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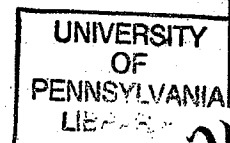
*The Writings of  
Thomas Wentworth Higginson  
(1823-1911)*

EDITED BY

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DA CAPO PRESS



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## 1

## OUGHT WOMEN TO LEARN THE ALPHABET?

Paris smiled, for an hour or two, in the year 1801, when, amidst Napoleon's mighty projects for remodelling the religion and government of his empire, the ironical satirist, Sylvain Maréchal, thrust in his "Plan for a Law prohibiting the Alphabet to Women."<sup>1</sup> Daring, keen, sarcastic, learned, the little tract retains to-day so much of its pungency, that we can hardly wonder at the honest simplicity of the author's friend and biographer, Madame Gacon Dufour, who declared that he must be insane, and soberly replied to him.

His proposed statute consists of eighty-two clauses, and is fortified by a "whereas" of a hundred and thirteen weighty reasons. He exhausts the range of history to show the frightful results which have followed this taste of fruit of the tree of knowledge; quotes from the *Encyclopédie*, to prove that the woman who knows the alphabet has already lost a portion of her innocence; cites the opinion of Molière, that any female who has unhappily learned anything in this line should affect ignorance, when possible; asserts that knowledge rarely makes men attractive, and females never; opines that women have no occasion to peruse Ovid's "Art of Love," since they know it all in advance; remarks that three quarters of female authors are no better than they should be; maintains that Madame Guion would have been far more useful had she been merely pretty and an ignoramus, such as Nature made her,—that Ruth and Naomi could not read, and Boaz probably would never have married into the family had they possessed that accomplishment,—that the

<sup>1</sup>*Projet d'une loi portant défense d'apprendre à lire aux femmes.*

Spartan women did not know the alphabet, nor the Amazons, nor Penelope, nor Andromache, nor Lucretia, nor Joan of Arc, nor Petrarch's Laura, nor the daughters of Charlemagne, nor the three hundred and sixty-five wives of Mohammed; but that Sappho and Madame de Maintenon could read altogether too well; while the case of Saint Brigitta, who brought forth twelve children and twelve books, was clearly exceptional, and afforded no safe precedent.

It would seem that the brilliant Frenchman touched the root of the matter. Ought women to learn the alphabet? There the whole question lies. Concede this little fulcrum, and Archimedeia will move the world before she has done with it: it becomes merely a question of time. Resistance must be made here or nowhere. *Obsta principiis*. Woman must be a subject or an equal: there is no middle ground. What if the Chinese proverb should turn out to be, after all, the summit of wisdom, "For men, to cultivate virtue is knowledge; for women, to renounce knowledge is virtue"?

No doubt, the progress of events is slow, like the working of the laws of gravitation generally. Certainly there has been but little change in the legal position of women since China was in its prime, until within the last half century. Lawyers admit that the fundamental theory of English and Oriental law is the same on this point: Man and wife are one, and that one is the husband. It is the oldest of legal traditions. When Blackstone declares that "the very being and existence of the woman is suspended during the marriage," and American Kent echoes that "her legal existence and authority are in a manner lost;" when Petersdorff asserts that "the husband has the right of imposing such corporeal restraints as he may deem necessary;" and Bacon that "the husband hath, by law, power and dominion over his wife, and may keep her by force within the bounds of duty, and may beat her, but not in a violent or cruel manner;" when Mr. Justice Coleridge rules that the husband, in certain cases, "has a right to confine his wife in his own dwelling-house, and restrain her from liberty for an indefinite time," and Baron Alderson sums it all up tersely, "The wife is only the *servant* of her husband,"—these high authorities simply reaffirm the dogma of the Gentoo code, four thousand years old and more: "A man, both day and night, must keep his wife so much in subjection that she by no means be mistress of her own actions. If the wife have her own free will, notwithstanding she be of a superior caste, she will behave amiss."

Yet behind these unchanging institutions, a pressure has been for centuries becoming concentrated, which, now that it has begun to act, is

threatening to overthrow them all. It has not yet operated very visibly in the Old World, where, even in England, the majority of women have not till lately mastered the alphabet sufficiently to sign their own names in the marriage register. But in this country the vast changes of the last few years are already a matter of history. No trumpet has been sounded, no earthquake has been felt, while State after State has ushered into legal existence one half of the population within its borders. Surely, here and now, might poor M. Maréchal exclaim, the bitter fruits of the original seed appear. The sad question recurs, Whether women ought ever to have tasted of the alphabet.

It is true that Eve ruined us all, according to theology, without knowing her letters. Still there is something to be said in defence of that venerable ancestress. The Veronese lady, Isotta Nogarola, five hundred and thirty-six of whose learned epistles were preserved by De Thou, composed a dialogue on the question, Whether Adam or Eve had committed the greater sin. But Ludovico Domenichi, in his "Dialogue on the Nobleness of Women," maintains that Eve did not sin at all, because she was not even created when Adam was told not to eat the apple. It was "in Adam all died," he shrewdly says; nobody died in Eve: which looks plausible. Be that as it may, Eve's daughters are in danger of swallowing a whole harvest of forbidden fruit, in these revolutionary days, unless something be done to cut off the supply.

It has been seriously asserted, that during the last half century more books have been written by women and about women than during all the previous uncounted ages. It may be true; although, when we think of the innumerable volumes of *Mémoires* by French women of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries,—each justifying the existence of her own ten volumes by the remark, that all her contemporaries were writing as many,—we have our doubts. As to the increased multitude of general treatises on the female sex, however,—its education, life, health, diseases, charms, dress, deeds, sphere, rights, wrongs, work, wages, encroachments, and idiosyncrasies generally,—there can be no doubt whatever; and the poorest of these books recognizes a condition of public sentiment of which no other age ever dreamed.

Still, literary history preserves the names of some reformers before the Reformation, in this matter. There was Signora Moderata Fonte, the Venetian, who left a book to be published after her death, in 1592, "*Dei Meriti delle Donne*." There was her townswoman, Lucrezia Marinella, who followed, ten years after, with her essay, "*La Nobilita e la Eccellenza delle Donne, con Difetti e Mancamenti degli Uomini*,"—a comprehensive theme, truly! Then followed the all-accomplished Anna Maria

Schurman, in 1645, with her "Dissertatio de Ingenii Muliebris ad Doctrinam et meliores Literas Aptitudine," with a few miscellaneous letters appended in Greek and Hebrew. At last came boldly Jacqueline Guillaume, in 1665, and threw down the gauntlet in her title-page, "*Les Dames Illustres; où par bonnes et fortes Raisons il se prouve que le Sexe Feminin surpasse en toute Sorte de Genre le Sexe Masculin*;" and with her came Margaret Boufflet and a host of others; and finally, in England, Mary Wollstonecraft, whose famous book, formidable in its day, would seem rather conservative now; and in America, that pious and worthy dame, Mrs. H. Mather Crocker, Cotton Mather's grandchild, who, in 1848, published the first book on the "Rights of Woman" ever written on this side the Atlantic.

Meanwhile there have never been wanting men, and strong men, to echo these appeals. From Cornelius Agrippa and his essay (1509) on the excellence of woman and her preëminence over man, down to the first youthful thesis of Agassiz, "*Mens Feminae Viri Animo Superior*," there has been a succession of voices crying in the wilderness. In England, Anthony Gibson wrote a book, in 1599, called "*A Woman's Woorth*, defended against all the Men in the World, proving them to be more Perfect, Excellent, and Absolute in all Vertuous Actions than any Man of what Qualitie soever, *Interlarded with Poetry*." *Per contra*, the learned Acidalius published a book in Latin, and afterwards in French, to prove that women are not reasonable creatures. Modern theologians are at worst merely sub-acid, and do not always say so, if they think so. Meanwhile most persons have been content to leave the world to go on its old course, in this matter as in others, and have thus acquiesced in that stern judicial decree with which Timon of Athens sums up all his curses upon womankind,—"*If there sit twelve women at the table, let a dozen of them be—as they are*."

Ancient or modern, nothing in any of these discussions is so valuable as the fact of the discussion itself. There is no discussion where there is no wrong. Nothing so indicates wrong as this morbid self-inspection. The complaints are a perpetual protest, the defences a perpetual confession. It is too late to ignore the question; and, once opened, it can be settled only on absolute and permanent principles. There is a wrong; but where? Does woman already know too much, or too little? Was she created for man's subject, or his equal? Shall she have the alphabet, or not?

Ancient mythology, which undertook to explain everything, easily accounted for the social and political disabilities of woman. Goguet quotes the story from Saint Augustine, who got it from Varro. Cecrops, building Athens, saw starting from the earth an olive-plant and a fountain, side

by side. The Delphic oracle said that this indicated a strife between Minerva and Neptune for the honor of giving a name to the city, and that the people must decide between them. Cecrops thereupon assembled the men, and the women also, who then had a right to vote; and the result was that Minerva carried the election by a glorious majority of one. Then Attica was overflowed and laid waste: of course the citizens attributed the calamity to Neptune, and resolved to punish the women. It was therefore determined that in future they should not vote, nor should any child bear the name of its mother.

Thus easily did mythology explain all troublesome inconsistencies; but it is much that it should even have recognized them as needing explanation. The real solution is, however, more simple. The obstacle to the woman's sharing the alphabet, or indeed any other privilege, has been thought by some to be the fear of impairing her delicacy, or of destroying her domesticity, or of confounding the distinction between the sexes. These may have been plausible excuses. They have even been genuine, though minor, anxieties. But the whole thing, I take it, had always one simple, intelligible basis,—sheer contempt for the supposed intellectual inferiority of woman. She was not to be taught, because she was not worth teaching. The learned Acidalius aforesaid was in the majority. According to Aristotle and the Peripatetics, woman was *animal occasionatum*, as if a sort of monster and accidental production. Mediæval councils, charitably asserting her claims to the rank of humanity, still pronounced her unfit for instruction. In the Hindoo dramas she did not even speak the same language with her master, but used the dialect of slaves. When, in the sixteenth century, Françoise de Saintonges wished to establish girls' schools in France, she was hooted in the streets; and her father called together four doctors, learned in the law, to decide whether she was not possessed by demons, to think of educating women,—*pour s'assurer qu'instruire des femmes n'était pas un œuvre du démon*.

It was the same with political rights. The foundation of the Salic Law was not any sentimental anxiety to guard female delicacy and domesticity; it was, as stated by Froissart, a blunt, hearty contempt: "The kingdom of France being too noble to be ruled by a woman." And the same principle was reaffirmed for our own institutions, in rather softened language, by Theophilus Parsons, in his famous defence of the rights of Massachusetts men (the "Essex Result," in 1778): "Women, what age soever they are of, are not considered as having a sufficient acquired discretion [to exercise the franchise]."

In harmony with this are the various maxims and *bon-mots* of eminent men, in respect to women. Niebuhr thought he should not have ed-

ucated a girl well,—he should have made her know too much. Lessing said, "The woman who thinks is like the man who puts on rouge, ridiculous." Voltaire said, "Ideas are like beards: women and young men have none." And witty Dr. Maginn carries to its extreme the atrocity, "We like to hear a few words of sense from a woman, as we do from a parrot, because they are so unexpected." Yet how can we wonder at these opinions, when the saints have been severer than the sages?—since the pious Fénelon taught that true virgin delicacy was almost as incompatible with learning as with vice; and Dr. Channing complained, in his "Essay on Exclusion and Denunciation," of "women forgetting the tenderness of their sex," and arguing on theology.

Now this impression of feminine inferiority may be right or wrong, but it obviously does a good deal towards explaining the facts it assumes. If contempt does not originally cause failure, it perpetuates it. Systematically discourage any individual, or class, from birth to death, and they learn, in nine cases out of ten, to acquiesce in their degradation, if not to claim it as a crown of glory. If the Abbé Choisi praised the Duchesse de Fontanges for being "beautiful as an angel and silly as a goose," it was natural that all the young ladies of the court should resolve to make up in folly what they wanted in charms. All generations of women having been bred under the shadow of intellectual contempt, they have, of course, done much to justify it. They have often used only for frivolous purposes even the poor opportunities allowed them. They have employed the alphabet, as Molière said, chiefly in spelling the verb *Amo*. Their use of science has been like that of Mlle. de Launay, who computed the decline in her lover's affection by his abbreviation of their evening walk in the public square, preferring to cross it rather than take the circuit; "from which I inferred," she says, "that his passion had diminished in the ratio between the diagonal of a rectangular parallelogram and the sum of two adjacent sides." And their conception, even of art, has been too often on the scale of Properzia de Rossi, who carved sixty-five heads on a walnut, the smallest of all recorded symbols of woman's sphere.

All this might, perhaps, be overcome, if the social prejudice which discourages women would only reward proportionately those who surmount the discouragement. The more obstacles, the more glory, if society would only pay in proportion to the labor; but it does not. Women being denied, not merely the training which prepares for great deeds, but the praise and compensation which follow them, have been weakened in both directions. The career of eminent men ordinarily begins with college and the memories of Miltiades, and ends with fortune and

fame: woman begins under discouragement, and ends beneath the same. Single, she works with half preparation and half pay; married, she puts name and wages into the keeping of her husband, shrinks into John Smith's "lady" during life, and John Smith's "relict" on her tombstone; and still the world wonders that her deeds, like her opportunities, are inferior.

Evidently, then, the advocates of woman's claims—those who hold that "the virtues of the man and the woman are the same," with Antisthenes, or that "the talent of the man and the woman is the same," with Socrates in Xenophon's "Banquet"—must be cautious lest they attempt to prove too much. Of course, if women know as much as the men, without schools and colleges, there is no need of admitting them to those institutions. If they work as well on half pay, it diminishes the inducement to give them the other half. The safer position is, to claim that they have done just enough to show what they might have done under circumstances less discouraging. Take, for instance, the common remark, that women have invented nothing. It is a valid answer, that the only implements habitually used by woman have been the needle, the spindle, and the basket; and tradition reports that she herself invented all three. In the same way it may be shown that the departments in which women have equalled men have been the departments in which they have had equal training, equal encouragement, and equal compensation; as, for instance, the theatre. Madame Lagrange, the *prima donna*, after years of costly musical instruction, wins the zenith of professional success; she receives, the newspapers affirm, sixty thousand dollars a year, travelling expenses for ten persons, country-houses, stables, and liveries, besides an uncounted revenue of bracelets, bouquets, and *billets-doux*. Of course, every young *débutante* fancies the same thing within her own reach, with only a brief stage-vista between. On the stage there is no deduction for sex, and, therefore, woman has shown in that sphere an equal genius. But every female common-school teacher in the United States finds the enjoyment of her four hundred dollars a year to be secretly embittered by the knowledge that the young college stripling in the next schoolroom is paid twice that sum for work no harder or more responsible than her own, and that, too, after the whole pathway of education has been obstructed for her, and smoothed for him. These may be gross and carnal considerations; but Faith asks her daily bread, and fancy must be fed. We deny woman her fair share of training, of encouragement, of remuneration, and then talk fine nonsense about her instincts and intuitions. We say sentimentally with the Oriental proverbialist, "Every book of knowledge is im-

planted by nature in the heart of woman,"—and make the compliment a substitute for the alphabet.

Nothing can be more absurd than to impose entirely distinct standards, in this respect, on the two sexes, or to expect that woman, any more than man, will accomplish anything great without due preparation and adequate stimulus. Mrs. Patten, who navigated her husband's ship from Cape Horn to California, would have failed in the effort, for all her heroism, if she had not, unlike most of her sex, been taught to use her Bowditch's "Navigator." Florence Nightingale, when she heard of the distresses in the Crimea, did not, as most people imagine, rise up and say, "I am a woman, ignorant but intuitive, with very little sense and information, but exceedingly sublime aspirations; my strength lies in my weakness; I can do all things without knowing anything about them." Not at all: during ten years she had been in hard training for precisely such services; had visited all the hospitals in London, Edinburgh, Dublin, Paris, Lyons, Rome, Brussels, and Berlin; had studied under the Sisters of Charity, and been twice a nurse in the Protestant Institution at Kaiserswerth. Therefore she did not merely carry to the Crimea a woman's heart, as her stock in trade, but she knew the alphabet of her profession better than the men around her. Of course, genius and enthusiasm are, for both sexes, elements unforeseen and incalculable; but, as a general rule, great achievements imply great preparations and favorable conditions.

To disregard this truth is unreasonable in the abstract, and cruel in its consequences. If an extraordinary male gymnast can clear a height of ten feet with the aid of a springboard, it would be considered slightly absurd to ask a woman to leap eleven feet without one; yet this is precisely what society and the critics have always done. Training and wages and social approbation are very elastic springboards; and the whole course of history has seen these offered bounteously to one sex, and as sedulously withheld from the other. Let woman consent to be a doll, and there was no finery so gorgeous, no baby-house so costly, but she might aspire to share its lavish delights; let her ask simply for an equal chance to learn, to labor, and to live, and it was as if that same doll should open its lips, and propound Euclid's forty-seventh proposition. While we have all deplored the helpless position of indigent women, and lamented that they had no alternative beyond the needle, the wash-tub, the schoolroom, and the street, we have usually resisted their admission into every new occupation, denied them training, and cut their compensation down. Like Charles Lamb, who atoned for coming late to the office in the morning by going away early in the afternoon, we have, first, half educated women,

and then, to restore the balance, only half paid them. What innumerable obstacles have been placed in their way as female physicians; what a complication of difficulties has been encountered by them, even as printers, engravers, and designers! In London, Mr. Bennett was once mobbed for lecturing to women on watchmaking. In this country, we have known grave professors refuse to address lyceums which thought fit to employ an occasional female lecturer. Mr. Comer stated that it was "in the face of ridicule and sneers" that he began to educate American women as book-keepers many years ago; and it was a little contemptible in Miss Muloch to revive the same satire in "A Woman's Thoughts on Women," when she must have known that in half the retail shops in Paris her own sex rules the ledger, and Mammon knows no Salic law.

We find, on investigation, what these considerations would lead us to expect, that eminent women have commonly been exceptional in training and position, as well as in their genius. They have excelled the average of their own sex because they have shared the ordinary advantages of the other sex. Take any department of learning or skill; take, for instance, the knowledge of languages, the universal alphabet, philology. On the great stairway at Padua stands the statue of Elena Cornaro, professor of six languages in that once renowned university. But Elena Cornaro was educated like a boy, by her father. On the great door of the University of Bologna is inscribed the epitaph of Clotilda Tambroni, the honored correspondent of Porson, and the first Greek scholar of southern Europe in her day. But Clotilda Tambroni was educated like a boy, by Emanuele Aponte. How fine are those prefatory words, "by a Right Reverend Prelate," to that pioneer book in Anglo-Saxon lore, Elizabeth Elstob's grammar: "Our earthly possessions are indeed our patrimony, as derived to us by the industry of our fathers; but the language in which we speak is our mother tongue, and who so proper to play the critic in this as the females?" Yet this particular female obtained the rudiments of her rare education from her mother, before she was eight years old, in spite of much opposition from her right reverend guardians. Adelung declares that all modern philology is founded on the translation of a Russian vocabulary into two hundred different dialects by Catherine II. But Catherine shared, in childhood, the instructors of her brother, Prince Frederick, and was subject to some reproach for learning, though a girl, so much more rapidly than he did. Christina of Sweden ironically reproved Madame Dacier for her translation of Callimachus: "Such a pretty girl as you are, are you not ashamed to be so learned?" But Madame Dacier acquired Greek by contriving to do her embroidery in the room where her father was teaching her stupid brother; and her

queenly critic had herself learned to read Thucydides, harder Greek than Callimachus, before she was fourteen. And so down to our own day, who knows how many mute, inglorious Minervas may have perished unenlightened, while Margaret Fuller Ossoli and Elizabeth Barrett Browning were being educated "like boys."

This expression simply means that they had the most solid training which the times afforded. Most persons would instantly take alarm at the very words; that is, they have so little faith in the distinctions which Nature has established, that they think, if you teach the alphabet, or anything else, indiscriminately to both sexes, you annul all difference between them. The common reasoning is thus: "Boys and girls are acknowledged to be very unlike. Now, boys study Greek and algebra, medicine and bookkeeping. Therefore girls should not." As if one should say: "Boys and girls are very unlike. Now, boys eat beef and potatoes. Therefore, obviously, girls should not."

The analogy between physical and spiritual food is precisely in point. The simple truth is, that, amid the vast range of human powers and properties, the fact of sex is but one item. Vital and momentous in itself, it does not constitute the whole organism, but only a part. The distinction of male and female is special, aimed at a certain end; and, apart from that end, it is, throughout all the kingdoms of Nature, of minor importance. With but trifling exceptions, from infusoria up to man, the female animal moves, breathes, looks, listens, runs, flies, swims, pursues its food, eats it, digests it, in precisely the same manner as the male: all instincts, all characteristics, are the same, except as to the one solitary fact of parentage. Mr. Ten Broeck's race-horses, Pryor and Prioress, were foaled alike, fed alike, trained alike, and finally ran side by side, competing for the same prize. The eagle is not checked in soaring by any consciousness of sex, nor asks the sex of the timid hare, its quarry. Nature, for high purposes, creates and guards the sexual distinction, but keeps it subordinate to those still more important.

Now all this bears directly upon the alphabet. What sort of philosophy is that which says, "John is a fool; Jane is a genius: nevertheless, John, being a man, shall learn, lead, make laws, make money; Jane, being a woman, shall be ignorant, dependent, disfranchised, underpaid"? Of course, the time is past when one would state this so frankly, though Comte comes quite near it, to say nothing of the Mormons; but this formula really lies at the bottom of the reasoning one hears every day. The answer is, Soul before sex. Give an equal chance, and let genius and industry do the rest: *La carrière ouverte aux talents!* Every man for himself, every woman for herself, and the alphabet for us all.

Thus far, my whole course of argument has been defensive and explanatory. I have shown that woman's inferiority in special achievements, so far as it exists, is a fact of small importance, because it is merely a corollary from her historic position of degradation. She has not excelled, because she has had no fair chance to excel. Man, placing his foot upon her shoulder, has taunted her with not rising. But the ulterior question remains behind. How came she into this attitude originally? Explain the explanation, the logician fairly demands. Granted that woman is weak because she has been systematically degraded: but why was she degraded? This is a far deeper question,—one to be met only by a profounder philosophy and a positive solution. We are coming on ground almost wholly untried, and must do the best we can.

I venture to assert, then, that woman's social inferiority has been, to a great extent, in the past a legitimate thing. To all appearance, history would have been impossible without it, just as it would have been impossible without an epoch of war and slavery. It is simply a matter of social progress,—a part of the succession of civilizations. The past has been inevitably a period of ignorance, of engrossing physical necessities, and of brute force,—not of freedom, of philanthropy, and of culture. During that lower epoch, woman was necessarily an inferior, degraded by abject labor; even in time of peace,—degraded uniformly by war, chivalry to the contrary notwithstanding. Behind all the courtesies of Amadis and the Cid lay the stern fact,—woman a child or a toy. The flattering troubadours chanted her into a poet's paradise; but alas! that kingdom of heaven suffered violence, and the violent took it by force. The truth simply was, that her time had not come. Physical strength must rule for a time, and she was the weaker. She was very properly refused a feudal grant, by reason, say "Les Coustumes de Normandie," of her unfitness for war or policy: *C'est l'homme ki se bast et ki conseille*. Other authorities put it still more plainly: "A woman cannot serve the emperor or feudal lord in war, on account of the decorum of her sex; nor assist him with advice, because of her limited intellect; nor keep his counsel, owing to the infirmity of her disposition." All which was, no doubt, in the majority of cases, true; and the degradation of woman was simply a part of a system which has, indeed, had its day, but has bequeathed its associations.

From this reign of force, woman never freed herself by force. She could not fight, or would not. Bohemian annals, to be sure, record the legend of a literal war between the sexes, in which the women's army was led by Libussa and Wlasla, and which finally ended with the capture, by the army of men, of Castle Dziewin, Maiden's Tower, whose ruins are

still visible near Prague. The armor of Libussa is still shown at Vienna; and the guide calls attention to the long-peaked toes of steel, with which, he avers, the tender princess was wont to pierce the hearts of her opponents, while careering through the battle. And there are abundant instances in which women have fought side by side with men, and on equal terms. The ancient British women mingled in the wars of their husbands, and their princesses were trained to the use of arms in the Maiden's Castle at Edinburgh, in the Isle of Skye. The Moorish wives and maidens fought in defence of their European peninsula; and the Portuguese women fought on the same soil, against the armies of Philip II. The king of Siam has, at present, a body-guard of four hundred women: they are armed with lance and rifle, are admirably disciplined, and their commander (appointed after saving the king's life at a tiger-hunt) ranks as one of the royal family, and has ten elephants at her service. When the all-conquering Dahomian army marched upon Abbeokuta, in 1851, they numbered ten thousand men and six thousand women. The women were, as usual, placed foremost in the assault, as being most reliable; and of the eighteen hundred bodies left dead before the walls, the vast majority were of women. The Hospital of the Invalides, in Paris, has sheltered, for half a century, a fine specimen of a female soldier, "Lieutenant Madame Bulan," who lived to be more than eighty years old, had been decorated by Napoleon's own hand with the cross of the Legion of Honor, and was credited on the hospital books with "seven years' service, seven campaigns, three wounds, several times distinguished, especially in Corsica, in defending a fort against the English." But these cases, though interesting to the historian, are still exceptional; and the instinctive repugnance they inspire is a condemnation, not of women, but of war.

The reason, then, for the long subjection of woman has been simply that humanity was passing through its first epoch, and her full career was to be reserved for the second. As the different races of man have appeared successively upon the stage of history, so there has been an order of succession of the sexes. Woman's appointed era, like that of the Teutonic races, was delayed, but not omitted. It is not merely true that the empire of the past has belonged to man, but that it has properly belonged to him; for it was an empire of the muscles, enlisting, at best, but the lower powers of the understanding. There can be no question that the present epoch is initiating an empire of the higher reason, of arts, affections, aspirations; and for that epoch the genius of woman has been reserved. The spirit of the age has always kept pace with the facts, and outstripped the statutes. Till the fulness of time came, woman was nec-

essarily kept a slave to the spinning-wheel and the needle; now higher work is ready; peace has brought invention to her aid, and the mechanical means for her emancipation are ready also. No use in releasing her till man, with his strong arm, had worked out his preliminary share in civilization. "Earth waits for her queen" was a favorite motto of Margaret Fuller Ossoli; but it would be more correct to say that the queen has waited for her earth, till it could be smoothed and prepared for her occupancy. Now Cinderella may begin to think of putting on her royal robes.

Everybody sees that the times are altering the whole material position of woman; but most people do not appear to see the inevitable social and moral changes which are also involved. As has been already said, the woman of ancient history was a slave to physical necessities, both in war and peace. In war she could do too little; in peace she did too much, under the material compulsions which controlled the world. How could the Jews, for instance, elevate woman? They could not spare her from the wool and the flax, and the candle that goeth not out by night. In Rome, when the bride first stepped across her threshold, they did not ask her, Do you know the alphabet? they asked simply, Can you spin? There was no higher epitaph than Queen Amalasontha's,—*Domum servavit, lanam fecit*. In Bœotia, brides were conducted home in vehicles whose wheels were burned at the door, in token that they were never to leave the house again. Pythagoras instituted at Crotona an annual festival for the distaff; Confucius, in China, did the same for the spindle; and these celebrated not the freedom, but the serfdom, of woman.

And even into modern days this same tyrannical necessity has lingered. "Go spin, you jades! go spin!" was the only answer vouchsafed by the Earl of Pembroke to the twice-banished nuns of Wilton. Even now, travellers agree that throughout civilized Europe, with the partial exception of England and France, the profound absorption of the mass of women in household labors renders their general elevation impossible. But with us Americans, and in this age, when all these vast labors are being more and more transferred to arms of brass and iron; when Rochester grinds the flour and Lowell weaves the cloth, and the fire on the hearth has gone into black retirement and mourning; when the wiser a virgin is, the less she has to do with oil in her lamp; when the needle has made its last dying speech and confession in the "Song of the Shirt," and the sewing-machine has changed those doleful marches to delightful measures,—how is it possible for the blindest to help seeing that a new era is begun, and that the time has come for woman to learn the alphabet?

Nobody asks for any abolition of domestic labor for women, any more than of outdoor labor for men. Of course, most women will still continue to be mainly occupied with the indoor care of their families, and most men with their external support. All that is desirable for either sex is such an economy of labor, in this respect, as shall leave some spare time to be appropriated in other directions. The argument against each new emancipation of woman is precisely that always made against the liberation of serfs and the enfranchisement of plebeians,—that the new position will take them from their legitimate business. "How can he [or she] get wisdom that holdeth the plough [or the broom],—whose talk is of bullocks [or of babies]?" Yet the American farmer has already emancipated himself from these fancied incompatibilities; and so will the farmer's wife. In a nation where there is no leisure class and no peasantry, this whole theory of exclusion is an absurdity. We all have a little leisure, and we must all make the most of it. If we will confine large interests and duties to those who have nothing else to do, we must go back to monarchy at once. If otherwise, then the alphabet, and its consequences, must be open to woman as to man. Jean Paul says nobly, in his "Levana," that, "before and after being a mother, a woman is a human being, and neither maternal nor conjugal relation can supersede the human responsibility, but must become its means and instrument." And it is good to read the manly speech, on this subject, of John Quincy Adams, quoted at length in Quincy's life of him, in which, after fully defending the political petitions of the women of Plymouth, he declares that "the correct principle is that women are not only justified, but exhibit the most exalted virtue, when they do depart from the domestic circle, and enter on the concerns of their country, of humanity, and of their God."

There are duties devolving on every human being,—duties not small nor few, but vast and varied,—which spring from home and private life, and all their sweet relations. The support or care of the humblest household is a function worthy of men, women, and angels, so far as it goes. From these duties none must shrink, neither man nor woman; the loftiest genius cannot ignore them; the sublimest charity must begin with them. They are their own exceeding great reward; their self-sacrifice is infinite joy; and the selfishness which discards them is repaid by loneliness and a desolate old age. Yet these, though the most tender and intimate portion of human life, do not form its whole. It is given to noble souls to crave other interests also, added spheres, not necessarily alien from these; larger knowledge, larger action also; duties, responsibilities, anxieties, dangers, all the aliment that history has given to its heroes. Not



home less, but humanity more. When the high-born English lady in the Crimean hospital, ordered to a post of almost certain death, only raised her hands to heaven, and said, "Thank God!" she did not renounce her true position as woman: she claimed it. When the queen of James I. of Scotland, already immortalized by him in stately verse, won a higher immortality by welcoming to her fair bosom the dagger aimed at his; when the Countess of Buchan hung confined in her iron cage, outside Berwick Castle, in penalty for crowning Robert the Bruce; when the stainless soul of Joan of Arc met God, like Moses, in a burning flame,—these things were as they should be. Man must not monopolize these privileges of peril, the birthright of great souls. Serenades and compliments must not replace the nobler hospitality which shares with woman the opportunity of martyrdom. Great administrative duties also, cares of state, for which one should be born gray-headed, how nobly do these sit upon a woman's brow! Each year adds to the storied renown of Elizabeth of England, greatest sovereign of the greatest of historic nations. Christina of Sweden, alone among the crowned heads of Europe (so says Voltaire), sustained the dignity of the throne against Richelieu and Mazarin. And these queens most assuredly did not sacrifice their womanhood in the process; for her Britannic Majesty's wardrobe included four thousand gowns; and Mlle. de Montpensier declares that when Christina had put on a wig of the latest fashion, "she really looked extremely pretty."

*Les races se féminisent*, said Buffon,—“The world is growing more feminine.” It is a compliment, whether the naturalist intended it or not. Time has brought peace; peace, invention; and the poorest woman of today is born to an inheritance of which her ancestors never dreamed. Previous attempts to confer on women social and political equality,—as when Leopold, Grand Duke of Tuscany, made them magistrates; or when the Hungarian revolutionists made them voters; or when our own New Jersey tried the same experiment in a guarded fashion in early times, and then revoked the privilege, because (as in the ancient fable) the women voted the wrong way;—these things were premature, and valuable only as recognitions of a principle. But in view of the rapid changes now going on, he is a rash man who asserts the “Woman Question” to be anything but a mere question of time. The fulcrum has been already given in the alphabet, and we must simply watch, and see whether the earth does not move.

There is the plain fact: woman must be either a subject or an equal; there is no middle ground. Every concession to a supposed principle only involves the necessity of the next concession for which that principle calls. Once yield the alphabet, and we abandon the whole long the-

ory of subjection and coverture: tradition is set aside, and we have nothing but reason to fall back upon. Reasoning abstractly, it must be admitted that the argument has been, thus far, entirely on the women's side, inasmuch as no man has yet seriously tried to meet them with argument. It is an alarming feature of this discussion, that it has reversed, very generally, the traditional positions of the sexes: the women have had all the logic; and the most intelligent men, when they have attempted the other side, have limited themselves to satire and gossip. What rational woman can be really convinced by the nonsense which is talked in ordinary society around her,—as, that it is right to admit girls to common schools, and equally right to exclude them from colleges; that it is proper for a woman to sing in public, but indelicate for her to speak in public; that a post-office box is an unexceptionable place to drop a bit of paper into, but a ballot-box terribly dangerous? No cause in the world can keep above water, sustained by such contradictions as these, too feeble and slight to be dignified by the name of fallacies. Some persons profess to think it impossible to reason with a woman, and such critics certainly show no disposition to try the experiment.

But we must remember that all our American institutions are based on consistency, or on nothing: all claim to be founded on the principles of natural right; and when they quit those, they are lost. In all European monarchies it is the theory that the mass of the people are children to be governed, not mature beings to govern themselves; this is clearly stated and consistently applied. In the United States we have formally abandoned this theory for one half of the human race, while for the other half it flourishes with little change. The moment the claims of woman are broached, the democrat becomes a monarchist. What Americans commonly criticise in English statesmen, namely, that they habitually evade all arguments based on natural right, and defend every legal wrong on the ground that it works well in practice, is the precise defect in our habitual view of woman. The perplexity must be resolved somehow. Most men admit that a strict adherence to our own principles would place both sexes in precisely equal positions before law and constitution, as well as in school and society. But each has his special quibble to apply, showing that in this case we must abandon all the general maxims to which we have pledged ourselves, and hold only by precedent. Nay, he construes even precedent with the most ingenious rigor; since the exclusion of women from all direct contact with affairs can be made far more perfect in a republic than is possible in a monarchy, where even sex is merged in rank, and the female patrician may have far more power than the male plebeian. But, as matters now stand among

us, there is no aristocracy but of sex: all men are born patrician, all women are legally plebeian; all men are equal in having political power, and all women in having none. This is a paradox so evident, and such an anomaly in human progress, that it cannot last forever, without new discoveries in logic, or else a deliberate return to M. Maréchal's theory concerning the alphabet.

Meanwhile, as the newspapers say, we anxiously await further developments. According to present appearances, the final adjustment lies mainly in the hands of women themselves. Men can hardly be expected to concede either rights or privileges more rapidly than they are claimed, or to be truer to women than women are to each other. In fact, the worst effect of a condition of inferiority is the weakness it leaves behind; even when we say, "Hands off!" the sufferer does not rise. In such a case, there is but one counsel worth giving. More depends on determination than even on ability. Will, not talent, governs the world. Who believed that a poetess could ever be more than an Annot Lyle of the harp, to soothe with sweet melodies the leisure of her lord, until in Elizabeth Barrett Browning's hands the thing became a trumpet? Where are gone the sneers with which army surgeons and parliamentary orators opposed Mr. Sidney Herbert's first proposition to send Florence Nightingale to the Crimea? In how many towns was the current of popular prejudice against female orators reversed by one winning speech from Lucy Stone! Where no logic can prevail, success silences. First give woman, if you dare, the alphabet, then summon her to her career: and though men, ignorant and prejudiced, may oppose its beginnings, they will at last fling around her conquering footsteps more lavish praises than ever greeted the opera's idol,—more perfumed flowers than ever wooed, with intoxicating fragrance, the fairest butterfly of the ball-room.