor insist that the race shall continue as pack mules on the other. I insist on this point of the progressiveness of justice, first because I do not wish you to think me a metaphysical dreamer, holding to the exploded theory that "rights" are positive, unalterable, indefinite somethings passed down from one generation to another after the fashion of an entailed estate, and come into existence in some mysterious manner at the exact moment that humanity emerges from apedom. It would be quite too difficult a matter to settle on the emerging point. I insist on the progressiveness of justice, because, however fierce my denunciation of present injustice may be, I none the less recognize it to have been the justice of the past, the highest possible condition so long as the aspirations of the general mind rose no farther—a part of invincible Necessity. And, last, I need the admission of the progressiveness of justice in order to explain my text, and prove my assertion that, however necessary the slavery of woman may have been, it is no longer in accord with the ideals of our present civilization.

In what consists the progress of justice?

Sociology, putting its finger upon the movements of man in the past, viewing him in all the various stages of his social development, as the naturalist examines the petrifications of rocks and traces back the lineage of a country's flora or fauna, deduces from its carefully gathered facts this conclusion: Social progress consists in a constantly widening sphere of activity to individuals, and, of necessity, a corresponding diminution of the power of one individual, or set of individuals over others. That is, Sociology confirms what '93 proclaimed; Science applauds the Red Flag, and carries as its banner the motto of the Commune: Liberty, Equality, Fraternity.

Gradually, one after another, various forms of slavery, such as feudalism, chattelism, monarchism, have disappeared, or are disappearing. (Between you and me I think Republicanism is going along with them). Gradually Destiny, God, Law, Adaptation, whatever you choose to call this glorious fact, has "put down the mighty from their seat, and exalted them of low degree." Yet, through it all, every inch of the ground has been disputed, and not one iota yielded up until those, upon whom had come the vision of greater liberty, a fore taste of "rights," had "dared maintain them," and through great struggle, risen to the dignity of a higher order of existence. It is in contemplating this struggle that we, who cry for the abolition of woman's slavery, receive our inspiration. It is in remembering that always before the coming of a "new dispensation" voices must cry in the wilderness, birds beat broken wings before the storm, that we take up our task, certain that where we lead or are driven "by the might of the inward must," others will follow. It is in realizing the vastness of humanity, the sublimity of the new ideal, the insignificance of "self," that we forget pain in our endeavor to arouse this slumbering soul, that it may conceive its rights and dare maintain them.

But to the application of the deduction of Sociology, we say, if social progress consists in a constant tendency towards the equalization of the liberties of the social units, then the demands of progress are not satisfied so long as half society, Woman, is in subjection. If men are enjoying all their own "rights" and some of ours as well, that is not equality—that is privilege and spoliation. That is to say, the old conception of justice must give place to a new one, because Woman through a dimly roused consciousness, is beginning to feel her servitude; that there is a requisite acknowledgement to be won from her master before he is put down and she exalted to—Equality. This acknowledgement is, the freedom to control her own person.

You can have no free, or just, or equal society, nor anything approaching it, so long as womanhood is bought, sold, housed, clothed, fed, and protected, as a chattel. We upon whom the gray light has dawned, whose perceptions are no longer locked in the dull sleep of base content, we point you to our weary sisters who week after week, month after month, till years have dragged away, rise early in the morning to go through the discouraging round of petty duties which must be done just so often, every day, and all day long—often borrowing from the night the hours of sleep that she may finish some little thing the value of which will never be known, never even counted—less than a cipher. We point you to her sitting tonight perhaps, with folded hands at last, sitting alone by the firelight, after the long harassing day of little tortures, that wear the soul as pin-points gingerly pressed against the flesh wear the body, trying in the silence, to learn, (not from her husband—he's at the lodge) but from her own poor unknown soul, this helpless chrysalis, which faintly stirs within her. Trying to learn if this is a fair bargain, a just thing, a righteous thing, that she should give the labor of her hands all these years, continually put in the background all her own desires and wait, wait, wait—till, from long denial, aspiration dies, and she is left an uncomplaining clod of clay, vested with the awful patience of despair. Sitting there, in the light of the fire, looking forward to this utter desolation of spirit, which is creeping upon her as surely as time is creeping upon eternity; looking forward to the time when her husband shall have grown so far beyond her intellectually that he will pity her—Good God! pity her, at the same time that her company is irksome to him because of her "inferior powers of mental co-ordination," sitting there in her dumb sorrow, bleeding to death inwardly, silently asking herself, "Is this justice? Is it equality?" Perhaps then she remembers the small beds up stairs with their glowing, health kissed sleepers, (perhaps a smile flits over her face as she dreams, followed by a spasm of reproach that she should, even by a thought, begrudge them the life, the strength they

have taken from her—those beloved children.) But after that comes the bitter remembrance, they are not my children—they are his. That, too, was part of the contract, that I should bear children for him, care and educate them for him. It was what I was to do in return for food, clothing, shelter and protection. They are not my children, any more than the calf men sell for veal, belongs to the cow.

After all—did she want them? When they were born, well, yes—she would not have them die. But before that, would she have chosen, voluntarily, to go through these years of martyrdom? Even for them? So many and so close together that to no one could she give the care requisite to really develop its nature? Terrible question! And the pang that goes with it, quivering outward to a visible shudder, till she shades her face from the firelight! The thought: "to which of them, unconscious, sleeping, trusting, am I the traitor? To the first and second in cheating them of their higher training by dividing my care with the fifth or sixth; or the fifth and sixth in deeming their existence a burden. Anyway, how could he decide what it was possible for me to do. How?" And so the bitter reverie goes on, concluded, no doubt, by a self-accusing start when she hears her husband's hand upon the latch, and remembers that she has not put his slippers by the fire.

We point you to this picture because it is not an extreme case. We do not show you the awful slavery of wifehood among the bitterly poor; we give no overdrawn example of a large family, no instance of horrible cruelty such as would be easy to give, such as our divorce courts teem with, but which it is a penitentiary offense to discuss in plain terms in a liberal paper. We give only the pathetic facts of the ordinary woman's life; and we say the social contract between man and woman is an unjust, unfair, unrighteous contract—a contract which does not square with the law of equal freedom. We say this is the reason why there should be a radical change in the present relation of the sexes; and this brings us to the discussion of what most properly comes under the title of the lecture, The Gates of Freedom.

Clearly, if this contract which stipulates that there shall be protection and support from man in return for child bearing, rearing, and nursing, and home-making on the part of woman, if this contract is to be annulled, and woman to become a free individual, then certainly she must be self-sustaining; that is to say, become an industrial competitor with man. "But," says Prof. Cope: "It is self-evident that any system which looks to a career for woman independent of man, such as man pursues, is abnormal and injurious to her interest." For, "It is evident that were woman of the same sex as man, that is, were she simply another kind of man, she would soon be eliminated from the earth under the operation of the ordinary law of the survival of the fittest. This need not be through any agencies different from those now actually in operation among men under the ordinary circumstances of peaceful trade. And such is often the actual history of male men who possess marked feminine characteristics. It does not follow from this, that some women might not sustain themselves apart from men, in agriculture, trade, and the professions. This is especially possible where the struggle is not very severe; but in the cases which exist few are really independent of male assistance, which has furnished the capital, either of cleared land or money or as an appointing power. The general result, as above stated, is self-evident from the facts." (Italics mine.)

I know there is a large class of sentimental reformers who hope to "enact" universal harmony, repeal the law of centrifugal force, and make facts to suit theories, to whom the mention of the word competition is like "flaunting a red flag" etc., and whose comprehension of the woman question is about as deep as their understanding of socialism; I know these persons will be ready to supplement the position of Prof. Cope with a scheme of State organization which they call co-

operation, whose motto instead of being equal liberty is equal slavery, and one of whose intents is to make woman dependent upon "the State" instead of upon a husband. Their argument is very specious. It runs like this: One of the most important and necessary services is rendered to the State by woman, viz: race-reproduction. Every mother therefore deserves the support and protection of the State. O tempora! O mores! Proteus reappears! Again to be protected and supported! And her children to belong to—whom? The State!

With all due respect to the intentions of my sentimental friends, let me say that any scheme which proposes to pay women for being mothers, is a degrading thing to her; and I care not whether it comes from Prof. Cope or Edward Bellamy. We have declared war—a few of us—and we accept no such treaty; we will be satisfied with nothing less than that maternity shall be put beyond the necessity of price-dependence. This means that we intend to be industrially independent; that we consider ourselves perfectly able to compete with men in a free field, and when our battle is won, as won it will be some day though none of us will live to see it, the body of woman will be her own, and husbands must meet their wives on the proud footing of equality.

But Prof. Cope says that in that case we shall die off the face of the earth under the operation of the law of the survival of the fittest, we are an inferior kind of beings who must necessarily go to the wall in the fierce competition for the means of existence; our services would not be in demand; we should be continually out of work! How ill squares this pronunciamento of the scientist with the laboring-man's protest: "The women are taking our places." Haven't you heard it? Haven't you heard how in the New England factories, one after another the male weavers have disappeared and the "women have taken their places." Haven't you heard how in the shoe factories of Philadelphia and New York and Boston shoe-workers are out of employment because in the fierce competition for places women have learned to work cheaper and live cheaper than men. I'm not defending this suicide of the giant Labor which takes place when the people combat each other for the chance to serve masters. But I am taking Prof. Cope on his own ground, and showing that even were this present horrible throttling of free competition by monopoly to go on, this "cut-throat competition" of handicapped laborers, there is quite as much likelihood that "men would die off the face of the earth" as women. I have mentioned textile manufactures and shoe-making; add to this hatting, tailoring, shirt-making, glove-making, book-binding, thread manufacture, in which the number of women out-number the men three to one (and it would be easy to make the list longer); and you will perceive that in these cases under the law of the survival of the fittest, men have been obliged to succumb. Do you tell me "man furnished the capital?" Bless my soul, why don't you say that of the men whose places they took! No! "Man" didn't furnish the capital. But certain individual men, by means of a masculinely instituted law, have stolen the capital which both men and women produced. I don't think we owe them any particular acknowledgement of inferiority on that account; unless, perhaps, an inferiority of rascality.

Inferior! Yes I am willing to admit that in certain things we are inferior to men. Also in certain things, men are inferior to crocodiles. For instance, their teeth are not as long and savage; their mouths are hardly as capacious. The time was when the mastodon trod through might geologic forests, king of the earth, the fittest to survive. The forests are gone, the environment is altered, the mastodon has disappeared. In strength he was superior to man; but the demand for strength gave way before the development of brain. The age of the dominion of muscular force is past; in the language of Oliver Schreiner, "the age of the dominion of Nervous Force, has cut the band of Inevitable Necessity with the knife of Mechanical Invention." It doesn't require a great body nor a powerful arm in order to engage in the productive labor of the day. No terrible amount

of power is needed to press an electric button, or turn a screw. I have seen a most splendidly developed muscular negro breaking cobble stones at $1 per day, while a white-handed delicate girl was operating a typewriter at $1,000 a year. I do not pretend to say that these rewards were just; but that if you will instance muscular strength I must show that the greatest rewards of your own economic system are not for muscular strength. Dexterity and skill are the requirements of the age. It is often urged, as proof of woman's inferiority, that she is not able to "bear arms. I don't think any of us feel very bad about this. I think the majority of enlightened women regard war as a barbarism, and the phrase "bearing arms" a sinister satire on modern christianity. Nevertheless if it comes to that Gens. Grant and Sherman could have learned a lot from Sophia Perovskai. The dreadful science of modern warfare teaches that there too, it is skill, not numbers, not muscular strength, which counts. No longer the forced marches, the masses of foot and horse, the unwieldy movements of a thousand, or a hundred thousand men. No! A single figure in the darkness, a flash, a blast—and the work of an army is done! Was the figure man or woman?

Such is the progress of mechanics and chemistry, and with their further development we may look for a race of people constantly degenerating in muscles and strengthening in nervous power. So the first objection is invalid. The second is that woman labors under an irremedial physical disadvantage in that she must bear and train children.

Regarding the periodical "unfitness of woman for active work," I hardly think it worth while noticing. The thousands upon thousands of actively employed women toiling ten hours a day year in and year out in our factories and shops disprove that. It is the exception, not the rule, that there is any discontinuance of work on that account. Regarding the bearing of children, while we have not sufficient evidence to prove that it can ever be a purely painless affair, universally speaking, yet recent experiments in sanitary science go to prove that a moderate amount of exertion during gestation is not only uninjurious, but rather beneficial; and by far the greater part of the suffering incident to maternity is due to ignorance, improper diet, improper dress, uncongenial surroundings and sexual slavery to a husband. Yet, withal, this physical disability, even as it is, need not prove the perpetual barrier to independence which Prof. Cope would make of it. For in the future society, the future, which even while we speak is beginning to shape and glow among the mists that seethe up from the cauldron of change, in the future society the price of independence, either for man or woman, will not be what it is today. In the future society, under the operation of the same inexorable law which scientists constantly invoke, the isolated home and its entire economy will have passed away. Division of Labor and Socialism will have entered the household. Not only will there be economy of time, labor, and adaptability so far as washing, ironing, cooking, sweeping, dusting, sewing, patching, darning and dish-washing is concerned, but it will also be learned that not every woman should give her energy to a species of hen-with-one-chicken raising of a child because she happens to be its mother. It will be learned that while one woman may be a very good mother, it does not follow that she is a good nurse or good teacher; that there can be no greater curse to a child than to take it for granted that because a certain man and woman were its progenitors, that therefore it must submit to their method of nursing, training and education no matter how utterly incompetent they may be. I am a perfect rebel to this idea. I know that it is quite possible to love one's parents, even to revere them; and yet be so thoroughly incompatible with them that both love and reverence may be worn out by the constant friction of tendency and repression. I believe that more children are ruined by their fathers' and mothers' misunderstandings and general incapability than would be safe to enumerate. And I look forward to the time when the selfishness and the narrowness engendered

by the individual home and individual training, the freaks of character born of this blundering of incongruous natures upon one another, as a day golden in the skies of children no less than women.

What do I mean? The socialistic nursery where women and men who succeed in reaching the natures of children, who recognize their task to be one worth learning well, making a specialty of, not an addenda to some other life work, will be employed as teachers are employed in colleges. No one today doubts that for by far the largest portion of our children, the educational institution is a much more serviceable instrument than a private tutor. No one imagines any more that every mother should teach "reading, writing, and arithmetic," to her children. That work has gone into more competent hands. So it will be with the nursery.

Is this shocking? Yet it is true that I mean just this—an economy of mothers. It is true that I believe no more pitiable waste of life attends our present social system than the unnecessary and mischievous waste of child-nurses! Anyhow, whether it is shocking or not, whether I advocate it or don't, this very thing is already growing up in your cities. I know of more than fifty cases where women have found it better to enter the lists of industrial competition, and engage for their young babies the care of others by nature much better fitted for the task. And these cases I know from no special investigation on my part. They came under my notice in my daily life in a large city.

Thus Socialism disposes of the physical bars to independence. We are now to consider the mental disabilities. These are, says Prof. Cope, "first, inferior powers of mental co-ordination, and second greater emotional sensibility which more or less interferes with rational action." I admit these things. But given equal opportunity, and the same environment which developed the present intellectual superiority of man will soon develop the intellectual equality of woman. We are inferior in these things, because we have never had the chance to be equal. See! My left hand is less dexterous than my right. Why?

All my life long I have been doing most things with my right hand. I button shoes with the left; in that particular work it is the more cunning of the two. So with men and women. Men are exceedingly awkward about those things to which they are not accustomed; so are we. But as the left hand may grow to do the same things that the right does, so we too shall learn, as soon as opportunity is free and we have had time to adapt ourselves to the conditions of self-dependence. Mind you, I never expect men to give us liberty. No, Women, we are not worth it, until we take it.

How shall we take it? By the ballot? A fillip for your paper rag! The ballot hasn't made men free, and it won't make us free.

By advocating the destruction of any and every barrier, the abolition of every law whereby the sources of wealth are held out of use;—in other words by advocating the complete liberation of land and capital. By holding in view the ideal of a society so organized that two hours labor per day would be more than sufficient for the needs of the day. By insisting on a new code of ethics founded on the law of equal freedom; a code recognizing the complete individuality of woman. By making rebels wherever we can. By ourselves living our beliefs. "Propaganda by the deed" is the favorite expression of the revolutionist. We are revolutionists. And we shall use propaganda by speech, deed, and most of all, life—being what we teach.

My liberty is dearer to me than any slavery of silk. My individuality is worth all the opprobrious epithets, all the gall and wormwood, it has ever cost to maintain it; and not because it is I, but because of the truth which I live.

O Woman! When I think of all the ages you have waited—waited! When I think how man has asked of you everything, every desire born of his selfishness, accepted of you every sacrifice, taken from you ruthlessly even your few dear hours of peace, as the Rich, who have appropriated it all, strike from his hand the Beggar's crust, for pastime; when I remember how he has studied and achieved at your expense, while you drudged patiently to win time for him, till all your hopes lay white, and still, and stiff, within your breast; when I remember the arid, barren, unchanging days that come afterward—and then—death in the desert! —when I remember it all, and think of it all, it seems as if my heart had turned to tears, and they—were frozen.

And then, in my dreams, I see the figure of a giantess, a lonely figure out in the desolate prairie with nothing over her but the gray sky, and no light upon her face but the chill pallor of the morning. And I see her looking upward and whispering: "How broad it is! It is cold and dark and frowning; but it is broad—and high!" Such will be your figure, O Woman, such your words in the day of your emancipation. In the day when you break from your cell, this warmed, round cell, whose horizon- wall is your children's life, whose light is your husband's eyes, whose zenith is your husband's smile. Better the pitiless gray of the clouds than the white ceiling of a prison; better the loneliness of the prairie than the caress of a slave-born child; better the cold biting of the wind than a Master's kiss. "Better the war of freedom than the peace of slavery."

The Anarchist Library
Anti-Copyright



Voltairine de Cleyre
The Gates of Freedom
1891

Retrieved on March 8, 2025 from https://www.libertarian-labyrinth.org/the-sex-question/voltairine-de-cleyre-the-gates-of-freedom-1891/
Address delivered before the Liberal Convention at Topeka, Kan., March 15, ‘89‘.

theanarchistlibrary.org