III

"The Woman With Empty Hands"*

This record of a woman's gradual conversion to the woman movement is an interesting and clever study in psychology, as well as a most useful bit of propaganda work. As propaganda, it is all the more valuable because the change of the woman's mental attitude is shown to have proceeded on natural lines of development, from causes arising primarily from personal circumstance, from personal stress and strain of spirit, from personal need of rescue from what the writer calls, "the horror of that desolation, the conviction of utter uselessness." One would wish specially to accentuate this point, because one cannot help thinking that any woman whatsoever, no matter how retiring and how disinclined for public work, would surely, after reading this direct and honest story, told without any pretence, or without any appeal of false pathos, be able to see the path of a larger life with larger possibilities stretching straight before her as a continuation and not as an arrestment or a diversion of the best currents of her nature.

It is to be hoped, therefore, that the book will penetrate into the quietest homes, the most tranquil backwaters, the

*The Woman With Empty Hands. New York: Dodd, Mead and Company.

most secluded hiding places in the world: so that to every woman who reads it, it may be an abiding memory, to be conjured up for inspiring action, if not before, then at least at the moment when "the horror of that desolation, the conviction of utter uselessness" strikes as a chilling blast on a lonely heart.

The story itself is well written and presents in a few words a series of vivid pictures, touched in very lightly, but with an unerring deftness of hand. We are first introduced to the woman selling *The Woman Voter* on lower Broadway, and we can see for ourselves the half indignant, half pained look on the face of the old Southerner who encounters unexpectedly the daughter of his old friend thus engaged in what appears to him a shameless occupation. We are then transported to her sheltered home in Virginia, and our minds easily bridge the chasm separating her from her present career of activity for the movement, and her past life of quiet and smug security. We see her later, *"making a man and child happy,"* and *"shedding abroad the beneficent influence of home"*—that hollow phrase of meaningless value, so often disguising an excuse for being narrow and selfish. We are with her at the crisis when her husband dies, and her little son is spared, to live on, however, only as a wreck; and we are with her as she nurses him and devotes to his service "every waking hour and all her dreams." And when he, too, dies, and she is left alone and realises that no one needs her now, and that her hands are empty, empty forevermore, we can hear her cry in her agony:—"Why even live? Why, O Lord, let me not depart in peace, the woman with the empty hands?"

From this point onward this human document discloses to us the successive psychological stages through which this lonely woman passed until she found out where and how she was needed in another direction, to serve and protect. Each phase is admirably described and closely analysed; but the one which is perhaps the most telling of all, is that early stage, the dawn, as it were, of her development, when she followed about all the widows she saw, and became obsessed by the very thought of widows, for the simple reason that she herself was now a widow; and from her personal sympathy with widows got her first conception of women as a community. After this impetus everything else followed "by natural processes out of natural antecedents." She made the acquaintance of a suffragist, and learned for the first time many of the facts and difficulties of an unsheltered woman's life; and in this way her limited idea of a community expanded until it no longer represented widows only, but every kind of woman, widowed, married or unmarried. She became a suffragist, and took her part in processions and other constitutional methods of agitation. She became a militant when she rescued and took care of a child, a victim to the white slave traffic, and had it burned into her brain once and forevermore that men had shown by their record of neglect that they were not to be trusted to legislate for women, and "that the laws made by men for women must be unmade by women for women." Even for those readers whose views are antagonistic to the views of the author, there should be much that is illuminating and arresting in this story. One would fain direct them to the passage which describes woman's hunger to be needed. To quote a part of it, because in it is contained the whole meaning idealistic and realistic of the woman movement, stated cleverly and clearly as I do not remember to have seen it stated before.

> **Woman's hunger to be needed—and instinct for service—an instinct so profoundly embedded in the very fibres of her being that without it she ceases to be woman.**
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> **Did you ever think of that instinct—think how, back to the very dawn of the world, woman has felt herself needed by her young. Yes, even the beasts of the field and the birds of the air feel it too. . . . For ages piled on ages that instinct has been silently growing, eternally responded to in woman's nature as it never has in man's; and for all**

those ages that instinct has been almost entirely absorbed and gratified within the four walls of home.

And now it is the world that has changed, not woman. Woman as a class is, as it were, shifting up her centre of gravity; as a class she is entering a different plane of conscious activity and passing from the strictly personal to the impersonal. We are following a traced way; we are living out our heritage from the mother instinct of the ages —the desire to be needed—bequeathed us in direct succession since mother instinct came into the world."

Surely this logical presentation ought to go far toward dispelling the illusion, still fondly cherished by the prehistoric, that a woman, in becoming a suffragist, parts with all her womanly attributes.

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