

Mary Elizabeth Lease

1890 speech to the Women's Christian Temperance Union

Madame President and Fellow Citizens:—

If God were to give me my choice to live in any age of the world that has flown, or in any age of the world yet to be, I would say, O God, let me live here and now, in this day and age of the world's history.

For we are living in a grand and wonderful time—a time when old ideas, traditions and customs have broken loose from their moorings and are hopelessly adrift on the great shoreless, boundless sea of human thought—a time when the gray old world begins to dimly comprehend that there is no difference between the brain of an intelligent woman and the brain of an intelligent man...

In an organization founded upon the eternal principles of truth and right, based upon the broad and philanthropic principle, "Injury to one is the concern of all," having for its motto, "Exact justice to all, special privileges to none,"—the farmers and laborers could not well exclude their mothers, wives and daughters, the patient burden bearers of the home, who had been their faithful companions, their tried friends and trusted counselors through long, weary years of poverty and toil. Hence the doors of the Farmers' Alliance were thrown open wide to the women of the land. They were invited into full membership, with all the privileges of promotion; actually recognized and treated as human beings. And not only the mothers, wives and daughters, but "the sisters, the cousins and the aunts," availed themselves of their newly offered liberties, till we find at the present time upward of a half-million woman in the Alliance, who, because of their loyalty to home and loved ones and their intuitive and inherent sense of justice, are investigating the condition of the country, studying the great social, economic and political problems, fully realizing that the political arena is the only place where the mighty problems of to-day and tomorrow can be satisfactorily fought and settled, and amply qualified to go hand-in-hand with fathers, husbands, sons and brothers to the polls and register their opinion against legalized robbery and corporate wrong...

... after all our years of toil and privation, dangers and hardships upon the Western frontier, monopoly is taking our homes from us by an infamous system of mortgage foreclosure, the most infamous that has ever disgraced the statutes of a civilized nation. It, takes from us at the rate of five hundred a month the homes that represent the best years of our life, our toil, our hopes, our happiness. How did it happen? The government, at the bid of Wall Street, repudiated its contracts with the people; the circulating medium was contracted in the interest of Shylock from \$54 per capita to less than \$8 per capita; or, as Senator [Preston] Plumb [of Kansas] tells us, "Our debts were increased, while the means to pay them was decreased;" or as grand Senator [William Morris] Stewart [of Nevada] puts it, "For twenty years the market value of the dollar has gone up and the market value of labor has gone down, till to-day the American laborer, in bitterness and wrath, asks which is the worst—the black slavery that has gone or the white slavery that has come?"

Do you wonder the women are joining the Alliance? I wonder if there is a woman in all this broad land who can afford to stay out of the Alliance. Our loyal, white-ribbon women should be heart and hand in this Farmers' Alliance movement, for the men whom we have sent to represent us are the only men in the councils of this nation who have not been elected on a liquor platform; and I want to say here, with exultant pride, that the five farmer Congressmen and the United States Senator we have sent up from Kansas—the liquor traffic, Wall Street, "nor the gates of hell shall not prevail against them."

... Let no one for a moment believe that this uprising and federation of the people is but a passing episode in politics. It is a religious as well as a political movement, for we seek to put into practical operation the teachings and precepts of Jesus of Nazareth. We seek to enact justice and equity between man and man. We seek to bring the nation back to the constitutional liberties guaranteed us by our forefathers. The voice that is coming up to day from the mystic chords of the American heart is the same voice that Lincoln heard blending with the guns of Fort Sumter and the Wilderness, and it is breaking into a clarion cry to-day that will be heard around the world.

Crowns will fall, thrones will tremble, kingdoms will disappear, the divine right of kings and the divine right of capital will fade away like the mists of the morning when the Angel of Liberty shall kindle the fires of justice in the hearts of men. "Exact justice to all, special privileges to none." No more millionaires, and no more paupers; no more gold kings, silver kings and oil kings, and no more little waifs of humanity starving for a crust of bread. No more gaunt faced, hollow-eyed girls in the factories, and no more little boys reared in poverty and crime for the penitentiaries and the gallows. But we shall have the golden age of which Isaiah sang and the prophets have so long foretold; when the farmers shall be prosperous and happy, dwelling under their own vine and fig tree; when the laborer shall have that for which he toils; when occupancy and use shall be the only title to land, and every one shall obey the divine injunction, "In the sweat of thy face shalt thou eat bread." When men shall be just and generous, little less than gods, and women shall be just and charitable toward each other, little less than angels; when we shall have not a government of the people by capitalists, but a government of the people, by the people.

Ladies and gentlemen, I thank you.

Source: Mary Elizabeth Lease, Speech to the Woman's Christian Temperance Union, in Joan M. Jensen, *With These Hands: Women Working on the Land* (Old Westbury, N.Y.: The Feminist Press and McGraw-Hill Book Company, 1981), 154–160.