

## ADDRESS DELIVERED BY MRS. POTTER PALMER,

PRESIDENT OF THE BOARD OF LADY MANAGERS.

ON THE OCCASION OF THE OPENING OF THE WOMAN'S BUILDING, MAY 1st, 1893.

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MEMBERS OF THE BOARD OF LADY MANAGERS AND FRIENDS:—The moment of fruition has arrived. Hopes which for more than two years have gradually been gaining strength and definiteness now become realities. Today the Exposition opens its gates. On this occasion of the formal opening of the Woman's Building, the Board of Lady Managers is singularly fortunate in having the honor to welcome distinguished official representatives of many of the able foreign committees and of the state boards, which have so effectively co-operated with it in accomplishing the results now to be disclosed to the world.

We have traveled together a hitherto untrodden path, have been subjected to tedious delays and overshadowed by dark clouds, which threatened disaster to our enterprise. We have been obliged to march with peace offerings in our hands, lest hostile motives be ascribed to us. Our burdens have been greatly lightened, however, by the spontaneous sympathy and aid which have reached us from women in every part of the world, and which have proved an added incentive and inspiration. Experience has brought many surprises, not the least of which is an impressive realization of the unity of human interests, notwithstanding differences of race, government, language, temperament and external conditions. The people of all civilized lands are studying the same problems. Each success and each failure in testing and developing new theories is valuable to the whole world. Social and industrial questions are paramount, and are receiving the thoughtful consideration of statesmen, students, political economists, humanitarians, employers and employed.

The few forward steps which have been taken during our boasted nineteenth century—the so-called age of invention—have promoted the general use of machinery and economic motive powers with the result of cheapening manufactured articles, but have not afforded the relief to the masses, which was expected. The struggle for bread is as fierce as of old. We find, everywhere, the same picture presented—overcrowded industrial centers, factories surrounded by dense populations of operatives, keen competition, many individuals forced to use such strenuous effort that vitality is drained, in the struggle to maintain life under conditions so uninviting and discouraging that it scarcely seems worth living. It is a grave reproach to modern enlightenment that we seem no nearer the solution of many of these problems than during feudal days.

It is not our province, however, to discuss these weighty questions, except in so far as they affect the compensation paid to wage earners, and more especially that paid to women and children. Of all existing forms of injustice, there is none so cruel and inconsistent as is the position in which women are placed with regard to self-maintenance—the calm ignoring of their rights and responsibilities, which has gone on for centuries. If the economic conditions are hard for men to meet, subjected as they



are to the constant weeding out of the less expert and steady hands, it is evident that women, thrown upon their own resources, have a frightful struggle to endure, especially as they have always to contend against a public sentiment which discountenances their seeking industrial employment as a means of livelihood.

The theory which exists among the conservative people, that the sphere of woman is her home—that it is unfeminine, even monstrous, for her to wish to take a place beside or to compete with men in the various lucrative industries—tells heavily against her, for manufacturers and producers take advantage of it to disparage her work and obtain her services for a nominal price, thus profiting largely by the necessities and helplessness of their victim. That so many should cling to respectable occupations while starving in following them, and should refuse to yield to discouragement and despair, shows a high quality of steadfastness and principle. These are the real heroines of life, whose handiwork we are proud to install in the Exposition, because it has been produced in factories, workshops and studios under the most adverse conditions and with the most sublime patience and endurance.

Men of the finest and most chivalric type, who have poetic theories about the sanctity of the home and the refining, elevating influence of woman in it, theories inherited from the days of romance and chivalry, which we wish might prevail forever—these men have asked many times whether the Board of Lady Managers thinks it well to promote a sentiment which may tend to destroy the home by encouraging occupations for women which take them out of it. We feel, therefore, obliged to state our belief that every woman, who is presiding over a happy home, is fulfilling her highest and truest function, and could not be lured from it by temptations offered by factories or studios. Would that the eyes of these idealists could be thoroughly opened, that they might see, not the fortunate few of a favored class, with whom they possibly are in daily contact, but the general status of the labor market throughout the world and the relation to it of women. They might be astonished to learn that the conditions under which the vast majority of the "gentler sex" are living, are not so ideal as they assume; that each is not "dwelling in a home of which she is the queen, with a manly and loving arm to shield her from rough contact with life." Because of the impossibility of reconciling their theories with the stern facts, they might possibly consent to forgive the offense of widows with dependent children and those wives of drunkards and criminals who so far forget the high standard established for them as to attempt to earn for themselves daily bread, lacking which they must perish. The necessity for their work under present conditions is too evident and too urgent to be questioned. They must work or they must starve.

We are forced, therefore, to turn from the realm of fancy to meet and deal with existing facts. The absence of a just and general appreciation of the truth concerning the position and status of women has caused us to call special attention to it and to make a point of attempting to create, by means of the Exposition, a well defined public sentiment in regard to their rights and duties, and the propriety of their becoming not only self-supporting, but able to assist in maintaining their families when necessary. We hope that the statistics which the Board of Lady Managers has been so earnestly attempting to secure may give a correct idea of the number of women—not only those without natural protectors, or those thrown suddenly upon their own resources, but the number of wives of mechanics, laborers, artists, artisans and workmen of every degree—who are forced to work shoulder to shoulder with their husbands in order to maintain the family.

There are two classes of the community who wish to restrain women from actual participation in the business of the world, and each gives apparently very strong reasons in support of its views. These are, first, the idealists, who hold the opinion already mentioned that woman should be tenderly guarded and cherished within the sacred precincts of the home, which alone is her sphere of action; and, second, certain political economists, with whom may be ranged most of the men engaged in the profitable pursuit of the industries of the world, who object to the competition that would



result from the participation of women, because they claim that it would reduce the general scale of wages paid, and lessen the earning power of men, who require their present incomes to maintain their families. Plausible as these theories are, we can not accept them without pausing to inquire, what then would become of all but the very few women who have independent fortunes or are the happy wives of men able and willing to support them? The interests of probably three-fourths of the women in the world are at stake. Are they to be allowed to starve, or to rush to self-destruction? If not permitted to work, what course is open to them?

Our oriental neighbors have seen the logic of the situation far more clearly than we and have been consistent enough to meet it, without shrinking from heroic measures when necessary. The question is happily solved in some countries by the practice of polygamy, which allows every man to maintain as many wives as his means permit. In others etiquette requires that a newly made widow be burned on the funeral pyre with her husband's body, while the Chinese take the precaution to drown surplus female children. It would seem that any of these methods is more logical and less cruel than the system we pursue of permitting the entire female population to live, but making it impossible for those born to poverty to maintain themselves in comfort, because they are hampered by a caste feeling almost as strong as that ruling India, which will not permit them to work on equal terms with men. These unhappy members of an inferior class must be content to remain in penury, living on the crumbs that fall from tables spread for those of another and higher caste. This relative position has been exacted on the one side, accepted on the other. It has been considered by each an inexorable law.

We shrink with horror from the unjust treatment of child widows and other unfortunates on the opposite side of the globe, but our own follies and inconsistencies are too close to our eyes for us to see them in proper perspective. Sentimentalists should have reduced their theories to set terms and applied them. They have had ample time and opportunity to provide means by which helpless women could be cherished, protected and removed from the storm and stress of life. Women could have asked nothing better. We have no respect for a theory which touches only the favored few who do not need its protection and leaves unaided the great mass it has assisted to push into the mire. Talk not of it, therefore, until it can be uttered, not only in polite drawing rooms, but also in factories and workshops without a blush of shame for its weakness and inefficiency.

But the sentimentalist again exclaims: "Would you have woman step down from her pedestal in order to enter practical life?" Yes! A thousand times, yes! If we can really find, after a careful search, any women mounted upon pedestals, we should willingly ask them to step down—in order that they may meet and help to uplift their sisters. Freedom and justice for all are infinitely more to be desired than pedestals for a few. I beg leave to state that, personally, I am not a believer in the pedestal theory—never having seen an actual example of it, and that I always suspect the motives of anyone advancing it. It does not represent the natural and fine relation between husband and wife, or between friends. They should stand side by side, the fine qualities of each supplementing and assisting those of the other. Men naturally cherish high ideals of womanhood, as women do of manliness and strength. These ideals will dwell with the human race forever without our striving to preserve and protect them.

If we now look at the question from the economic standpoint and decide for good and logical reasons that women should be kept out of industrial fields in order that they may leave the harvest for men, whose duty it is to maintain women and children, then by all the laws of justice and equity these latter should be provided for by their natural protectors, and if deprived of them should become wards of the state, and be maintained in honor and comfort. The acceptance of even this doctrine of tardy justice would not, however, I feel sure, be welcomed by the woman of today who, having had a taste of independence, will never willingly relinquish it. They have no desire to be



helpless and dependent. Having the full use of their faculties, they rejoice in exercising them. This is entirely in conformity with the trend of modern thought, which is in the direction of establishing proper respect for human individuality and the right of self-development. Our highest aim now is to train each individual to find happiness in the full and healthy exercise of the gifts bestowed by generous nature. Ignorance is too expensive and wasteful to be tolerated. We cannot afford to lose the reserve power of any individual.

We advocate, therefore, the thorough education and training of woman to fit her to meet whatever fate life may bring; not only to prepare her for the factory and workshop, for the professions and arts, but, more important than all else, to prepare her for presiding over the home. It is for this, the highest field of woman's effort, that the broadest training and greatest preparation are required. The illogical, extravagant, whimsical, unthrifty mother and housekeeper belongs to the dark ages. She has no place in our present era of enlightenment. No course of study is too elaborate, no amount of knowledge and culture too abundant to meet the actual requirements of the wife and mother in dealing with the interests committed to her hands.

The board does not wish to be understood as placing an extravagant or sentimental value upon the work of any woman because of her sex. It willingly acknowledges that the industries, arts and commerce of the world have been for centuries in the hands of men who have carefully trained themselves for the responsibilities devolving upon them, and who have, consequently, without question, contributed vastly more than women to the valuable thought, research, invention, science, art and literature, which have become the rich heritage of the human race. Notwithstanding their disadvantages, however, a few gifted women have made their value felt, and have rendered exceptional service to the cause of humanity.

Realizing that woman can never hope to receive the proper recompense for her services until her usefulness and success are not only demonstrated but fully understood and acknowledged, we have taken advantage of the opportunity presented by the Exposition to bring together such evidences of her skill in the various industries, arts and professions, as may convince the world that ability is not a matter of sex. Urged by necessity, she has shown that her powers are the same as her brothers', and that like encouragement and fostering care may develop her to an equal point of usefulness.

The fact that the Woman's Building is so small that it can hold only a tithe of the beautiful objects offered, has been a great disadvantage. The character of the exhibits and the high standard attained by most of them serve, therefore, only as an index of the quality and range of the material from which we have drawn. When our invitation asking co-operation was sent to foreign lands the commissioners already appointed generally smiled doubtfully and explained that their women were doing nothing; that they would not feel inclined to help us, and, in many cases, stated that it was not the custom of their country for women to take part in any public effort, that they only attended to social duties. But as soon as these ladies received our message, sent in a brief and formal letter, the free masonry among women proved to be such that they needed no explanation; they understood at once the possibilities. Strong committees were immediately formed of women having large hearts and brains, women who cannot selfishly enjoy the ease of their own lives without giving a thought to their helpless and wretched sisters.

Our unbounded thanks are due to the exalted and influential personages who became, in their respective countries, patronesses and leaders of the movement inaugurated by us to represent what women are doing. They entered with appreciation into our work for the Exposition because they saw an opportunity, which they gracefully and delicately veiled behind the magnificent laces forming the central objects in their superb collections, to aid their women by opening new markets for their industries.

The Exposition will thus benefit women, not alone by means of the material objects brought together, but there will be a more lasting and permanent result through the interchange of thought and sympathy among influential and leading women of all

countries now for the first time working together with a common purpose and an established means of communication. Government recognition and sanction give to these committees of women official character and dignity. Their work has been magnificently successful, and the reports which will be made of the conditions found to exist will be placed on record as public documents among the archives of every country. Realizing the needs and responsibilities of the hour, and that this will be the first official utterance of women on behalf of women, we shall weigh well our words, words which should be so judicious and convincing that hereafter they may be treasured among the happy influences which made possible new and better conditions.

We rejoice in the possession of this beautiful building, in which we meet today, in its delicacy, symmetry and strength. We honor our architect and the artists who have given not only their hands but their hearts and their genius to its decoration. For it women in every part of the world have been exerting their efforts and talents, for it looms have wrought their most delicate fabrics, the needle has flashed in the hands of maidens under tropical suns, the lacemaker has bent over her cushion weaving her most artful web, the brush and chisel have sought to give form and reality to the visions haunting the brain of the artist—all have wrought with the thought of making our building worthy to serve its great end. We thank them all for their successful efforts.

The eloquent President of the Commission last October dedicated the great Exposition buildings to humanity. We now dedicate the Woman's Building to an elevated womanhood—knowing that by so doing we shall best serve the cause of humanity.

