

# *The Woman Question*

by

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# The Woman Question

By STEPHEN LEACOCK

I was sitting the other day in what is called the Peacock Alley of one of our leading hotels, drinking tea with another thing like myself, a man. At the next table were a group of Superior Beings in silk, talking. I couldn't help overhearing what they said,—at least not when I held my head a little sideways.



They were speaking of the war.

“There wouldn't have been any war,” said one, “if women were allowed to vote.”

“No, indeed,” chorused all the others.

The woman who had spoken looked about her defiantly. She wore spectacles and was of the type that we men used to call, in days when we still retained a little courage, an Awful Woman.

“When women have the vote,” she went on, “there will be no more war. The women will forbid it.”

She gazed about her angrily. She evidently wanted to be heard. My friend and I hid ourselves behind a little fern and trembled.

But we listened. We were hoping that the Awful Woman would explain how war would be ended. She didn't. She went on to explain instead that when women have the vote there will be no more poverty, no disease, no germs, no cigarette smoking and nothing to drink but water.

It seemed a gloomy world.

“Come,” whispered my friend, “this is no place for us. Let us go to the bar.”

“No,” I said, “leave me. I am going to write an article on the Woman Question. The time has come when it has got to be taken up and solved.”

So I set myself to write it.

**T**he woman problem may be stated somewhat after this fashion. The great majority of the women of to-day find themselves without any means of support of their own. I refer of course to the civilized white women. The gay savage in her jungle, attired in a cocoanut leaf, armed with a club and adorned with the neck of a soda water bottle, is all right. Trouble hasn't reached her yet. Like all savages, she has a far better time,—more varied, more interesting, more worthy of a human being,—than falls to the lot of the rank and file of civilized men and women. Very few of us recognize this great truth. We have a mean little vanity over our civilization. We are touchy about it. We do not realize that so far we have done little but increase the burden of work and multiply the means of death. But for the hope of better things to come, our civilization would not seem worth while.

But this is a digression. Let us go back. The great majority of women have no means of support of their own. This is true also of men. But the men can acquire means of support. They can hire themselves out and work. Better still, by the industrious process of intrigue rightly called busyness, or business, they may presently get hold of enough of other people's things to live without working. Or again, men can, with a fair prospect of success, enter the criminal class, either in its lower ranks as a house breaker, or in its upper ranks, through politics. Take it all in all a man has a certain chance to get along in life.



A woman, on the other hand, has little or none. The world's work is open to her, but she cannot do it. She lacks the physical strength for laying bricks or digging coal. If put to work on a steel beam a hundred feet above the ground, she would fall off. For the pursuit of business her head is all wrong. Figures confuse her. She lacks sustained attention and in point of morals the average woman is, even for business, too crooked.

This last point is one that will merit a little emphasis. Men are queer creatures. They are able to set up a code of rules or a standard, often quite an artificial one, and stick to it. They have acquired the art of playing the game. Eleven men can put on white flannel trousers and call themselves a cricket team, on which an entirely new set of obligations, almost a new set of

personalities, are wrapped about them. Women could never be a team of anything.

So it is in business. Men are able to maintain a sort of rough and ready code which prescribes the particular amount of cheating that a man may do under the rules. This is called business honesty, and many men adhere to it with a dog-like tenacity, growing old in it, till it is stamped on their grizzled faces, visibly. They can feel it inside them like a virtue. So much will they cheat and no more. Hence men are able to trust one another knowing the exact degree of dishonesty they are entitled to expect.

With women it is entirely different. They bring to business an unimpaired vision. They see it as it is. It would be impossible to trust them. They refuse to play fair.

**T**hus it comes about that woman is excluded, to a great extent, from the world's work and the world's pay.

There is nothing really open to her except one thing,—marriage. She must find a man who will be willing, in return for her society, to give her half of everything he has, allow her the sole use of his house during the daytime, pay her taxes, and provide her clothes.

This was, formerly and for many centuries, not such a bad solution of the question. The women did fairly well out of it. It was the habit to marry early and often. The “house and home” was an important place. The great majority of people, high and low, lived on the land. The work of the wife and the work of the husband ran closely together.

The chaw-  
bacon rustic  
compares  
well with the  
pale slum-  
rat.



The two were complementary and fitted into one another. A woman who had to superintend the baking of bread and the brewing of beer, the spinning of yarn and the weaving of clothes, could not complain that her life was incomplete.

Then came the modern age, beginning let us say about a hundred and fifty years ago. The distinguishing marks of it have been machinery and the modern city. The age of invention swept the people off the land. It herded them into factories, creating out of each man a poor miserable atom divorced from hereditary ties, with no rights, no duties, and no place in the world

except what his wages contract may confer on him. Every man for himself, and sink or swim, became the order of the day. It was nicknamed 'industrial freedom.' The world's production increased enormously. It is doubtful if the poor profited much. They obtained the modern city,—full of light and noise and excitement, lively with crime and gay with politics,—and the free school where they learned to read and write, by which means they might hold a mirror to their poverty and take a good look at it. They lost the quiet of the country side, the murmur of the brook and the inspiration of the open sky. These are unconscious things, but the peasant who has been reared among them, for all his unconsciousness, pines and dies without them. It is doubtful if the poor have gained. The chaw-bacon rustic who trimmed a hedge in the reign of George the First, compares well with the pale slum-rat of the reign of George V.

But if the machine age has profoundly altered the position of the working man, it has done still more with woman. It has dispossessed her. Her work has been taken away. The machine does it. It makes the clothes and brews the beer. The roar of the vacuum cleaner has hushed the sound of the broom. The proud proportions of the old-time cook, are dwindled to the slim outline of the gas-stove expert operating on a beefsteak with the aid of a thermometer. And at the close of day the machine, wound with a little key, sings the modern infant to its sleep, with the faultless lullaby of the Victrola. The home has passed, or at least is passing out of existence. In place of it is the 'apartment'—an incomplete thing, a mere part of something; where children are an intrusion, where hospitality is done through a caterer, and where Christmas is only the twenty-fifth of December.

All this the machine age did for woman. For a time she suffered—the one thing she had learned, in the course of centuries, to do with admirable fitness. With each succeeding decade of the modern age things grew worse instead of better. The age for marriage shifted. A wife instead of being a help-mate had become a burden that must be carried. It was no longer true that two could live on less than one. The prudent youth waited till he could 'afford' a wife. Love itself grew timid. Little Cupid exchanged his bow and arrow for a book on arithmetic and studied money sums. The school girl who flew to Gretna Green in a green and yellow cabriolet beside a peach-faced youth,—angrily pursued by an ancient father of thirty-eight,—all this drifted into the pictures of the past, romantic but quite impossible.

Thus the unmarried woman, a quiet distinct thing from the 'old maid' of ancient times, came into existence, and multiplied and increased till there were millions of her.

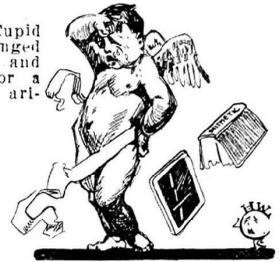
Then there rose up in our own time, or within call of it, a deliverer. It was the Awful Woman with the Spectacles, and the doctrine that she preached was Woman's Rights. She came as a new thing, a hatchet in her hand, breaking glass. But in reality she was no new thing at all, and has her lineal descent in history from age to age. The Romans knew her as a sybil and shuddered at her. The Middle Ages called her a witch and burnt her. The ancient law of England named her a scold and ducked her in a pond. But the men of the modern age, living indoors and losing something of their ruder fibre, grew afraid of her. The Awful Woman,—meddlesome, vociferous, intrusive,—came into her own.

Her softer sisters followed her. She became the leader of her sex. "Things are all wrong," she screamed, "with the *status* of women." Therein she was quite right. "The remedy for it all," she howled, "is to make women 'free,' to give women the vote. When once women are 'free' everything will be all right." Therein the woman with the spectacles was, and is, utterly wrong.

The women's vote, when they get it, will leave women much as they were before.

Let it be admitted quite frankly that women are going to get the vote. Within a very short time all over the British Isles and North America,—in the States and the nine provinces of Canada,—woman suffrage will soon be an accomplished fact. It is a coming event which casts its shadow, or its illumination, in front of it. The woman's vote and total prohibition are two things that are moving across the map with gigantic strides. Whether they are good or bad things is another question. They are coming. As for the women's vote, it has largely come. And as for prohibition, it is going to be recorded as one of the results of the European War, foreseen by nobody. When the King of England decided that the way in which he could best help the country was by giving up drinking, the admission was fatal. It will stand as one of the landmarks of British history comparable only to such things as the signing of the Magna Carta by King John, or the serving out of rum and water instead of pure rum in the British Navy under George III.

Little Cupid  
exchanged  
his bow and  
arrow for a  
book on ar-  
ithmetic.



So the woman's vote and prohibition are coming. A few rare spots—such as Louisiana, and the City of New York—will remain and offer here and there a wet oasis in the desert of dry virtue. Even that cannot endure. Before many years are past, all over this continent women with a vote and men without a drink will stand looking at one another and wondering, what next?

For when the vote is reached the woman question will not be solved but only begun. In and of itself, a vote is nothing. It neither warms the skin nor fills the stomach. Very often the privilege of a vote confers nothing but the right to express one's opinion as to which of two crooks is the crookeder.

**B**ut after the women have obtained the vote the question is, what are they going to do with it? The answer is, nothing, or at any rate nothing that men would not do without them. Their only visible use of it will be to elect men into office. Fortunately for us all they will not elect women. Here and there perhaps at the outset, it will be done as the result of a sort of spite, a kind of sex antagonism bred by the controversy itself. But speaking broadly the women's vote will not be used to elect women to office. Women do not think enough of one another to do that. If they want a lawyer they consult a man, and those who can afford it have their clothes made by men, and their cooking done by a chef. As for their money, no woman would entrust that to another woman's keeping. They are far too wise for that.

So that the woman's vote will not result in the setting up of female prime ministers and of parliaments in which the occupants of the treasury bench cast languishing eyes across at the flushed faces of the opposition. From the utter ruin involved in such an attempt at mixed government, the women themselves will save us. They will elect men. They may even pick some good ones. It is a nice question and will stand thinking about.



She came as a new thing, a hatchet in her hand, breaking glass.

But what else, or what further can they do, by means of their vote and their representatives to “emancipate” and “liberate” their sex?

Many feminists would tell us at once that if women had the vote they would first and foremost throw everything open to women on the same terms as men. Whole speeches are made on this point, and a fine fury thrown into it, often very beautiful to behold.

The entire idea is a delusion. Practically all of the world's work is open to women now, wide open. *The only trouble is that they can't do it.* There is nothing to prevent a woman from managing a bank, or organizing a company, or running a department store, or floating a merger, or building a railway,—except the simple fact that she can't. Here and there an odd woman does such things, but she is only the exception that proves the rule. Such women are merely—and here I am speaking in the most decorous biological sense,—“sports.” The ordinary woman cannot do the ordinary man's work. She never has and never will. The reasons why she can't are so many, that is, she ‘*can't*’ in so many different ways, that it is not worth while to try to name them.

Here and there it is true there are things closed to women, not by their own inability but by the law. This is a gross injustice. There is no defence for it. The province in which I live, for example, refuses to allow women to practise as lawyers. This is wrong. Women have just as good a right to try at being lawyers as they have at anything else. But even if all these legal disabilities, where they exist, were removed (as they will be under a woman's vote) the difference to women at large will be infinitesimal. A few gifted “sports” will earn a handsome livelihood, but the woman question in the larger sense will not move one inch nearer to solution.

The feminists, in fact, are haunted by the idea that it is possible for the average woman to have a life patterned after that of the ordinary man. They imagine her as having a career, a profession, a vocation,—something which will be her “life work” just as selling coal is the life work of the coal merchant.

If this were so, the whole question would be solved. Women and men would become equal and independent. It is thus indeed that the feminist sees them, through the roseate mist created by imagination. Husband and wife appear as a couple of honorable partners who share a house together. Each is off to business in the morning. The husband is, let us say, a stock broker: the wife manufactures iron and steel. The wife is a Liberal, the husband a Conservative. At their dinner they have animated discussions over the tariff till it is time for them to go to their clubs.

These two impossible creatures haunt the brain of the feminist and disport them in the pages of the up-to-date novel.

The whole thing is mere fiction. It is quite impossible for women,—the average and ordinary women,—to go in for having a career. Nature has forbidden it. The average woman must necessarily have,—I can only give

the figures roughly,—about three and a quarter children. She must replace in the population herself and her husband with something over to allow for the people who never marry and for the children that do not reach maturity. If she fails to do this the population comes to an end. Any scheme of social life must allow for these three and a quarter children and for the years of care

that must be devoted to them. The vacuum cleaner can take the place of the housewife. It cannot replace the mother. No man ever said his prayers at the knees of a vacuum cleaner, or drew his first lessons in manliness and worth from the sweet old-fashioned stories that a vacuum cleaner told. Feminists of the enraged kind may talk as they will of the paid attendant and the expert baby-minder. Fiddlesticks! These things are a mere supplement, useful enough but as far away from the realities of motherhood as the vacuum cleaner itself. But the point is one that need not be labored. Sensible people understand it as soon as said. With fools it is not worth while to argue.

The modern  
infant—sung  
to sleep with  
the faultless  
lullaby of the  
Victrola.



**B**ut, it may be urged, there are, even as it is, a great many women who are working. The wages that they receive are extremely low. They are lower in most cases than the wages for the same, or similar work, done by men. Cannot the woman's vote at least remedy this?

Here is something that deserves thinking about and that is far more nearly within the realm of what is actual and possible than wild talk of equalizing and revolutionizing the sexes.

It is quite true that women's work is underpaid. But this is only a part of a larger social injustice.

The case stands somewhat as follows: Women get low wages because low wages are all that they are worth. Taken by itself this is a brutal and misleading statement. What is meant is this. The rewards and punishments in the unequal and ill-adjusted world in which we live are most unfair. The price of anything,—sugar, potatoes, labor, or anything else,—varies according to the supply and demand: if many people want it and few can supply it the price goes up: if the contrary it goes down. If enough cabbages are brought to market they will not bring a cent a piece, no matter what it cost to raise them.

On these terms each of us sells his labor. The lucky ones, with some rare gift, or trained capacity, or some ability that by mere circumstance happened to be in a great demand, can sell high. If there were only one night plumber in this city, and the water pipes in a dozen homes of a dozen millionaires should burst all at once, he might charge a fee like that of a consulting lawyer.

On the other hand the unlucky sellers whose numbers are greater than the demand,—the mass of common laborers,—get a mere pittance. To say that their wage represents all that they produce is to argue in a circle. It is the mere pious quietism with which the well-to-do man who is afraid to think boldly on social questions drugs his conscience to sleep.

So it stands with women's wages. It is the sheer numbers of the women themselves, crowding after the few jobs that they can do, that brings them down. It has nothing to do with the attitude of men collectively towards women in the lump. It cannot be remedied by any form of woman's freedom. Its remedy is bound up with the general removal of social injustice, the general abolition of poverty, which is to prove the great question of the century before us. The question of women's wages is a part of the wages' question.

To my thinking the whole idea of making women free and equal (politically) with men as a way of improving their *status*, starts from a wrong basis and proceeds in a wrong direction.

*Women need not more freedom but less.* Social policy should proceed from the fundamental truth that women are and must be dependent. If they cannot be looked after by an individual (a thing on which they took their chance in earlier days) they must be looked after by the State. To expect a woman, for example, if left by the death of her husband with young children without support, to maintain herself by her own efforts, is the most absurd mockery of freedom ever devised. Earlier generations of mankind, for all that they lived in the jungle and wore cocoon leaves, knew nothing of it. To turn a girl loose in the world to work for herself, when there is no work to be had, or none at a price that will support life, is a social crime.

I am not attempting to show in what way the principle of woman's dependence should be worked out in detail in legislation. Nothing short of a book could deal with it. All that the present article attempts is the presentation of a point of view.

I have noticed that my clerical friends, on the rare occasions when they are privileged to preach to me, have a way of closing their sermons by “leaving their congregations with a thought.” It is a good scheme. It suggests an inexhaustible fund of reserve thought not yet tapped. It keeps the congregation, let us hope, in a state of trembling eagerness for the next instalment.

With the readers of this article I do the same. I leave them with the thought that perhaps in the modern age it is not the increased freedom of woman that is needed but the increased recognition of their dependence. Let the reader remain agonized over that till I write something else.

THE END

## TRANSCRIBER NOTES

Mis-spelled words and printer errors have been corrected. Where multiple spellings occur, majority use has been employed.

Punctuation has been maintained except where obvious printer errors occur.

Illustrations have been relocated due to using a non-page layout.

A cover was created for this ebook which is placed in the public domain.

[The end of *The Woman Question* by Stephen Leacock]