

The Woman Question Once More.

THERE are the Indian question, and the negro question, and the Chinese question,—and there is the woman question. But has anybody ever heard of a man question, and can any one give a more valid reason for the existence of the one than of the other? When God made man and pronounced his work good, did he leave the woman to be arbitrated upon by the coming race, and, if found worthy, to be stamped with its approval? What is the woman question, and why are we talking about it *ad sudorem*?

Clearly, the woman question must have a real existence: our magazines and journals are filled with its discussion, and our editors do not indulge a propensity for chimeras. Here we have women in law, women before the law, women and social reforms, women and wages, women and Christianity, the higher education of woman, woman in politics, in medicine, in theology—in short, the woman question has resolved itself into a separate question as to woman in every phase of her worth and work. There is no point of observation from which she is not questioned; there is no voice or language where the note of interrogation is not heard.

Now, if we look closely into the mass of all that is written and said on this subject, we find that it gathers itself under two main heads, and may be broadly stated thus: first, the question as to woman's right to live in the world on the same terms as a man does—to work as he works, to be paid as he is paid, to govern as he governs—to use the world, in short, as he uses it, and to be treated by it as it treats him; and, second, the question as to woman's competence to do so.

As to the first question, it would seem that where discussion begins, the question is begged at once. We do not discuss a right. We only assume it. Assertion weakens; nobody insists upon an axiom. It rests not with women to show why they should have all these rights, but with man to show why they should not. "The burden of proof," says Mill, "is supposed to be with those who are against liberty; who contend for any restriction or prohibition, either any limitation of the general freedom of human action, or any disqualification or disparity of privilege, affecting one person or kind of persons, as compared with others. The *a priori* presumption is in favor of freedom and impartiality."

As to the second question,—that of competence,—I beg leave humbly to suggest that this must be settled, not from the outside by talking about it, either in affirmation or denial, but from the inside, by the working of the same law of natural selection and the application of the same practical tests that settle this question for men. The only proof of competence is performance. The world has belonged to those who have taken it, women as well as men.

What have we been talking about all this time, then—a nonentity, a creature of the imagination? Precisely. The woman question is the modern Mrs. Harris, and I am Betsey Prig. "I don't believe there's no such a thing." That there is an artificial something, made up of much assertion and many denials, and denominated the woman question, of course I do not deny. But it has a very ghost-like and precarious existence. Stop talking about it, and it will disappear. If I read my history aright, it did not exist in the early

development of the race. Mill to the contrary notwithstanding, we are not warranted in supposing that the early condition of woman was one of bondage. In the earliest historical records we find that it was the woman, and not the man, who was the head of the family; from her descent was reckoned, from her honors and inheritance came. In Egypt, at the most brilliant period of its history, woman sat upon the throne and held the office of priestess. Colleges were founded for women, and the medical profession belonged to them. Among the Greeks, the intellectual women possessed absolute freedom, and taught the wise men of their day. The Romans made women their priestesses,—as, indeed, did all pagan nations,—and their civil laws for wives and mothers were most liberal. With the striking picture before us which Tacitus gives of the equal privileges of the men and women of the Germanic nations, of their mutual love and confidence, and of the deep respect shown to the women by the men, one can scarcely believe that the woman question troubled that day. Biblical evidence corroborates that of history—it was the woman, and not the man, who first ate of the fruit of the tree of knowledge.

But as civilization advanced, and refined away the primitive rude strength of the race, woman was seen to weaken more rapidly than man. She grew introspective, doubting, hesitant. One day she failed to meet man's might with equal might. Then was born the "woman question."

Strange as it may seem that there has been occasion for so much warring discussion over a matter logically so simple, it is stranger still that most of the discussion has been offered by women themselves. One would suppose that to the task of convincing mankind of her equal rights and competence, she would scarcely need to add that of first convincing herself. Perhaps the suggestion is not out of place that, since the individual woman has but a given amount of nervous energy, and since, after all, women must come back to be governed by the same natural laws—and iron ones, too—that rule the other sex, it would be wiser to conserve the nervous force expended in hammering assertions of equality of strength and privilege, to be transformed into the higher force of competence. That is the key that unlocks all doors to success. Success in anything she wishes she may have, from poultices to politics; but woman must first be ready to offer for it what man does—the patience, faithfulness, and steady effort that go to make up actual and unquestioned competence.

There may be room also for the second suggestion that, if there is anything left to be wished for in the advancement of this much talked of portion of the human race, since progress is usually found to be not in the line of direct force, but the resultant of several indirect forces, the real impetus to woman's advancement will be given, not by those women who insist on keeping the woman question alive by talking about it, but by those steady, quiet workers who have no convictions of duty to their sex, but only to their work, and who, if asked their opinion on the woman question, would probably have to reply in mild perplexity, as did one to me not long ago: "I have been so busy with my work that I really did n't know there was a woman question."

Helen Watterson.