

THE REVOLT OF YOUTH

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OF late *The Woman Citizen*, a monthly publication devoted to the political enlightenment of American women, has been treating its readers to an exciting debate on the subject of The New Generation. The first instalment, "A Cry of an American Mother", was published in the March issue, and each subsequent number added more fuel to the flame thus kindled.

The American mother, whose "cry" has echoed and reechoed from the Atlantic to the Pacific, is apparently a woman of wealth, culture, and refinement. Like thousands of mothers, she could easily understand how somebody else's daughter might be tempted by the allurements of such diversions as petting parties, "necking", and the thousand and one escapades of modern youth; but that her own daughter should at last confess to the same weakness, was utterly inconceivable. Yet that is precisely what happened, and the force of the "cry" is in direct proportion to the force of the staggering blow.

The fact that the daughter in this case is a college student, led to new revelations. A female near relative, occupying a high position in a western college, was subjected by the grief-stricken mother to a thorough examination with regard to the moral and social life of college students in general. With singular clearness, and not without a strain of cynicism, the college functionary informed the once so proud mother that her old world of innocence was a vanished illusion, that old-time moralities had been relegated to the scrap heap, and that even the great crowds of young teachers of both sexes who throng the summer schools for advanced work are largely dominated by the ethics of the petting party.

I

Whereupon the battle commenced, a battle for which the public mind has not been entirely unprepared. For years past, quakes beneath the surface have been clearly discernible, and preliminary skirmishes have been fought, especially at ministerial meetings and in the pulpits throughout the land. Lingered representatives of pre-war civilization have apparently discovered that the new generation is entirely in the clutches of the externals of life, that

its inner world is either a mass of impenetrable clouds or a dwindling entity, and that consequently our civilization, purchased with the blood and treasures of the ages, is going the way of all flesh. Various reasons have been assigned for this state of things. In the May issue of *The Woman Citizen*, a Boston woman suggested that perhaps we have not paid sufficient attention to the Freudian psychology. "I wonder", she writes, "if it is not possible that this psychology, which for a good many years . . . has been pointing out the dangers of inhibitions and self-suppression, is the underlying cause of the present revolt of youth. Is it not possible that what began as a scientific or medical theory has become with the younger generation a practical reaction against all authority and control, and against what it considers Puritanism . . . I ask myself whether . . . this irresponsible attitude of youth will not, if it continues, seriously undermine our civilization, and lead ultimately to chaos and dark night . . . For our civilization has been built upon self-discipline and self-control."

Among the young people themselves we find a few who defend the attitude of this Boston woman. A young and brilliant female graduate of one of the State universities, writing in the June issue of *The Woman Citizen*, admitted the seriousness of the situation, but laid the blame on the American home. What else can we expect? "We (the young people) have been choked with cream", she declares. Every luxury, every advantage, has been lavished upon the young life, until its balance is lost, and its moral capacities are undermined. But these are only the exceptions. The young people, as a rule, are not backward in defending themselves. They have been subjected to interviews and questionnaires without number, and they have generally given a consistent and impressive account of their ethical position. In an interview published in *The Woman Citizen* for April, a young woman, occupying a responsible position, not only defends the young generation but assumes the offensive in a spirited fashion. What right have we, the older people, to set up standards for the young—we who have made such a miserable mess of things? We had neither manhood nor intelligence enough to prevent the world war, and now we are seeking to hand over to the new generation a civilization which, all too plainly, bears the stamp of our incapacity and moral decay. Besides, the young people are honest, which we can not claim to have been in our youth. We were practising furtively and in secret what they proclaim from the house tops. Our boasted "authority", therefore, is nothing but pretence. The young woman does not even hesitate to suggest that while she herself is indifferent to petting parties,

a little familiarity with the mysteries of sex is not only harmless, but may even be a source of strength and wisdom in the vicissitudes of after-life.

Among teachers of international standing who have found this subject worthy of more or less extensive comment is Dr. Augustus O. Thomas, commissioner of education for the State of Maine. In an article published in a Boston paper, Dr. Thomas asserts that we do not understand the young people. One might wish that the noted educator had expressed himself in greater detail, since the Why of our ignorance regarding the new generation is not made clear. But if his main contention is accepted as sound, perhaps the following considerations will assist in clarifying it. The new generation was ushered into life under conditions unique in history. Its first real impression was that of a universal war, with its hatreds, falsehoods, and suffering, while money was circulated in quantities without a parallel. The young mind was cradled into consciousness in the automobile, introduced into society and its intrigues in the photoplay house, and treated to all the electrical miracles of sound and illumination in the home. From this nursery he was sent to college, where every theory of life and the world was in a fluid state, full of inconsistencies and self-contradictions. We—the older men—who had seen the world under different conditions, and had been impressed with the power of authority in every department of life and learning,—we had something with which to compare the present state of things, and we might reasonably conclude that even times so stirring and reckless were nothing more than a passing shadow on the long trail of human history. But the young people were differently situated. They had no background of memory, no recollections of what the world had been before. The impressions of the present hour filled their minds, an hour of brilliant confusion, restlessness, extravagance, luxury, and calamity. And if indeed it must be admitted that early impressions are among the agencies that mould a person's character, it will hardly be questioned that Young America stands a fair chance of becoming a unique race. We can hardly blame ourselves if we fail to understand the young people. These considerations seem reasonable, at any rate. But whether this or something else is the thought which Dr. Thomas might have expressed, certain it is that he looks upon the young generation as exemplifying a kind of psychology which the world is not prepared to appreciate. Yet, Dr. Thomas is not a pessimist—far from it. He looks with admiration upon our young people, regards them as exceptionally promising, and reminds us that, if our young ladies indulge in

smoking, so did our grandmothers. Other writers of distinction have emphasised their clear belief that our young people have broken, for good and all, the old shamefaced relation between the sexes, and are facing the future and its problems in a spirit as intrepid as that of any viking of old. "And", adds a California writer, "of such is the kingdom of heaven."

II

We may now, perhaps, be permitted to direct our attention to the more or less visible results of this new American "declaration of independence." There is doubtless something truly Jeffersonian in it all—an effort to gain freedom from the trammels and conventions of a more or less artificial civilization, and step out on the arena of life unhampered by the customs and traditions of a lingering Puritanism. So far, so good—perhaps. But Jefferson's mind went deeper than the young generation is able or willing to admit. "Error", he declared, "is the stuff of which the web of life is woven, and he who lives longest and wisest is able only to weave out the more of it." This implies a disillusionment of which no youthful mind is capable; but, even if clearly understood, it can not possibly have any terrors for the young mind of to-day. The young generation has simply sought to forestall the disillusioning process by declaring its independence of error itself. The question now is, How does it work?

There is no lack of evidence that the young generation is in trouble. For some reason or other, its philosophy of sex does not seem to work according to expectation. During a seven-months visit in the Middle West, the writer of this article discovered that in a mid-western city, of considerable wealth and culture, not fewer than eighty high-school girls had "gone to the bad" within a single year. Naturally, the community in question was not anxious to advertise the fact, and it never became "public property." The community itself is wide awake to the peril involved in the "new freedom" of its youth; but, curiously enough, nobody seemed to know what to do about it; everybody was helpless. Youth had chosen its guide, and proposed to follow where it led, even if, as in the case of Don Juan, it should terminate in Inferno. With such a picture in one's mind, the "cry of an American mother" seems at least intelligible.

Under these conditions, nobody will be surprised to learn that the young generation is very largely responsible for the ghastly divorce record now gradually making its way to the public mind. It was once supposed that divorces occur most frequently among

people in middle life; but, as divorce records become better known, this judgment is found to be erroneous. The divorce courts, we now learn, are dealing mostly with people in their early twenties, that is to say, people who have been married but a very short time. Undoubtedly, many of these marriages have been contracted under duress—which is always fatal to happiness. But even under normal conditions, the sudden realization that one is bound to another person for life is so galling and so utterly inconsistent with that precious consciousness of freedom which is the soul of “the revolt of youth”, that marriage is often changed, almost without warning, from a shining aircastle in the sky to the dark abode of despair. And then the divorce court, as a messenger of mercy, comes to the relief of the despairing soul.

As a direct result of the failure of so many marriages, we have now, especially in New England, a most interesting psychological reaction. The report of the census bureau in Washington shows, in New England alone, seven thousand fewer marriages in 1926 than in 1924. Interviewed by one of the leading Boston dailies Mrs. Frances McDonald, a sociologist of note, has no other explanation to offer than the evident fact that the young people at last have become thoroughly frightened by the appalling divorce record, and prefer to remain single rather than risk the “death of their love on the altar of divorce.” Here is a situation that probably has no parallel. Is romance dead? Is Cupid retreating from the haunts of youth? The young people will not admit this. They think they love each other, but “the love that laughs at danger” is evidently a thing of the past. Calculating love, love that fears its own weakness, has always been looked upon as a contradiction in terms.

Mrs. McDonald has nothing but pity for the young people. And truly, they are a suffering lot. They started out in life determined to leave behind everything that hurts and stings and claws—and walked straight into purgatory! Of course, that was inevitable. Judge Murray of Boston, in an interview with Mrs. McDonald, remarked that youth to-day is not willing to pay the price of happiness, and does not know the meaning of the word responsibility. “I pity youth”, continued the judge, “and all who try to find sufficiency in self. They are foredoomed to failure in marriage. . . .”

Another social phenomenon, which attracts increasing attention, is the “run-away girl.” She is one more product of the youth’s “declaration of independence.” And there are “very many of her.” Thousands of girls run away from home every year, to find freedom,

wealth, and fame, in the big cities. Many of them are never heard of again. They are restless, conscious of great "abilities" either histrionic or musical, and burning with an unquenchable desire to see the world at their feet. When caught, as they sometimes are, by some official of the Travellers' Aid Association, and closely questioned, they will generally tell the same old story—lack of "understanding" in their homes, the intolerable monotony in the small cities and villages, etc. But there are also a few who tell the truth, which is this, that the parental home gave no promise of fulfilling their boundless ambition for fame and power. Therefore, they had to make a desperate effort to catapult themselves into the limelight. It is perhaps not too much to say that the photoplay is largely responsible for this diseased imagination on the part of the young girls. The way of independence in these days is about as promising as the path of the transgressor.

III

In what way, and to what extent, is this revolt of "flaming youth" likely to impress the sober and experienced onlooker? Is there anything new or startling in it? Is not the daring spirit of youth, born of inexperience and ignorance, a social necessity in every civilized age? Is not this spirit the very salt of society? The experienced man of affairs, no less than the street corner philosopher, will listen to such questions, then he will shrug his shoulders and smile blandly. The idea that the young people of to-day are in any essentials different from those of past generations! "Let the young mind trim his sails for the open sea", he will say. "There his ambitious spirit will meet its Waterloo, and in due time we shall see him limping back into the harbour, a weather-beaten hulk, with a cargo of humility, and with the confession on his lips that the world was too much for him,—that it could not be conquered in the way he expected. Then he will join the great army of conservatives, and live in peace ever after."

But there are men and women who think differently, and they are not all in the class of light-weight thinkers. Whatever it may mean, the new generation is consciously and deliberately attempting to construct its own philosophy of life. Everything is being weighed in the balance and found wanting. Nothing is right, everything is wrong. Therefore, the young generation must take hold of this suffering old world, and re-create it in its own image. Its novel attitude toward time-honoured moral questions has impressed itself so powerfully upon the minds of thinking people that they are forced to regard it as a new phenomenon in the history of civiliza-

tion. The conviction is indeed widely expressed that the young people have definitely broken with a mass of worthless or hampering traditions, and may therefore be given the credit for leading the way into a new realm of freedom and self-realization. Frankness and honesty, especially as pertaining to questions of sex, are freely recognized as among the virtues of the young mind. At the same time, however, it is now for the young people to prove—by saving themselves, morally, socially, and economically—that they have actually discovered a new way of saving the world. By their fruits ye shall know them. If they can break with all tradition, and still create for themselves a sweet, joyous, independent and useful life, they will prove their superiority to the old generation. But, up to the present time, their soteriological scheme does not seem to have borne any particularly sweet or nourishing fruit. Few really believe that the young people are happy. They dislike hard work and responsibility, they dislike authority, and seem to dislike everything except automobiles and freedom—which means that at the very outset they have shut themselves off from every source of permanent satisfaction and the fruition of human life. Such is the criticism levelled at “the revolt of youth.”

The question, then, as to the extent of this movement is important, but the answer that can be given is little better than a guess. In the public press we get only the academic side of it—statements drawn up by some college-trained youth or other, relative to the Ten Commandments, traditional morality, the folly of authority, the pure motives of the young people, etc. But if the home of some prominent family is made unhappy by the “freedom” of one of its young members, the newspaper reporter has a way of not discovering it. So we are left largely in the dark. Sufficient however, is known to convince any reasonable person that the freedom-movement within the young generation is not all fiction. The discussion carried on in *The Woman Citizen* must have convinced its readers that the movement contains a solid nucleus of fact, however much it may have been distorted by passion or prejudice. One thing is certain—it is in no sense a political movement. Indeed, there is no political movement among the young people. Since Dr. Will Durant has shown, beyond a shadow of doubt, that while the voter at the polls may have his choice between A and B, yet, going a little deeper than the ballot box, he will invariably discover that A and B are both identical with X,—what young person, possessed of wealth and a Rolls-Royce, would think of wasting his precious time on such outworn traditions as politics? No, the movement is ethical in its essence, a fiery protest against the

traditional follies which have denied to human nature its God-given rights. Recognized as such, what city, what hamlet, what country place, can claim to be untouched by the spirit of this modern crusade, which is headed toward the New Jerusalem of a great future?

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Finally, there is the most important question of all, namely, What is the depth of this movement of the young generation? Is it merely the evanescent froth of pampered souls, or must we look for the cause in the very heart of society? Has it any organic connection with the various other ills from which our age is suffering? The wisest among us would feel baffled if requested to give a definite answer. A general explanation is, that the war is to blame, which is an easy way of concealing our ignorance. Sympathisers with the "revolt" will assure us that the young people of to-day are the first generation of youth that ever truly discovered America. After the manner of Comte's genius, we have passed through the theological and metaphysical stages of Americanism, and have arrived through our young people at something like a social positivism, which is supposedly the climax of all human effort. All of which sounds fine; but a warning finger is pointing at us from the past—Comte's life ended in a mad-house!

Responsible criticism is levelling its shafts at the homes of the nation, as the seat and source of the whole movement. The stern discipline of old has been unknown for half a century, and during these many years the child has dominated the home. Does it seem surprising that a crisis had to come, sooner or later? This is sweeping criticism, and apparently effective; but do the critics also realize the implications? If the home has surrendered its God-given function of training the children for future citizenship, what foundation is there for the nation to build upon? The obvious answer is,—None at all. The home and the nation will stand or fall together. To assert, therefore, that the home has surrendered its rights, and flouted its privileges as regards the children, is simply to say by implication that the nation is on the decline. If a man should say it explicitly, he would soon find himself an outcast. Many believe it, however.

Sociologists have long assured us that society can be depended upon to protect itself, and that the old *mores* will stand the strain, however severe. But while this may be a comfortable sociological dogma, the student of history knows that it is false. The *mores* are not invincible. They can be "choked with cream." And yet, after visiting some thousands of American homes during

the past thirty years, I have only to record my conviction that the Republic is not in danger. The eternal "remnant" is here, humble, patient, and never parading its patriotism; but standing like Cherubim with flaming swords to guard the way to the Tree of Life. It is not in the homes of this remnant that "the revolt of youth" originated. In truth, nothing has originated in those homes, because the need of invention is scarcely felt; but, on the other hand, there are no crying mothers, because there are no wayward girls. These homes are built on the rock; the others are built on sand. And in the sifting process of long years, we know in which the strength shall be found—the strength to work, to endure, and to meet the dangers which for ever threaten the fabric of human society.