

WOMAN SUFFRAGE AND MARRIAGE

The editorial quoted from the Cincinnati Gazette in the Woman's Journal of July 19, under the above caption, while being exasperatingly absurd, both in its assumptions and inferences, contains a grain of truth which makes it worthy the serious consideration of all interested in the elevation of woman. The argument of the article may be digested into a syllogism somewhat like this:

Major premise. The relationship of marriage is necessarily one of subjection (slavery) on the part of the wife, and authority on the part of the husband.

Minor premise. Woman Suffrage would destroy such subjection, by placing the wife on an equality with her husband.

Conclusion. Woman Suffrage would annul the marriage relation. Granting the Major premise, the rest logically follows. It is precisely here that we join issue with the writer of the article in question, and all of like mind. Is woman's position one of equality with man, or subjection to him? This is the question at issue between woman suffragists and their opponents, and has been ever since the subject was first agitated. No one among us has ever tried to "shove by" this issue, or put it out of sight. That has been left for our opponents to do; and most of them have had the shrewdness and good policy to do it. Have they not almost universally ignored the existence of any such issue of equality or subordination—ridiculed it, laughed it to scorn, assuring us that woman's position is even superior, her work higher than man's; that she is respected, revered, deferred to; that, in fact, she is in her "present sphere" the superior of man, who is her humble menial, doing all the heavy work and the dirty work, and giving her the perquisites; that she is a queen, whose realm is home, etc. etc., ad infinitum? But, now and then, the horns and hoofs will stick out from behind the angelic raiment, and the editor of the Cincinnati Gazette affords us a good view of them when he makes bold to declare the issue, as the advocates for woman's enfranchisement have always held it, and to strike for the subordination of woman as against her freedom; or "independence," as he calls it. He assumes that marriage and equality are utterly incompatible; that where marriage exists, one—and that one the woman—must be the slave of the other. Of course, under such circumstances she cannot be made his equal before the law. Woman Suffragists, on the other hand, claim that marriage is a union of equals, and that, as such, only can its highest results be attained; that the subordination of woman is a relic of barbarism which, as civilization advances, gradually disappears; and that the more advanced the civilization the more perfect the equality. Undoubtedly it is very trying to the natural man to have his wife disagree with him, either in politics or religion; but we hold that this affords no occasion for sundering the marriage tie, nor even for the indignant and outraged husband forcing his opinion upon his Wife at the point of either bayonet or ballot; but rather gives opportunity for the cultivation of a broader charity, a larger liberality, and a sweeter and more generous nature.

The editor of the Gazette speaks of the "law of nature," which, he says, "the common law only follows." If he will take the trouble to investigate the subject he will find that the "law of nature" and

the “common law” are by no means synonymous. “The law of nature,” according to Blackstone, is “the will of the maker;” and is “founded in those relations of justice, that existed in the nature of things antecedent to any positive precept.... Such, among others, are these principles; that we should live honestly, should hurt nobody, and should render to every one his due; to which three precepts, Justinian has reduced the whole doctrine of law. ... In a state of nature no one is subject to another.”

Common law, on the other hand, denotes simply the unwritten law of England (and America) founded on immemorial usage; custom, so long continued as to have the force of law. This, it will readily be seen, may be quite a different thing from the “law of nature” as above defined—varying as widely from it, indeed, as human practice varies from the abstract principles of justice. It is true that the common law of England did sanction the subjection of the wife to the husband—that law being derived from custom formed many centuries ago, among the primitive Britons, when they were but little above the brute creation, and long before Christianity or civilization had dawned upon them. As humanity has progressed, this common law has been modified by statute law, till now, but little comparatively, of its more odious features remain. It requires little study by a candid mind, of the issue between subordination and equality before making a choice on the side of equality; and that choice, as the editor of the Gazette justly asserts, is the choice of Woman Suffrage, and equality before the law. On the one hand is subordination, developing brutality and selfish egotism in the man, and artfulness and hypocrisy, or else frivolity and imbecility, in the woman; on the other, equality of the sexes, developing the noblest traits in the characters of both man and woman. Can a Christian community hesitate long between the two?

As I write, brave words come to me, through the Christian Union on this very point, illustrating so clearly the idea just formed that I cannot resist the temptation to transcribe the closing paragraphs:

These, (alluding to the Walworth tragedy, the Gillem wife murder, and similar atrocities, through which the demoralization of society, in consequence of the pernicious theory of the subjection of woman, is made manifest, the editor says) are not pleasant pictures; but it is only in their concrete form that the bad tendencies of society arrest the general mind. The one hope of diminishing crime is to reform those false modes of thought which generate crime. No one of these is more dangerous than the notion of man’s ownership of woman, and of woman’s accountability to man. It brutalizes the lower classes from end to end. Its consequences touch unborn children and keep the ranks of rogues and paupers full. It makes the men of the upper classes tyrannous and selfish; the women, silly, exacting, frivolous and weak. It leads to crimes of sensuality and violence, and sets the code of honor above the law of the land. Half the social questions that vex our souls will be answered when the world concedes that a woman is a normal, responsible, individual human being, as a man is a normal, responsible, individual; that she must be the protector of her own honor, the judge, of her own duty, the keeper of her own conscience, answerable only to the law and to Heaven. There will be a lofty observance of marriage, a noble race of children, only when the man and the woman are intelligent equals and friends. And in that day the world will be ashamed to remember through how many centuries it ranged men into a mock order of devotees and women into a sentimental priesthood.

The above is an extract from "Heaven's Last Best Gift;" editorial in Christian Union of Aug. 6, 1873. The whole article is worthy of reproduction for the healthy sentiments inculcated. Shall we have slavery in the family, and inequality before the law; or freedom, and impartial suffrage ? That is the alternative.

Lavinia Goodell. Janesville, Wis. August. 12.