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Excerpts from Amelia Bloomer's "Most Terribly Bereft" 1855 (given in Council Bluffs, Iowa)

I would greatly have preferred, my friends, that the duty which devolves upon me tonight had fallen on some person other than myself. But as I have never yet, in a service of many years in the cause of humanity, shrank from duty, so I could not now, when called upon, refuse to act so far as in me lies. [Simply put, the liquor traffic] is a grievous wrong which inflicts incalculable evil upon every community where it exists. It is a fruitful source of crime, and it pours out upon the country one continued stream of moral and social pollution and death.

The use of intoxicating drinks is the great cause of poverty and destitution in our country. Drunkenness, you all know, sooner or later leads to the waste of property and the final degradation of those who are addicted to it. The till of the rumseller absorbs dime by dime the earnings of the laborer and the mechanic, the crops and broad acres of the farmer, the gold and stocks of the capitalist, and when the means of support are all gone, where next must the besotted victims of this vile habit fly for refuge but to public and private charity? Hence it is mainly for the support of the intemperate and their destitute families that our poor law system has been devised, and it is to proved for the wants of these that poor houses are established. Strike out intemperance from among the vices of the people – put an end to the traffic in strong drinks – and very small would be the number to be supported at the expense of the state, or nourished and sustained by private charity. Here again it is passing strange that taxpayers do not seem to understand better their true interests! Let the traffic in intoxicating drinks be suppressed and how speedily would their taxes for the support of the poor be reduced!

Intemperance destroys the noblest developments of the mind, quenches the fire of genius, and degrades the most gifted talents. How many of the great and noble of the land has it laid low! How many of the brilliant and wealthy has it prostrated in the dust! You have all doubtless known instances of this kind – have seen the young man set out in life with the fairest prospects and the highest aspirations – yet have soon seen his sun go down amid the black clouds of intemperance! Oh! It is a pitiful sight to see the human mind thus prostrated before this fell demon – to see talent, intellect, energy, genius all quenched in the intoxicating bowl. Men, would you save the youth of our land from the drunkard's fearful fate, then close up the doors of the rum shop and pour out the burning poison upon the earth! If you have no mercy on yourselves, have mercy I pray you on your children. Save, oh, save your sons from the drunkard's doom and your daughters from the wretchedness and degradation that ever falls to the lot of the drunkard's wife!

Men of Council Bluffs, I leave this matter in your hands. IF you enforce the law against the traffic, all will be well. Vice and immorality, riot and crime will flee away from your streets, and the reputation of your city will be redeemed in the eyes of the whole country. May a sense of your responsibilities to your own families, to society, and to God prompt you to act at once, and with a determination and energy which shall show that you mean to stop nothing short of the total extermination of the liquor traffic. You have

law – you have justice and right – on your side, and if you do your duty faithfully, the approving plaudits of all good men and angels will be yours!

And for woman, how many are the incentives to labor unceasingly in this cause! On her head has been visited all the terrible woes from that curse which man has let loose upon the world to oppress and destroy the race. While society deeply suffers from its efforts, while the taxpayer is compelled to pay the bill to support paupers and criminals, and man himself is compelled to bow before the scourge and acknowledge that upon him it visits a fearful retribution, yet it is upon woman that the rum traffic makes its power most heavily felt. Of all hearts, hers is the most lacerated; of all rights, hers are the most outraged; of all justice, she is the most terribly bereft!

Keeping herself comparatively aloft from the debasing contact of the foul destroyer, he has yet entered into her dearest associations, stricken down her most precious rights and crushed her fondest and most cherished aspirations. Had she a father whom she loved? That father it has consigned to a drunkard's grave! Has she a husband whom she adores? Of that husband it has made a demon! Has she a son on whom rests her fondest hopes? That son it has sent forth a lunatic and a criminal! Has she a daughter around whose happiness she has entwined the fondest affection? That daughter it has given over to the companionship of a monster more ruthless than death itself! Had she a home in which she hoped to pass in peace and quietness the declining years of her life? That home it has ruthlessly torn from her and sent her forth a beggar! And finally, has she a mind to cultivate and a soul to save? Alas! These too the great destroyer has cast down to the very earth, and degraded her to the companionship of the most abandoned of his votaries!

To whom then does it more properly belong than to her to labor for the extirpation of this great evil? Hitherto custom and law have assigned her a narrow and restricted field of labor. While she has been told that it is her duty to train up her children in all purity and fit them to become great and good, she has yet been denied all voice and part either in the building up or putting down of those influences by which her children are surrounded when they go forth amid the busy scenes of life. She has had no voice in the selection of the agents by whom the laws are administered; no right to say whether the laws and customs shall be such as will corrupt and destroy her children, and bring down shame and sorrow upon her head; no right to say whether he who has sworn to protect and provide for her shall be transformed into a madman and go down to the cold vault of death with the chains of the drunkard upon him!

She has been allowed to weep and mourn over the ruin that surrounded her and to send up agonizing prayers to the God of Heaven, but never to raise her voice in expostulation and entreaty to man that those evils might be averted – never to raise her voice or her arm in defense of her loved ones whom she saw on the brink of ruin! Be her lot what it might, she has been taught that her duty was quiet submission to whatever man, either in his folly or his wisdom, might decree...

Still woman has a work to do, and woe unto her if she does it not. It is true she cannot go with her brother to the polls and cast her vote for honest God-fearing men who will make and sustain good laws. Would that she could do this! For then we should have peaceful elections, less bribery, corruption and drunkenness, and more just and honest rulers!

It is a sad truth that hitherto those who have claimed to be woman's rightful representatives and protectors have legislated against her interests and happiness and turned loose upon her a fearful foe to desolate her home and subject her to a life of poverty, shame and sorrow. It is full time that she demand either that she be faithfully represented and protected, or that all obstacles be removed and she be permitted to represent and protect herself. She should claim the right to a voice in saying whether those pitfalls of ruin which now surround us on every side shall longer exist, whether her life partner shall live the wretched life and die the infamous death of the drunkard, whether the children whom God has entrusted her to care and will require again at her hand shall be corrupted and destroyed, whether she herself shall become that miserable, despised, degraded thing, a drunkard's wife.

And let not woman hesitate to enter upon the work before her from any fear of transcending the bounds of her sphere. The field of her usefulness is as wide as the world and as high as heaven. It reaches far enough to take in the wants and necessities of every human being, and the extent of her influence can only be measured by the uncounted ages of eternity. Into a moral vineyard thus extended and boundless, woman has been placed by her Creator, and shall she hesitate to improve, cultivate and beautify it until every noxious weed shall be removed – until every wastepiece shall be changed to a fruitful field, and the wilderness made to blossom as a rose throughout the genial influences of her industry, her teachings, and her benignant example?