

EDITORIAL

HOME AND FAMILY.

By DANIEL DE LEON

AN article of exceptional merit and interest is Mrs. Charlotte Perkins Gilman's, "The Passing of the Home in Great American Cities," in the *Cosmopolitan* for December. Its dozen profusely illustrated pages form a compact study of the evolution of the home and family under capitalist conditions.

Mrs. Gilman begins her admirable paper with a statement of what she terms "the distinctive spirit of American progress," which, she declares, "is its sure and instant recognition of new values, new methods, new lines of advance, and its steady courage in taking advantage of them." Continuing, Mrs. Gilman shows that "in the very face of this rising current of progressiveness, we find at times strangest pools and eddies, dull backwater where the driftwood of past seasons floats and molds like wrecks in the Sargasso Sea."



CHARLOTTE PERKINS GILMAN
(1860-1935)

Having thus poetically characterized decadent conservatism, Mrs. Gilman exclaims:

"It is from a stagnant stretch like this that we hear the cry of complaint and warning about the passing of the American home. Everything else ___¹ passed and without wailing; passed, as must all rising life, 'from the less to the greater, from the simple to the complex.'

"Social evolution follows natural law as surely as physical: why should we fear it? Or rather, why should we accept so much of it gladly and then balk, straining rebelliously at this gnat after swallowing caravans of camels."

Coming, after more argument of a similar pertinent character, to the change

¹ [A word or words appear to be missing.]

itself, Mrs. Gilman says:

“The tendency in terms of brick and mortar is clearly visible. It is from a relatively small, plain, isolated house, holding one family, toward a vast glittering palace of a thousand occupants.

“The tendency industrially is as clear; it is from the weary housewife making soap and candles, carding, spinning, weaving, dyeing, cutting, sewing, cooking, nursing, sweeping, washing, and all the rest to the handsome, healthy, golf-playing woman who does none of these things (and, to her shame be it spoken, does little else), for her former trades are done each and all by expert professionals.

“The tendency of the character of home and family life is not so potently visible, but may yet be traced.

“It is from a self-centered family life, mainly content with its own members and its immediate neighbors, to a family that is by no means content with its own members, that knows not neighbors though they be as near and numerous as the cells of a honeycomb, and that insists on finding its pleasures in the great outside world.”

Finally, Mrs. Gilman, discussing the evils of this tendency, asks:

“The children? The apartment-house and the hotel evade that question—avoid it—dodge it. They make no provision for children—they don’t want any!”—which is equivalent to saying that the men and women constituting “the family” don’t want them!

The correction of this evil, Mrs. Gilman argues, is essential to the perfect completion of the evolution which she has described and favors.

To the intelligent class conscious workman it is plainly evident that the tendency described by Mrs. Gilman is mainly beneficial to the members of the capitalist class. For them only exist the “vast, glittering palaces,” the Hotels St. Regis, with their highly organized kitchens, restaurants, laundry, and other industrial departments, conducted by exploited wage labor. For them only exist these luxurious abodes, free from every care and toil. The workingmen and the workingwomen living in the huge, congested and unsanitary tenement houses reap none of its advantages. With them factory work—nay, even the industrial labor of the Hotels St. Regis—is added to the housework of wives, mothers, daughters and sisters. The meagre income of the working class family still compels the latter to be, to a great extent, the household drudge and slave—the cook, baker, clothier,

dressmaker, laundress, waitress, etc., etc. Obviously, the material advantages of this evolution accrue only to the members of the capitalist class. They, in this, as in all things, are enabled, by their superior economic position, to make them their own exclusively.

This is not the only observation that Mrs. Gilman's article provokes regarding this home evolution. There is another relating to the children—without whom there is no family. The bad results in this respect, alarm Mrs. Gilman. She would overcome them by making provisions for the children, building them nurseries, playgrounds, and roof gardens; in brief, making these “homes” not merely places of adult rest and enjoyment, but child breeding and development as well. Shout as the enemies of Socialism will, almost every development of Capitalism tends to militate against the home and the family. How then can these bad results be remedied by the very system that is producing them?

Taking it all in all, Mrs. Gilman's article will offer small comfort to those who believe the home and family sacred and final, and exempt from change and improvement. It drives home the truth that even in them evolution is a factor that must be reckoned with—a factor that is conveying human institutions Socialistward!

Transcribed and edited by Robert Bills for the official Web site of the Socialist Labor Party of America.
Uploaded September 2007

slpns@slp.org