

Tenth National Women's Rights Convention, 1860 – Cooper Institute

(From *The History of Woman Suffrage*)

Rev. Antoinette Brown Blackwell followed, and prefaced her remarks by saying: "Ours has always been a free platform. We have believed in the fullest freedom of thought and in the free expression of individual opinion. I propose to speak upon the subject discussed by our friend, Mrs. Stanton. It is often said that there are two sides to every question; but there are three sides, many sides, to every question. Let Mrs. Stanton take hers; let Horace Greeley take his; I only ask the privilege of stating mine. (Applause). I have embodied my thought, hastily, in a series of resolutions, and my remarks following them will be very brief."

Mrs. Blackwell continued: I believe that the highest laws of life are those which we find written within our being; that the first moral laws which we are to obey are the laws which God's own finger has traced upon our own souls. Therefore, our first duty is to ourselves, and we may never, under any circumstances, yield this to any other. I say we are first responsible to ourselves, and to the God who has laid the obligation upon us, to make ourselves the grandest we may. Marriage grows out of the relations of parties. The law of our development comes wholly from within; but the relation of marriage supposes two persons as being united to each other, and from this relation originates the law. Mrs. Stanton calls marriage a "tie." No, marriage is a relation ; and, once formed, that relation continues as long as the parties continue with the natures which they now essentially have. Let, then, the two parties deliberately, voluntarily consent to enter into this relation. It is one which, from its very nature, must be permanent. Can the mother ever destroy the relation which exists between herself and her child? Can the father annul the relation which exists between himself and his child? Then, can the father and mother annul the relation which exists between themselves, the parents of the child? It can not be. The interests of marriage are such that they can not be destroyed, and the only question must be, "Has there been a marriage in this case or not?" If there has, then the social law, the obligations growing out of the relation, must be life-long. But I assert that every woman, in the present state of society, is bound to maintain her own independence and her own integrity of character; to assert herself, earnestly and firmly, as the equal of man, who is only her peer. This is her first right, her first duty; and if she lives in a country where the law supposes that she is to be subjected to her husband, and she consents to this subjection, I do insist that she consents to degradation; that this is sin, and it is impossible to make it other than sin. True, in this State, and in nearly all the States, the idea of marriage is that of subjection, in all respects, of the wife to the husband—personal subjection, subjection in the rights over their children and over their property; but this is a false relation. Marriage is a union of equals—equal interests being involved, equal duties at stake; and if any woman has been married to a man who chooses to take advantage of the laws as they now stand, who chooses to subject her,

ignobly, to his will, against her own, to take from her the earnings which belong to the family, and to take from her the children which belong to the family, I hold that that woman, if she can not, by her influence, change this state of things, is solemnly obligated to go to some State where she can be legally divorced; and then she would be as solemnly bound to return again, and, standing for herself and her children, regard herself, in the sight of God, as being bound still to the father of those children, to work for his best interests, while she still maintains her own sovereignty. Of course, she must be governed by the circumstances of the case. She may be obliged, for the protection of the family, to live on one continent while her husband is on the other: but she is never to forget that in the sight of God and her own soul, she is his wife, and that she owes to him the wife's loyalty; that to work for his redemption is her highest social obligation, and that to teach her children to do the same is her first motherly duty. Legal divorce may be necessary for personal and family protection; if so, let every woman obtain it. This, God helping me, is what I would certainly do, for under no circumstances will I ever give my consent to be subjected to the will of another, in any relation, for God has bidden me not to do it. But the idea of most women is, that they must be timid, weak, helpless, and full of ignoble submission. Only last week, a lady who has just been divorced from her husband said to me—"I used to be required to go into the field and do the hardest laborer's work, when I was not able to do it; and my husband would declare, that if I would not thus labor, I should not be allowed to eat, and I was obliged to submit." I say the fault was as much with the woman as with the man; she should never have submitted. Our trouble is not with marriage as a relation between two; it is all individual. We have few men or women fit to be married. They neither fully respect themselves and their own rights and duties, nor yet those of another. They have no idea how noble, how godlike is the relation which ought to exist between the husband and wife. Tell me, is marriage to be merely a contract—something entered into for a time, and then broken again—or is the true marriage permanent? One resolution read by Mrs. Stanton said that, as men are incompetent to select partners in business, teachers for their children, ministers of their religion, or makers, adjudicators, or administrators of their laws, and as the same weakness and blindness must attend in the selection of matrimonial partners, the latter and most important contract should no more be perpetual than either or all of the former. I do not believe that, rightly understood, she quite holds to that position herself. Marriage must be either permanent, or capable of being any time dissolved. Which ground shall we take? I insist that, from the nature of things, marriage must be as permanent and indissoluble as the relation of parent and child. If so, let us legislate toward the right. Though evils must sometimes result, we are still to seek the highest law of the relation. Self-devotion is always sublimely beautiful, but the law has no right to require either a woman to be sacrificed to any man, or a man to be sacrificed to any woman, or either to the good of society; but if either chooses to devote himself to the good of the other, no matter how low that other may have fallen, no matter how degraded he may be, let the willing partner strive to lift him up, not by going down and sitting

side by side with him—that is wrong—but by steadily trying to win him back to the right: keeping his own sovereignty, but trying to redeem the fallen one as long as life shall endure. I do not wish to go to the other state of being, and state what shall be our duty there, but I do say, that where there is sin and suffering in this universe of ours, we may none of us sit still until we have overcome that sin and suffering. Then if my husband was wretched and degraded in this life, I believe God would give me strength to work for him while life lasted. I would do that for the lowest drunkard in the street, and certainly I would do as much for my husband. I believe that the greatest boon of existence is the privilege of working for those who are oppressed and fallen; and those who have oppressed their own natures are those who need the most help. My great hope is, that I may be able to lift them upwards. The great responsibility that has been laid upon me is the responsibility never to sit down and sing to myself psalms of happiness and content while anybody suffers. (Applause). Then, if I find a wretched man in the gutter, and feel that, as a human sister, I must go and lift him up, and that I can never enjoy peace or rest until I have thus redeemed him and brought him out of his sins, shall I, if the man whom I solemnly swore to love, to associate with in all the interests of home and its holiest relations—shall I, if he falls into sin, turn him off, and go on enjoying life, while he is sunk in wretchedness and sin? I will not do it. To me there is a higher idea of life. If, as an intelligent human being, I promised to co-work with him in all the higher interests of life, and if he proves false, I will not turn from him, but I must seek first to regenerate him, the nearest and dearest to me, as I would work, secondly, to save my children, who are next, and then my brothers, my sisters, and the whole human family. (Applause).

Mrs. Stanton asks, "Would you send a young girl into a nunnery, when she has made a mistake?" Does Mrs. Stanton not know that nunneries belong to a past age, that people who had nothing to do might go there and try to expiate their own sins? I would teach the young girl a higher way. I do not say to her, "If you have foolishly united yourself to another" (not "if you have been tied by the law"; for, remember, it was not the law that tied her; she said, "I will do it," and the law said, "So let it be!")—"sunder the bond"; but I say to her, that her duty is to reflect, "Now that I see my mistake, I will commence being true to myself; I will become a true unit, strong and noble in myself; and if I can never make our union a true one, I will work toward that good result, I will live for this great work—for truth and all its interests." Let me tell you, if she is not great enough to do this, she is not great enough to enter into any union! Look at those who believe in thus easily dissolving the marriage obligation! In very many cases they can not be truly married, or truly happy in this relation, because there is something incompatible with it in their own natures. It is not always so; but when one feels that it is a relation easily to be dissolved, of course, incompatibility at once seems to arise in the other, and every difficulty that occurs, instead of being overlooked, as it ought to be, in a spirit of forgiveness, is magnified, and the evil naturally increased. We purchase a house, the deed is put into our hands, and we take possession. We feel at once that it is really very convenient. It suits

us, and we are surprised that we like it so much better than we supposed. The secret is, that it is our house, and until we are ready to part with it, we make ourselves content with it as it is. We go to live in some country town. At first we do not like it; it is not like the home we came from; but soon we begin to be reconciled, and feel that, as Dr. Holmes said of Boston, our town is the hub of the universe. So, when we are content to allow our relations to remain as they are, we adapt ourselves to them, and they adapt themselves to us, and we constantly, unconsciously (because God made us so) work toward the perfecting of all the interests arising from those relations. But the moment we wish to sell a house, or remove from a town, how many defects we discover! The place has not the same appearance to us at all; we wish we could get out of it; we feel all the time more and more dissatisfied. So, let any married person take the idea that he may dissolve this relation, and enter into a new one, and how many faults he may discover that otherwise never would have been noticed! The marriage will become intolerable. The theory will work that result; it is in the nature of things, and that to me is everything. Of course, I would not have man or woman sacrificed—by no means. First of all, let every human being maintain his own position as a self-protecting human being. At all hazards, let him never sin, or consent to be sacrificed to the hurt of himself or of another; and when he has taken this stand, let him act in harmony with it. Would I say to any woman, "You are bound, because you are legally married to one who is debased to the level of the brute, to be the mother of his children?" I say to her, "No! while the law of God continues, you are bound never to make one whom you do not honor and respect, as well as love, the father of any child of yours. It is your first and highest duty to be true to yourself, true to posterity, and true to society." (Applause). Thus, let each decide for himself and for herself what is right. But, I repeat, either marriage is in its very nature a relation which, once formed, never can be dissolved, and either the essential obligations growing out of it exist forever, or the relation may at any time be dissolved, and at any time those obligations be annulled. And what are those obligations? Two persons, if I understand marriage, covenant to work together, to uphold each other in all excellence, and to mutually blend their lives and interests into a common harmony. I believe that God has so made man and woman, that it is not good for them to be alone, that they each need a co-worker. There is no work on God's footstool which man can do alone and do well, and there is no work which woman can do alone and do well. (Applause). We need that the two should stand side by side everywhere. All over the world, we need this co-operation of the two classes—not because they are alike, but because they are unlike—in trying to make the whole world better. Then we need something more than these class workers. Two persons need to stand side by side, to stay up each other's hands, to take an interest in each other's welfare, to build up a family, to cluster about it all the beauties and excellencies of home life; in short, to be to each other what only one man and one woman can be to each other in all God's earth. No grown-up human being ought to rush blindly into this most intimate, most important, most enduring of human relations; and will you let a young man, at the age of fourteen, contract

marriage, or a young maiden either? If the law undertakes to regulate the matter at all, let it regulate it upon principles of common-sense. But this is a matter which must be very much regulated by public opinion, by our teachers. What do you, the guides of our youth, say? You say to the young girl, "You ought to expect to be married before you are twenty, or about that time; you should intend to be; and from the time you are fifteen, it should be made your one life purpose; and in all human probability, you may expect to spend the next ten or twenty years in the nursery, and at forty or fifty, you will be an old woman, your life will be well-nigh worn out." I stand here to say that this is all false. Let the young girl be instructed that, above her personal interests, her home, and social life, she is to have a great life purpose, as broad as the rights and interests of humanity. I say, let every young girl feel this, as much as every young man does. We have no right, we, who expect to live forever, to play about here as if we were mere flies, enjoying ourselves in the sunshine. We ought to have an earnest purpose outside of home, outside of our family relations. Then let the young girl fit herself for this. Let her be taught that she ought not to be married in her teens. Let her wait, as a young man does, if he is sensible, until she is twenty-five or thirty. (Applause). She will then know how to choose properly, and probably she will not be deceived in her estimate of character; she will have had a certain life-discipline, which will enable her to control her household matters with wise judgment, so that, while she is looking after her family, she may still keep her great life purpose, for which she was educated, and to which she has given her best energies, steadily in view. She need not absorb herself in her home, and God never intended that she should; and then, if she has lived according to the laws of physiology, and according to the laws of common-sense, she ought to be, at the age of fifty years, just where man is, just where our great men are, in the very prime of life! When her young children have gone out of her home, then let her enter in earnest upon the great work of life outside of home and its relations. (Applause). It is a shame for our women to have no steady purpose or pursuit, and to make the mere fact of womanhood a valid plea for indolence; it is a greater shame that they should be instructed thus to throw all the responsibility of working for the general good upon the other sex. God has not intended it. But as long as you make women helpless, inefficient beings, who never expect to earn a farthing in their lives, who never expect to do anything outside of the family, but to be cared for and protected by others throughout life, you can not have true marriages; and if you try to break up the old ones, you will do it against the woman and in favor of the man. Last week I went back to a town where I used to live, and was told that a woman, whose husband was notoriously the most miserable man in the town, had in despair taken her own life. I asked what had become of the husband, and the answer was, "Married again." And yet everybody there knows that he is the vilest and most contemptible man in the whole neighborhood. Any man, no matter how wretched he maybe, will find plenty of women to accept him, while they are rendered so helpless and weak by their whole education that they must be supported or starve. The advantage, if this theory of marriage is adopted, will not be on the side of woman,

but altogether on the side of man. The cure for the evils that now exist is not in dissolving marriage, but it is in giving to the married woman her own natural independence and self-sovereignty, by which she can maintain herself. Yes, our women and our men are both degenerate; they are weak and ignoble. "Dear me!" said a pretty, indolent young lady, "I had a great deal rather my husband would take care of me, than to be obliged to do it for myself." "Of course you would," said a blunt old lady who was present; "and your brother would a great deal rather marry an heiress, and lie upon a sofa eating lollypops, bought with her money, than to do anything manly or noble. The only difference is, that as heiresses are not very plenty, he may probably have to marry a poor girl, and then society will insist that he shall exert himself to earn a living for the family; but you, poor thing, will only have to open your mouth, all your life long, like a clam, and eat." (Applause and laughter). So long as society is constituted in such a way that woman is expected to do nothing if she have a father, brother, or husband able to support her, there is no salvation for her, in or out of marriage. When you tie up your arm, it will become weak and feeble; and when you tie up woman, she will become weak and helpless. Give her, then, some earnest purpose in life, hold up to her the true ideal of marriage, and it is enough—I am content! (Loud applause).