

The Position of Women.

A NEW VIEW OF THE QUESTION: WOMAN AND ECONOMICS.*

ONE of the most delightful things in the world is to come suddenly upon a book which not only interests, not only enthralls, but which, by opening up an entirely new line of thought, gives rise in the brain to endless reflection, endless speculation.

This is an effect which the book now before us may fairly claim to produce upon the mind of every thoughtful woman. Dissent you may from many of its details, you may consider the arguments not sufficiently guarded, the suggestions for reform somewhat dubious, but you cannot escape from the conclusion that the author has formulated for the first time, a position which the present age will have to face, and to work out for itself.

Very briefly, the argument of the book is as follows:

1. Woman is—for the purposes of argument—entirely dependent for her support upon the male of her species.

2. The genus homo is the only order of animal in which this state of things obtains, and is encouraged, from generation to generation, the result being an extreme specialization of the female to sex uses.

3. This extreme specialization, by emphasizing the sex attributes of woman unduly, and by depriving her of all means of expression except through sex, is bad for the race in every respect.

Now, that these contentions are, broadly speaking, true, few thoughtful women will be found to deny. Some among us of course there now are who are wage earners in the fullest sense, and who, having our own independence, fail to realize fully the extent to which the sex as a whole is in the position of economic dependence here treated. But to most of us, the thing, as a whole, will be patent. The economic position of woman is actually dependent upon the males with whom she is associated. The woman whose father can leave her a fortune, the woman who can succeed in attracting a rich husband—these are the women who are economically best provided for—not the ablest women, nor those who are best fitted to be the mothers of a strong, healthy race.

That the economic relation of women should be wholly dependent upon the sex relation, is, no doubt, a great evil. It is, perhaps, felt with greater force in England and America than anywhere else, since in these countries it is largely the fashion to hand over daughters to any man who can show himself able to keep them, without there being any question of providing them with dowries. In France, and other continental countries, where the father's consideration for his daughter's dignity has made the system of "dot" customary, the result is most unfavourable to race development, since it causes an enormous amount of artificial prevention of reproduction; the parents dare not bring into the world daughters for whom they cannot provide.

Mrs. Stetson's arguments from animals are most interesting and suggestive. The racing mare is an admirable mother, perfectly formed, having an adequate supply of milk for the sustenance of her young; the fact of her being as valuable for racing

purposes or driving purposes as the male of her species, has not in the least militated against her due performance of sex functions.

The author freely admits the functional difference between male and female; she in no sense argues that there ought to be no distinction; but she insists that the ordinary woman is over-sexed—as much over-sexed as the milch cow; and she has much right on her side.

"Physically, woman belongs to a tall, vigorous, beautiful animal species capable of great and varied exertion. In every race and time when she has opportunity for racial activity, she develops accordingly, and is no less a woman for being a healthy human creature. In every race and time where she is denied this opportunity—and few indeed have been her years of freedom—she has developed in the lines of action to which she was confined; and those were always lines of sex activity. In consequence, the body of woman, speaking in the largest generalization, manifests sex-distinction predominantly A 'feminine hand' or a 'feminine foot' is distinguishable anywhere. 'We do not hear of a 'feminine paw' or a 'feminine hoof.' 'A hand is an organ of prehension, a foot an organ of locomotion: they are not secondary sex-characteristics."

But when Mrs. Stetson goes on to argue, from such exceptional insect developments as the spider and the queen bee, that the male was originally a "quantité négligeable," and has been raised to his present position through his mother's love, we feel that her biological grounds are somewhat weak.

Moreover, she has failed duly to guard some of her assertions, so as to leave room for the derision of the possible unbeliever.

"In no other animal species is the sex-relation for sale," cries she. For just half a moment this sounds a terrible indictment; but in a flash the rational person remembers that in no other animal species is anything whatever for sale; because the idea of paying a price for what is of intrinsic value is exclusively a human idea.

Moreover, in certain passages, she seems to contradict herself. On page 82, she seems to think that, because individual kings and priests are bad, it is perfectly logical to argue that kingship and priesthood are in themselves bad; but on page 108 she is very severe upon those celibates who because they saw the evils of lust, considered that there was something intrinsically wrong and indecent in the sex-relation.

All that she has to say about the attitude, into which our social fabric forces the unmarried girl, is most suggestive; and what she says of reaction could hardly be better put.

"So sharp is the reaction from this unlovely yoke that there is a limited field to-day wherein women choose not to marry, preferring what they call 'their independence'—a new-born, hard-won, dear-bought independence. That any living woman should prefer it to home and husband, to love and motherhood, throws a fierce light upon what women must have suffered for lack of freedom before. This tendency need not be feared, however. It is merely a reaction, and a most natural one."

Special attention is also drawn to the vivid words about the attitude of good mothers towards their young daughters who are about to marry. These will be found upon page 85.

It is when passing from the critical to the constructive portion of her book that some of us will not find it possible to follow the voice of this new teacher. Admittedly, the difficulty of the constructive reformer is the great difficulty, and frankly does Mrs. Stetson confess it.

* By Charlotte Perkins Stetson. London: Putnam and Sons.

[previous page](#)

[next page](#)