

SPEAKING
OF
WOMEN

Nellie L. McClung

MacLean's Magazine, May 1916

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EDITOR'S NOTE—The movement for the extension of the vote to women gained an impetus by the action of the Alberta Legislature in passing an Equal Franchise measure. The most important individual factor in achieving this decision was Mrs. Nellie McClung. Her books and her platform performances have made Mrs. McClung the outstanding figure in the fight for women's rights. Accordingly, when the editors of MacLean's decided that the subject introduced some months ago by Stephen Leacock in his article "The Woman Question" could be continued with interest to the readers of MacLean's, by having the same topic treated from the feminine standpoint, the first name that suggested itself naturally was that of Mrs. McClung. She consented to write an article for the readers of MacLean's, despite the fact that her time is very much taken up by the work in the West in which she is taking an active part. Accordingly, we present:

Speaking of Women

By NELLIE L. McCLUNG

Cartoons by WILLIAM CASEY

The Cave Dweller, long ago, realizing that the food supply was limited and hard to obtain, was disposed to look upon every other man as a possible rival; and considered it good policy to kill at sight in order that the crowd around the Neolithic lunch counter might be lessened. The reasoning was economically sound, too. If the divisor is lessened, the quotient is correspondingly increased!

Life was simple then. Every man was his own lawyer, butcher, barber, drycleaner; he settled his own quarrels, without lawyers' fees or "notes"; there were no apartment houses, tax-notices, rural mail delivery, water rates, subscription lists, or any other complication.



But it was not long before men began to plan greater tasks than could be accomplished by individual effort, and the idea slowly grew that the other man might be a real help at times and perhaps it was a mistake always to kill him. Co-operation began when one man chased the bear out of the cave and another man killed him when he ran past the gap!

Since then the idea of co-operation has steadily grown. Now we are so utterly dependent upon the other man—or woman—that we cannot live a day without them. But the primitive instincts die hard! Men are still haunted by the ghost of that old fear that there may not be enough of some things to go around if too many people have the same chance of obtaining a share. They join in the thanksgiving of the old blessing:

“Six potatoes among the four of us;
Thank the Lord there ain’t any more of us.”

This deep-rooted fear, that any change may bring personal inconvenience, lies at the root of much of the opposition to all reform.

Men held to slavery for long years, condoning and justifying it, because they were afraid that without slave labor life would not be comfortable. Certain men have opposed the advancement of women for the same reason; their hearts have been beset with the old black fear that, if women were allowed equal rights with men, some day some man would go home and find the dinner not ready, and the potatoes not even peeled! But not many give expression to this fear, as a reason for their opposition. They say they oppose the enfranchisement of women because they are too frail, weak and sweet to mingle in the hurly-burly of life; that women have far more influence now than if they could vote, and besides, God never intended them to vote, and it would break up the home, and make life a howling wilderness; the world would be full of neglected children (or none at all) and the homely joys of the fireside would vanish from the earth.



I remember once hearing an eloquent speaker cry out in alarm, “If women ever get the vote, who will teach us to say our prayers?”

Surely his experience of the franchised class had been an unfortunate one when he could not believe that anyone could both vote and pray!

That women are physically inferior to men is a strange reason for placing them under a further handicap, and we are surprised to find it advanced in all seriousness as an argument against woman suffrage. The exercising of the ballot does not require physical strength or endurance. Surely the opponents of woman suffrage do not mean to advocate that a strong fist should rule; just now we are a bit sensitive about this, and such doctrine is not popular. Might is not right; with our heart's blood we declare it is not!

No man has the right to citizenship on his weight, height, or lifting power; he exercises this right because he is a human being, with hands to work, brain to think, and a life to live.

It is to save women from toil and fatigue and all unpleasantness that the chivalrous ones would deny her the right of exercising the privileges of citizenship; though just how this could be brought about is not stated. Women are already in the battle of life; thirty per cent. of the adult women of Canada and the United States are wage earners, and the percentage grows every day. How does the lack of the ballot help them? Is it any comfort to the woman who feels the sting of social injustice to reflect that she, at least, had no part in making such a law? Or do the poor women who go through the deserted streets in the grey dawn to their homes, alone and unprotected after their hard night's work at office-cleaning, ever proudly reflect that at least they have never had to drag their skirts in the mire of the polls, or be stared at by rude men as they approach the ballot box?

The physical disability of women is an additional reason for their having the franchise. The ballot is such a simple, easy way of expressing a preference or wish so "genteel," ladylike and dignified.

Now even in the matter of homesteads women are not allowed free land unless they are widows with the care of minor children; although any man who is of the age of eighteen may have one hundred and sixty acres on payment of ten dollars, and the performance of certain duties. The alleged reason for this discrimination is that women cannot perform the required duties and so, to save them from the temptation of trying, the Government in its fatherly wisdom denies them the chance.

But women are doing homestead duties wherever homestead duties are being done. Women suffer the hardships—cold, hunger, loneliness—against which there is no law; and, when the homestead is "proved," all the scrub

cleared, and the land broken, the husband may sell the whole thing without his wife's knowledge, and he can take the money and depart, without a word. Against this there is no law either!

No person objects to the homesteader's wife having to get out wood, or break up scrub land, or drive oxen, so long as she is not doing these things for herself and has no legal claim on the result of her labor. Working for someone else is very sweet and womanly, and most commendable. What a neat blending there is of kindness and cruelty in the complacent utterances of the armchair philosophers who tell us that women have not the physical strength to do the hard tasks of life, and therefore should not be allowed to vote! Kindness and cruelty have never blended well, though clever people have tried to bring it about.



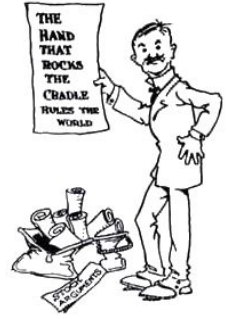
Little Harry had a birthday party one day, and as part of the entertainment he proudly exhibited a fine family of young puppies, who occupied a corner of the barn. One of his little guests seemed to be greatly attracted by the smallest puppy. He carried it about in his arms and appeared to lavish great affection on it! At last, he took it into the house, and interviewed Harry's mother. "Oh, Mrs. Brown," he said, "this little puppy is smaller than any of the others—and Harry says it will never grow to be a fine big dog—and maybe it is sick—and it is a dear sweet pet—and please may we drown it!"

I saw a letter last week which was written to the Sunshine Editor of one of our papers, from a woman on the homestead. She asked if a pair of boots could be sent to her, for she had to get out all the wood from the bush. Her husband had gone to work in the mines in B.C. She expressed her gratitude for the help she had received from Sunshine before, and voiced the hope that when "she got things going" she would be able to show her gratitude by helping someone else. There was no word of complaint. And this brave woman is typical of many. Whether able or not able, women are out in the world, meeting its conditions, bearing its conditions, fighting their own battles, and always under a handicap.

Now the question is, what are we going to do about it?

One way, pursued by many, is to turn blind eyes to conditions as they are, and "haver" away about how frail and sweet women are; and that what

they need is greater dependence. This babble of marriage and home for every woman sounds soothing, but does not seem to lead anywhere. Before the war, there were a million and a half more women than men in the Old Country alone—what will the proportion be when the war, with its fearful destruction of men, is over? One would think, to read the vaporings which pass as articles on the suffrage question, that good reliable husbands will be supplied upon request, if you would only write your name and address plainly and enclose a stamped envelope.



It is certainly true that the old avenues of labor have been closed to women. The introduction of machinery has done this, for now the work is done in factories, which formerly was done by hand labor. Women have not deserted their work, but the work has been taken from them. Sometimes it is said that women are trying to usurp men's place in the world; and if they were, it would be merely an act of retaliation, for men have already usurped women's sphere. We have men cooks, milliners, hairdressers, dressmakers, laundrymen—yes, men have invaded women's sphere. It is inevitable and cannot be changed by words of protest. People do well to accept the inevitable.

Men and women have two distinct spheres, when considered as men and women, but as human beings there is a great field of activity which they may—and do occupy in common. Now it is in this common field of activity that women are asking for equal privileges. There is not really much argument in pointing out that women cannot lay bricks, nor string electric wire, and therefore can never be regarded as man's equal in the matter of citizenship. Man cannot live by bricks alone! And we might with equal foolishness declare that because a man (as a rule) cannot thread a needle, or "turn a heel," therefore he should not ever be allowed to vote. Life is more than laying bricks or threading needles, for we have diverse gifts given to us by an all-wise Creator!

The exceptional woman can do many things, and these exceptions simply prove that there is no rule. There is a woman in the Qu'Appelle Valley who runs a big wheat farm and makes money. The Agricultural Editor of the *Manitoba Free Press* is a woman who is acknowledged to be one of the best crop experts in Canada. Figures do not confuse her! Even if the average woman is not always sure of the binominal theorem, that does not

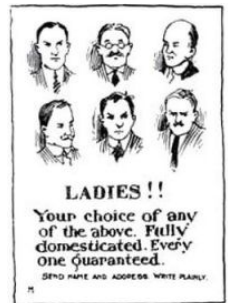
prove that she is incapable of saying who shall make the laws under which she shall live.

But when all other arguments fail, the anti-suffragist can always go back to the “saintly motherhood one,” and “the hand that rocks.” There is the perennial bloom that flourishes in all climates. Women are the mothers of the race—therefore they can be nothing else. When once a woman has a child, they argue, she must stay right on the job of raising it. Children have been blamed for many things very unjustly, and one of the most outstanding of these is that they take up all their mother’s time, and are never able to care for themselves; that no one can do anything for the child but the mother; not even caring for it once every four years. From observation and experience, I wish to state positively that children do grow up—indeed they do—far too soon. The delightful days of babyhood and childhood are all too short, and they grow independent of us; and in a little while the day comes, no matter how hard we try to delay it, when they go out from us, to make their own way in the world, and we realize, with a queer stabbing at our hearts, that in the going of our first-born, our own youthfulness has gone too! And it seems such a cruel short time since he was born!

Yes, it is true. Children do grow up. And when they have gone from their mother, she still has her life to live.

The strong, active, virile woman of fifty, with twenty good years ahead of her, with a wealth of experience and wisdom, with a heart mellowed by time and filled with that large charity which only comes by knowledge—is a force to be reckoned with in the uplift of the world.

But if a woman has had the narrow outlook on life all the way along—if her efforts have been all made on behalf of her own family, she cannot quickly adjust herself to anything else, even when her family no longer need her. There is no sadder sight than the middle-aged woman left alone and purposeless when her family have gone. “I am a woman of fifty, strong, healthy—a college graduate,” I once heard a woman say. “My children no longer need me—my attentions embarrass them—I gave them all my thought, all my time—I stifled every ambition to serve them. Now I am too old to gain new interests. I am a woman without a job.”



Yet this type of woman, who had no thought beyond her own family circle, has been exalted greatly as the perfect mother, the “living sacrifice,” the “perfect slave” of her children.

It was a daring woman who claimed that she had a life of her own; and a perfect right to her own ambitions, hopes, interests, and desires.

But time goes on, and the world moves; and the ways of the world are growing kinder to women. Here and there in a sheltered eddy in the stream of life, where the big currents never are felt, you will find the old mossy arguments that women are intended to be wageless servants dependent upon man’s bounty, with no life or hopes of their own. But the currents of life grow stronger and stronger in these terrible days, and the moss is being broken up, and driven out into the turbulent water.

On March 1st, at 3 o’clock in the afternoon, the Woman Suffrage Bill was given its second reading in the Legislature of Alberta, and the women of the Province gathered in large numbers to hear the debate. For over an hour before the galleries were opened, women waited at the foot of the stairs; white-haired women, women with little children by the hand, women with babies in their arms, smartly-dressed women, alert, tailor-made business women; quiet, dignified and earnest; they were all there; they filled the galleries; they packed every available space. Many were unable to find a place in the gallery, and stood outside in the corridors.



“I consider it an honor to stand anywhere in the building,” one bright-eyed old lady said when someone expressed their regret at not having a seat for her, “and I can read the speeches to-morrow, and imagine that I heard them.”

When the Premier rose to move the second reading of the Bill the silence of the legislative chamber was tense, and the great mass of humanity in the galleries did not appear to breathe. The Premier, in a straightforward way, outlined the reasons for the granting of the franchise; he did not speak of it as a favor, a boon, a gift, or a privilege, but a right, and declared that the extension of the franchise was an act of justice; he did not once refer to us as the “fair sex,” or assure us of his deep respect for us. The Leader of the Opposition, whose advocacy of woman franchise dates back many years, seconded the reading of the Bill; and short speeches were made by other

members. There was only one who opposed it; one timorous brother declared it would break up the home.

On the same day that the Bill got its second reading, and at the same hour, the women of Calgary met together to discuss what women should do with the vote; and they drafted a platform, which must commend itself to all thinking people. Each subject discussed was for human betterment, and social welfare.

Women will make mistakes, of course,—and pay for them. That will be nothing new—they have always paid for men's mistakes. It will be a change to pay for their own. Democracy has its failures—it falls down utterly sometimes, we know, but not so often, or so hopelessly, as any other form of government. There have been beneficent despotisms, when a good king ruled absolutely. But unfortunately the next king was not good, and he drove the country to ruin. "King Jehoshaphat did that which was right in the sight of the Lord, but Amaziah, his son, did that which was evil."

Too much depended upon the man!

Democracy has its faults; the people may run the country to the dogs, but they will run it back again. People, including women, will make mistakes, but in paying for them they will learn wisdom.

THE END

TRANSCRIBER NOTES

Misspelled 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.

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[The end of *Speaking of Women* by Nellie L. McClung]