

BAREFOOT AND PREGNANT



Ambrose Bierce
EMANCIPATED WOMAN

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EMANCIPATED WOMAN

excerpt from:

Ambrose Bierce, *A Cynic Looks at Life*

What I should like to know is, how "the enlargement of woman's sphere" by her entrance into various activities of commercial, professional and industrial life benefits the sex. It may please Helen Gougar and satisfy her sense of logical accuracy to say, as she does: "We women must work in order to fill the places left vacant by liquor-drinking men." But who filled these places before? Did they remain vacant, or were there then disappointed applicants, as now? If my memory serves, there has been no time in the period that it covers when the supply of workers—abstemious male workers—was not in excess of the demand. That it has always been so is sufficiently attested by the universally inadequate wage rate.

Employers seldom fail, and never for long, to get all the workmen they need. The field into which women have put their sickles was already overcrowded with reapers. Whatever employment women have obtained has been got by displacing men—who would otherwise be supporting women. Where is the general advantage? We may shout "high tariff," "combination of capital," "demonetization of silver," and what not, but if searching for the cause of augmented poverty and crime, "industrial discontent" and the tramp evil, instead of dogmatically expounding it, we should take some account of this enormous, sudden addition to the number of workers seeking work. If any one thinks that within the brief period of a generation the visible supply of labor can be enormously augmented without profoundly affecting the stability of things and disastrously touching the interests of wage-workers let no rude voice dispel his dream of such maleficent agencies as his slumbrous understanding may joy to affirm. And let our Widows of Ashur unlung themselves in advocacy of quack remedies for evils of which themselves are cause; it remains true that when the contention of two lions for one bone is exacerbated by the accession of a lioness the squabble is not composable by stirring up some bears in the cage adjacent.

Indubitably a woman is under no obligation to sacrifice herself to the good of her sex by foregoing needed employment in the hope that it may fall to a

man gifted with dependent women. Nevertheless our congratulations are more intelligent when bestowed upon her individual head than when sifted into the hair of all Eve's daughters. This is a world of complexities, in which the lines of interest are so intertangled as frequently to transgress that of sex; and one ambitious to help but half the race may profitably know that every effort to that end provokes a counterbalancing mischief. The "enlargement of woman's opportunities" has benefited individual women. It has not benefited the sex as a whole, and has distinctly damaged the race. The mind that can not discern a score of great and irreparable general evils distinctly traceable to "emancipation of woman" is as impregnable to the light as a toad in a rock.

A marked demerit of the new order of things—the *régime* of female commercial service—is that its main advantage accrues, not to the race, not to the sex, not to the class, not to the individual woman, but to the person of least need and worth—the male employer. (Female employers in any considerable number there will not be, but those that we have could give the male ones profitable instruction in grinding the faces of their employees.) This constant increase of the army of labor—always and everywhere too large for the work in sight—by accession of a new contingent of natural oppressibles makes the very teeth of old Munniglut thrill with a poignant delight. It brings in that situation known as two laborers seeking one job—and one of them a person whose bones he can easily grind to make his bread; and Munniglut is a miller of skill and experience, dusted all over with the evidence of his useful craft. When Heaven has assisted the Daughters of Hope to open to women a new "avenue of opportunities" the first to enter and walk therein, like God in the Garden of Eden, is the good Mr. Munniglut, contentedly smoothing the folds out of the superior slope of his paunch, exuding the peculiar aroma of his oleaginous personality and larding the new roadway with the overflow of a righteousness stimulated to action by relish of his own identity. And ever thereafter the subtle suggestion of a fat philistinism lingers along that path of progress like an assertion of a possessory right.

It is God's own crystal truth that in dealing with women unfortunate enough to be compelled to earn their own living and fortunate enough to have wrested from Fate an opportunity to do so, men of business and affairs treat them with about the same delicate consideration that they show to dogs and horses of the inferior breeds. It does not commonly occur to the

wealthy "professional man," or "prominent merchant," to be ashamed to add to his yearly thousands a part of the salary justly due to his female bookkeeper or typewriter, who sits before him all day with an empty belly in order to have an habilimented back. He has a vague, hazy notion that the law of supply and demand is mandatory, and that in submitting himself to it by paying her a half of what he would have to pay a man of inferior efficiency he is supplying the world with a noble example of obedience. I must take the liberty to remind him that the law of supply and demand is not imperative; it is not a statute but a phenomenon. He may reply: "It is imperative; the penalty for disobedience is failure. If I pay more in salaries and wages than I need to, my competitor will not; and with that advantage he will drive me from the field." If his margin of profit is so small that he must eke it out by coining the sweat of his workwomen into nickels I've nothing to say to him. Let him adopt in peace the motto, "I cheat to eat." I do not know why he should eat, but Nature, who has provided sustenance for the worming sparrow, the sparrowing owl and the owling eagle, approves the needy man of prey and makes a place for him at table.

Human nature is pretty well balanced; for every lacking virtue there is a rough substitute that will serve at a pinch—as cunning is the wisdom of the unwise, and ferocity the courage of the coward. Nobody is altogether bad; the scoundrel who has grown rich by underpaying workmen in his factory will sometimes endow an asylum for indigent seamen. To oppress one's own workmen, and provide for the workmen of a neighbor—to skin those in charge of one's own interests while cottoning and oiling the residuary product of another's skinnery—that is not very good benevolence, nor very good sense, but it serves in place of both. The man who eats *pâté de fois gras* in the sweat of his girl cashier's face, or wears purple and fine linen in order that his typewriter may have an eocene gown and a pliocene hat, seems a tolerably satisfactory specimen of the genus thief; but let us not forget that in his own home—a fairly good one—he may enjoy and merit that highest and most honorable title on the scroll of woman's favor, "a good provider." One having a claim to that glittering distinction should enjoy immunity from the coarse and troublesome question, "From whose backs and bellies do you provide?"

So much for the material results to the sex. What are the moral results? One does not like to speak of them, particularly to those who do not and can not know—to good women in whose innocent minds female immorality is

inseparable from flashy gowning and the painted face; to foolish, book-taught men who honestly believe in some protective sanctity that hedges womanhood. If men of the world with years enough to have lived out of the old *régime* into the new would testify in this matter there would ensue a great rattling of dry bones in bodices of reform-ladies. Nay, if the young man about town, knowing nothing of how things were in the "dark backward and abysm of time," but something of the moral distance between even so free-running a creature as the society girl and the average working girl of the factory, the shop and the office, would speak out (under assurance of immunity from prosecution) his testimony would be a surprise to the cartilaginous virgins, blowsy matrons, acrid relicts and hairy males of Emancipation. It would pain, too, some very worthy but unobservant persons not in sympathy with "the cause."

Certain significant facts are within the purview of all but the very young and the comfortably blind. To the woman of to-day the man of to-day is imperfectly polite. In place of reverence he gives her "deference"; to the language of compliment has succeeded the language of raillery. Men have almost forgotten how to bow. Doubtless the advanced female prefers the new manner, as may some of her less forward sisters, thinking it more sincere. It is not; our giddy grandfather talked high-flown nonsense because his heart had tangled his tongue. He treated his woman more civilly than we ours because he loved her better. He never had seen her on the "rostrum" and in the lobby, never had heard her in advocacy of herself, never had read her confessions of his sins, never had felt the stress of her competition, nor himself assisted by daily personal contact in rubbing the bloom off her. He did not know that her virtues were due to her secluded life, but thought, dear old boy, that they were a gift of God.