

THE
FAMILY IN THE MAKING

AN HISTORIC SKETCH

BY
MARY BURT MESSER



G. P. PUTNAM'S SONS
NEW YORK — LONDON
The Knickerbocker Press
1928

THE FAMILY IN THE MAKING

~
Copyright, 1928
by
Mary Burt Messer



Made in the United States of America

To
LORENZO DOW HARVEY

of woman—a departure from accredited values, the beaten path; for the attainment of partial—or full—equality with men, as we shall discover, does not close her case.

CHAPTER XXIV

THE ADVANCE OF WOMAN

IN the Spring of 1858 Buckle, author of the once famous, now somewhat outdated, *History of Civilization*, delivered at the Royal Institution of London his only public lecture, of which the subject was "The Influence of Woman on the Progress of Knowledge." The thesis of this lecture, somewhat isolated from the thought-currents of the hour which were finding expression rather in the contentions of John Stuart Mill, is of marked interest in relation to the later history of womankind, for there is here struck an interpretive note decidedly unique in discussions of cultural progress. "So far from women exercising little or no influence over the progress of knowledge," declared Buckle at this time, "they are capable of exercising and have exercised an enormous influence," and he insisted that this influence was so great that it was hardly possible to assign limits to it, and that great as it was it might with advantage be still further increased. He saw the influence in question as "an undercurrent below the surface—and therefore invisible to hasty observers," and he felt that it had produced the most important results, having affected the shape, character and amount of our knowledge. To proceed to the heart of his analysis of woman's tendency and contribution, he saw in her the mental habit which proceeds spontaneously from the internal to the external in its attack on life, in short he found in woman the natural exponent of a deductive rather than an inductive method, one who, to use his own somewhat picturesque terms in this connection:

"explains phenomena by descending on them instead of rising from them."

This habit, according to Buckle, had "rendered an immense though unconscious service to the progress of knowledge by preventing scientific investigators from being as exclusively inductive as they would otherwise be." "If it were not for them" (women), he asserts, "scientific men would be much too inductive." From which point the lecturer proceeds with a certain lift of vision to declare that "the field of thought is rapidly widening, and as the horizon recedes on every side it will soon be impossible for the more logical operation of the understanding to cover the whole of that enormous outlying domain." Again, "Those who are most anxious that the boundaries of knowledge should be enlarged, ought to be most eager that the influence of women should be increased in order that every resource of the human mind may be at once and quickly brought into play." "When the human mind once steadily combines the whole of its powers," he concludes, "it will be more than a match for the difficulties presented by the external world."

It may be said of these observations that the striking feature in their time and place is a recognition of qualitative differences between men and women not to be interpreted at the latter's expense, and at the same time not exclusively associated (in time-honored fashion) with the parental function. And it is interesting to note that woman is seen not only as possessing possibilities in the field of general values, but as one who has continually expressed there an obscure but potent influence. Woman does not necessarily rise, then, from nothing to something as she presses forward into an equalitarian program—this would be the view-point of Buckle. Even in the midst of her civil and domestic disabilities she has been continually modifying society and even the pursuit of

knowledge by attitudes not to be overlooked, even though it has proven difficult, perhaps impossible, to keep the score of her proceedings in the same terms as those of men.

This particular view-point, however, for all its stimulating quality (as looked upon from the firm vantage-ground of today) had a serious draw-back, and it is not surprising that it was overridden in the sturdy forward march of the suffrage movement, for the differentiation of woman, once granted in this way, tended to hold her in the old limited grooves. Here was that "indirect influence" which was the arch-enemy of civil freedom, here was a defense of the old feminine irrationality which tended to defeat a sound educational program, here was a woman who by her exceptionality was not granted a position in the liberal movements advancing the human race. Woman was to be seen at this point either as a human being, in the sense that men are human beings, or as a ward; and the zest of the hour carried her forward to the braver, more desirable ground. This new position was most easily sustained by holding to a kind of quantitative rather than a qualitative program. No qualitative difference between men and women was conceded: in short the feminine property had been so long identified with weakness that the boldest maneuver was to abandon it completely. Society was to be seen henceforth as made up of valid human beings. In short, the lecture of Buckle, in somewhat yellowed essay form, was destined to spend the better part of a century on the library shelf, while that of Mill was to be set to the music of marching feet.

Yet there was an inevitable pitfall confronting woman in her coming forth as a human being, and that was that her model in the way of a human being was a type of man. That is, the concession, so far as sex-modifications were concerned, was all hers. In brief, her humanization was to

a large degree frank masculinization, so that the triumph of the masculine characteristic was in a sense more complete after her admission into the world of affairs than ever before. The home, amateurish, out of touch with the trend of things, had yet served as a kind of still spot in which woman had been left much to her own devices. What her thought process was no one knew very clearly (it was into this field that Buckle penetrated with his intuition or speculation): it was certainly not man's, owing to her exclusion from active affairs, from education, from that which made him what he was. It was generally believed that woman was religious—in an unofficial way—and this proclivity was welcomed, first possibly for a real reason, that there was here conserved an actual religious note; beyond this for the reason that this program supported a program of subordination. In any case it was quite obvious that during a long stretch of centuries woman was to be found living in a very different way from man, doing a very different type of work, and experiencing a very different set of emotional reactions, (as the situation would be expressed in the current phrase).

Given this situation, it would seem that nothing could be of more interest and value than a real and naive self-expression on the part of this long-silent one upon her entrance into a world of somewhat stereotyped procedure. And yet there were almost insurmountable obstacles in the way of expression of this kind. Assuming that there did exist—in the very nature of the case—something in the way of a unique self in woman, it was almost too much to expect that it should break forth from its centuries of twilight and achieve expression in the stark glare of a thoroughly masculine world. It must be borne in mind that this was a world extraordinarily confident of its values—which were only to be disturbed momentarily by such men as poets—and it was not looking for any fresh

and naïve commentary on its own procedure, or any contribution couched in other than familiar terms. Certainly it was not looking for anything of the sort from such a despised quarter as woman's mind. There was little curiosity, then, about what the newcomer in civilization was likely to feel or think; the most to be hoped for was that she should enter the body politic without disturbing the public peace, and prove as biddable and accommodating in the new situation as in the old.

And indeed it was not easy for her to discover any other way than that of pure tutelage and accommodation, since the entire world surrounding her was so firmly organized in the hands of men. First there were the fields of work not only developed along the lines of man's imagination but subject to his immediate control. Then there was the enormous project of education by means of which the unit of masculine society was to find its way not only into all the techniques of accomplishment, but into all the mental atmospheres in which life was led, in which things were conceived and done. A prelude to any thoroughgoing grasp of and feeling for this masculine culture was a knowledge of that great saga of man's attainment—history, as written: history with its essentially masculine preoccupations,—war, politics, finance. Then it was necessary to acquire at least a measure of that searching knowledge of externals which was to stand possibly as man's supreme achievement, by his own appraisal. For this scientific knowledge was linked with a great extension of material power, astonishing manipulations, and but for its chastening failure to do as well with human beings as with things, it would certainly have stood forth as the dominion which was to distinguish man from the brute world. Beyond all this was an organized religion interpreted and administered by men, the official custodians of spiritual values.

The enfranchisement of woman, then, was to mean admission not only into the body politic as designed by men and conducted by them, but into an entire man-made world, into an acceptance of a typically masculine mental process at every turn. It was thus the case that any differentiated value was apt to disappear in woman precisely in proportion to her success on the new terms. Thrown into this real but largely unrecognized dilemma, woman in the majority of cases went straight on, doing the thing before her with astonishing proficiency, and enjoying her freedom from home captivity too much really to orient herself in the new situation. And while a certain mediocrity of imitation inhered in this program from the very first, it was lost for a time in the general excitement attending a change and real step of progress.

With the subsidence of the suffrage campaigns, however, marked by their heroic temper, with the settling down to the real business of life on new terms, certain things became apparent—even to the most ardent champions of womankind. It was literally the case that the bright promises of the suffrage movement were not being fulfilled, at least not in the mode predicted. It was not that the enfranchisement of woman had brought with it any serious ills—even divorce was acquiring its headway earlier, and could not be laid squarely at its door. But there was creeping in a certain apathy of purpose—at least a limited fulfilment (so it would seem) of the first shining vision. From the standpoint of numbers women were an astonishingly feeble block in affairs of legislation, with the bars practically down; their economic independence, squarely viewed, did not seem to augur a mighty advance upon citadels of financial control. Their appearance all along the line was that of widely diffused subordinates, carrying with it the sense of performance reiterated, rather than the infusion into

the life of the world of fresh force, of new enthusiasm and vitality—new elements, or at least new uses for the old. The humanitarian modifications and reforms did not languish—they were carried on; the theme of equality was pressed into its fuller implications. But if the “sorry scheme of things entire” was to have been remoulded nearer to the desire of human beings, not even the most loyal champion of woman could claim that the thing had been visibly attained by her political emancipation—or professional advance. Either the meaning of the contribution of woman was to be appraised in a different way, or the limited character of her attainment was to be frankly admitted on every hand.

The current of thought running in this critical direction with respect to woman was coming to be more and more frequently expressed as time went on, especially on the part of men—those men who had conceded the humanization of woman, perhaps, with a reluctance not quite overcome. Here was a complex attitude, an overtone of doubt and question, especially in those disillusioned to a degree with the world of man's own making. In the midst of the sum of things as contrived by him—in the midst of all his sanity, his science, his attainment—was it not true of man that he had somehow looked to woman for a kind of respite, a spiritual refreshment beyond his power to define? Whether she was absurd or inscrutable he could not tell: he was loth none the less to lose this incalculable something. To bare the actual truth, up to the hour of her enfranchisement had he not vested in her that *superstition*, that trust in the apparently irrational, without which it is impossible for the soul to live? Woman having given herself over so trustingly to his tutelage, is he to be confronted henceforth with nothing but the array of his own unending pigeonholes? Is there to be henceforth no atmosphere, nothing but the stark forms of

machinery, system, masculinity? Even of "equality," of "rights"? Is it to be the doom of the more sensitive among men that they are to perish of their own dominion, unless there is to be discovered to them something which shall have the force of a revivifying newness, a beyond?

The dominant sex! It becomes necessary at this point, given the fine philosophic clue of the Vaertings, to attempt to see the social whole with a more over-arching vision than hitherto, to the end of discovering its larger rhythms, its more elemental factors. And from this vantage-ground it appears that this prevailing masculinity which tends to limit the full expression of the feminine factor at every turn is not indissolubly associated with dominion in its nature, but is subject instead to the mighty flux standing for the surgence and resurgence of certain values in the creative movement of the human race. Now the feminine is caught up by advancing life, used and exalted (as attested to at least to a degree in primitive society, in a more pervasive sense, in the Middle Ages); now the masculine is borne forward, held aloft in a position of authority and dominion, as in industrial civilization. Best of all—that which must be prefigured rather than fully seen at the present hour—the two correlated factors, both comprehended and so harmoniously attuned, are finally advanced in full expression of the potencies of generic man.

With this recognition of a larger, a more free-flowing movement in the affair of human life—possible only in contemplation of a longer sweep of time than history records—we are forced to see not only the society of any given period but its religion also in a relative place. From this standpoint of vision the most transcendent values are inevitably linked with the social aspects of the age in which they appear, as for example when vestiges of woman's social eminence are correlated with hints as to

the spiritual importance and priority of the feminine idea. In the path of matriarchy or near-matriarchy we thus discover stories of creation in which Adam is conceived as being created out of the rib of Eve; suggestions from recently discovered Babylonian tablets that it was man who first tasted the forbidden fruit; evidences of the precedence of goddesses over gods in Crete, in Egypt—examples further supported by the findings of the distinguished Semitic student, W. Robertson Smith, who discovers deities originally female changing their sex and becoming gods, a religious change corresponding with suggestions of a vanishing matriarchy already noted in preceding pages. Other students writing with authority in the field of myths observe that the position of the female deities usually depends upon the social position of woman. It is also noted that female deities are frequently conceived as having more spiritual qualities than the male, as more pervasive presences. There are myths indeed which conceive of woman as alone endowed with immortal life.

In the light of these hints and vestiges the masculine dominance of man in the later world-religions ceases to be a matter of surprise, presenting itself instead as normal to every period in which man stands forth as the dominant sex. The masculinization of the Christian Church—so complete as to have lost for centuries any trace of its historic origin—is thus to be accounted for in terms of the political and social dominance of the masculine half of the human race. Historic Christianity thus runs true to type as the religion of a patriarchate; but in so doing it is astonishing to see how it loses the potencies and uniqueness of Christianity itself, which was originally projected into life as a revelation at variance with patriarchal claims, the tendencies of an official priesthood exclusively identified with a régime of men. With this

identification vanishes the very general faculty of healing, the doing of the "first works" so miraculous in character that the reputation of the early Christians was rather that of miracle-doers than dogmatic teachers. And this fixed masculine dominance not only prevails in the great Roman church, but penetrates with nearly undiminished force into the heretical movement of the Protestant Reformation. Socially, politically and in terms of organized religion woman has been thus accorded in Western as in Eastern civilization a completely logical position as the subordinate sex, and such has been her status until very recent times. So close indeed is the psychic relation of these social and religious factors that in the light of what may be called the larger history it is not easy to conceive of her free movement in any of these fields with her movement in the others bound.

It is thus apparent that in a society identified with a religion of masculine ideology the advance of woman (in its outward aspects) is an advance held firmly in areas of subordination, and highly conditioned by the most elemental modes and thought-processes of men. Under these circumstances there may be observed in her case an extended lateral movement—but little upward lift. The major enterprise on her part is wanting, the affair of scope and influence at all comparable to that repeatedly characteristic of the work of men—for the very air is charged with conceptions against which the individual performance has a tendency to beat in vain. Not entirely in vain: because the ultimate change is to be wrought in part by just such pressures exerted everywhere, each falling short of free expression, but each contributing to the change in equilibrium which alone is able to release woman into accomplishment, untrammelled speech. Yet here is a dominant thought which tends to align every possible movement with its major trend, to confer its

tone and color—and limitation—upon every undertaking conceived within its range.

What must be looked for then, if woman is to advance as woman, if she is to make articulate an influence which has steadily but obscurely modified life for good (as Buckle has believed), is a break in the traditional barrier wider and more far-reaching than that which has been associated up to this point with her way of progress. In short—if we are to proceed with knowledge of historic rhythms—there must be looked for not only openings into social, political and industrial fields, but a breach in the wall of the historic Christianity which has built its churches and its systems on the official exclusion of woman as an inferior sex—for all the elusive feminism of the Middle Ages, the clarity of the Quakers, the keying of certain of the later Protestant groups to civic changes. We must look indeed for a break not only in the usages and overtones of Christian civilization, but in the conceptions which lie nearer its very base.

So looking we shall find the phenomenon in question is not to be sought in a future vision, but is to be discovered—directly and surprisingly—in contemporary life; at least it may be discovered there if we are able to divest the mind of preconceptions and to view the whole with fresh eyes. For in the United States, breaking through the entire scheme of accepted values, and carrying its methods into all quarters of the world, the movement of Christian Science stands forth as a conception of the Christian religion drawn from woman's insight, quietly advancing woman to a position of equality with man in the Christian church, and, conceiving the spiritual or creative principle in feminine as well as in masculine terms. The maternal attribute of the divine is thus advanced in connection with the paternal attribute—not as in the poetic overtones of Virgin worship, but with the living potencies of

an operative truth, a conception intimately associated with the restoration to Christianity of its lost power of healing.

Significantly enough, in this accomplishment in the field of spiritual intuition, we have on the part of woman a single attainment unrivalled in her historic record, a major enterprise remarkable not only for its scope and influence, but as the projection of a unique vision at variance with the accredited modes of men. As contrasted with other movements making for woman's political, educational and professional advancement, this movement (free of these specific aims) proceeds without a gesture of discrimination between the case of woman and that of all humankind; but it avoids by its very character and history the tendencies of imitation which have beset woman's path, and thus releases something in the way of an untrammelled contribution. Moreover it is a movement not based on a petitioning of men, but one which has marched steadily along its straight—and derided—path without support or favor from the administrators of life as organized. It has not asked for half of the world as man has made it; even more significantly, it has not asked for half of the historic Christian church. Continually dependent upon its striking "works," its enterprise has been the direct expression of an active principle, the discovery of its leader, Mary Baker Eddy, whose *Science and Health with Key to the Scriptures*, however baffling to scholars, has commanded the attention of an enormous—and increasingly enormous—public for over half a century. An international newspaper bearing the name of the movement and founded by its leader is valued by enlightened readers throughout the world, and is even conceded to have influenced all journalism in the direction of its ideals.

Here on the whole is an undertaking, an event in the human chronicle, which by virtue of its magnitude alone

should compel the thoughtful consideration of the social student, especially the student of the history of woman—the more indeed that it is a movement defying appraisal according to the standards habitually applied to the work of men. We have here in fact something which has actually proceeded from a differentiated value in womankind—not discoverable in woman as a unique possession, but conserved in her or revealed through her in our day as a further reach of the perceptive possibilities of the human race. There is here caught up and saved through the instrumentality of woman's intuition (so evidence would indicate) a primitive Christian meaning, once registered by illuminated men and thereafter lost—a realization able to restore to Christianity something of the first great works. Is there not possibly presented here at the same time a valid approach to the phenomena of life which will eventually be seen and understood as a contribution to the larger "science" that must avail itself of every true perception and attribute of mind in its quest for knowledge?

As to the social significance of this new movement carrying forward an intuitive value, especially as touching family problems, it may be said that this is to be read at the present hour rather in general aspects than in direct application to the formulation of institutional life. This is partly because a movement involving such new attitudes and devoted so largely to the elemental work of healing requires in the nature of the case more than half a century to realize its own implications—like the Protestant movement before it, from which it traces its lineal descent. Further, it is essentially characteristic of the new attitudes in question that they do not concern themselves with the manipulation of outward circumstance, with schemes and systems, but involve instead a solution of all problems in terms of the inner life. They revive the early Christian

emphasis on the inner or spiritual man, as distinguished from the material personality, the man of flesh, but the relation between the divine and human at this point is wrought out in a way which departs widely from the asceticism of the Middle Ages in that it provides for the ascent of man through the upward steps of a natural life. Indeed it is a distinguishing mark of the new Christian interpretation advanced by woman that it moves from the resistant Puritan position into conceptions of fulfilment and abundance, in spite of the fact that it proceeds from what would be popularly termed a mystic premise.

In any case we discover here a movement of immense scope and influence which does actually advance spiritual values palpable to woman and which does force a breach in the historic wall which has so long excluded her from free expression in the Christian church. Interestingly enough this unique feminine contribution may be broadly classified as falling in the field of deductive thought and in this sense fulfilling to a degree at least the prophecy of Buckle, who believed that the cultural gift of woman was not to be identified wholly with that of man, but was to be advanced as a distinct addition to or amplification of his powers of thought. It may be said further of this feminine gift that it verifies a certain profound wisdom in the world's platitudes in that it confirms the age-old association of woman with the ministry of love.

From the latter standpoint it may be said that woman's life has been enriched and socialized at the same time that it has been handicapped in the narrowest professional sense by family obligations, so that she is likely to carry forward, with her less hampered movement, a human maturity of high value in the wider fields. She is likely to exhibit a capacity for welding, for adjusting the claims of the young, the old, the needy—the enormous army of human beings not able to respond at all times to

the hard-and-fast demands of systems. In short, society may turn to her to carry the concept of justice into its New Testament implications, a service for which her way of life has been preparing her in the midst of her very disabilities and humiliations.

But such a contribution cannot be seen as a swing of the pendulum in the direction of dominion on the part of womankind. At one with the finest intuitions of the suffrage movement and democracy itself, it aims at a getting away from the very theory of dominion. In this it supports the genuine desire of the present age to lead captivity captive, that the iron hand of institutions may rest as lightly as possible on those whose freedom begins to manifest the faint outlines of an inner law. In this sense the strong structural lines of the historic family grow faint only to make room for the finer, more perfect affiliation of men and women and their children, of friend and friend, as bound primarily by a law of spontaneous love. This spontaneity, however, as spiritually understood, is built on the conquest not the release of the lower nature of humankind—an interpretation which gives dignity to the long fumbling struggle of institutional life.