

Women—Wives or Mothers

By a Woman

WE believe it to be well within the truth to say that most men cherish, hidden away in an inner pocket of consciousness, their own particular ideal of the perfect woman. Sole sovereign she of that unseen kingdom, and crowned and sceptred she remains long after her faithful subject has put aside the other playthings of his youth. The fetish is from time to time regarded rapturously, though sorrowfully, by its possessor, but it is never brought forth for public exhibition. If to worship and adore were the beginning and end of the pastime, no cavilling word need be said, for the power to worship is a great and good gift, and, save in the fabulous region of politics, is nowadays so rare an one, that when discovered in the actual world its steady encouragement becomes a duty. But to this apparently innocent diversion there is another side. Somewhat grave consequences are apt to follow, and it is to this point of view that we wish to call attention.

When the woman uncreate becomes the measuring rod by which her unconscious living rivals are judged, and are mostly found wanting, then we are minded to lift up our voice and put in a plea for fair-play. To the shrined deity are given by the acolythyst, not only all the perfections of person demanded by a severely æsthetic

æsthetic sense, but all the moral qualities as well. Every grace of every fair woman he has ever met—the best attributes of his mother, his sister, and his aunt—are freely hers. None of the slight blemishes which occasionally tarnish the high lustre of virtue, none of the caprices to which sirens are constitutionally liable, are permitted. Faultless wife and faultless mother must she be, faithful lover and long-suffering friend, or he will have none of her in his temple. Now, this is surely a wholly unreasonable, an utterly extravagant demand on the part of man, and if analysed carefully, will, we believe, be found to yield egoism and gluttony in about equal parts. How, we venture to inquire, would he meet a like claim, were it in turn presented to him? A witty and light-hearted lady—a remnant yet remains, in spite of the advent of the leaping, bounding, new womanhood—once startled a selected audience by the general statement, “All men are widowers.” But even if this generous utterance can be accepted as absolutely accurate, it can hardly be taken as a proof of man’s fitness for both the important rôles involved.

For our own part, we are convinced that, broadly speaking, the exception only proving the rule—whatever that supporting phrase may mean—woman, fresh from Nature’s moulding, is, so far as first intention is concerned, a predestined wife *or* mother. She is not both, though doubtless by constant endeavour, art and duty taking it turn and turn about, the dual end may, with hardness, be attained unto. For Nature is not economic. Far from her is the fatal utilitarian spirit which too often prompts the improver man (or—dare we confess it?—still more frequently woman) to attempt to make one object do the work of two. From all such sorry makeshifts Nature, the great modeller in clay, turns contemptuously away. Not long ago we read in a lady’s journal of a ‘combination gown’ which by some cunning arrangement, the

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secret whereof was only known to its lucky possessor, would do alternate day and night duty with equal credit and despatch. We have no desire to disparage the varied merits of this ingenious contrivance, but at the best it must remain an unlovely hybrid thing. Probably it knew this well, for gowns, too, have their feelings, and before now have been seen to go limp in a twinkling, overcome by a sudden access of despondency. Such a moment must certainly have come to the omnibus garment referred to above, when it found itself breakfasting with a severe and one-idea'd "tailor-made," or, more cruel experience still, dining skirt by skirt with a "mysterious miracle"—the latest label—in gossamer and satin.

We dare to go even further, and to declare that every woman knows in her heart—though never, never will she admit it to you—within which fold she was intended to pass. Is it an exaggeration to say that many a girl marries out of the superabundance of the maternal instinct, though she may the while be absolutely ignorant of the motive power at work? Believing herself to be wildly enamoured of the man of her (or her parents') choice, she is in reality only in love with the nursery of an after-day. Of worship between husband and wife, as a factor in the transaction, she knows nothing, or likely enough she imagines it present when it is the sweet passion of pity, or the more subtle patronage of bestowal, one or both, which are urging her forward into marriage. Gratitude, none the less real because unrealised, towards the man who thus enables her to fulfil her true destiny—the saving of souls alive—has also its share in the complex energy. Well for the husband of this wife if he allows himself gradually to occupy the position of eldest and most important of her children, to whom indeed a somewhat larger liberty is accorded, but from whom also more is required. In return for this submission boundless will be the care and devotion bestowed upon his upbringing day by day.

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He will be foolish if he utters aloud, or even says in the silence of his heart, that motherhood is good, but that wifehood was what he wanted. It would be but a bootless kicking against the pricks. For he has chosen the mother-woman, and it is beyond his power, or that of any other specialist, to effect the fundamental change for which his soul may long. It only remains for him to make the best of a very good bargain, and one to which it is very probable his strict personal merits may hardly have entitled him.

If such a marriage is childless, it may still be a very useful one. Nature's accommodations often verge on the miraculous. The unemployed maternal instincts of the wife easily work themselves out in an unlimited and universal auntdom. It must be confessed that bad blunders are apt to ensue, but where the intentions are good, the pavement should not be too closely scanned. In fiction these are the Dinahs, the Romolas, the Dorotheas, the Mary Garths. Dear to the soul of the female writer is the maternal type. With loving, if tiresome frequency, she is presented to us again and yet again. In truth we sometimes grow a little weary of her saintly monotony. But as it is given to few of us to have the courage of our tastes, we bear with her, as we bear with other not altogether pleasing appliances, presented to us by earnest friends, with the assurance that they are for our good, or for our education, or some other equally superfluous purpose.

With the male artist this female model is not nearly so popular. It may be that he feels himself wholly unequal to cope with her countless perfections. Certain it is that he makes but a sad muddle of it when he tries. Witness Thackeray's faded, bloodless Lady Esmond, as set against his glowing wayward Trix—she, by the way, a beautifully-marked specimen of the wife-woman—though whether it would be pure wisdom to take her to wife must be left an open question. Still, we have in our time loved her
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her well, and some of us have found it hard to forgive the black treachery done in bringing her back in her old age, a painted and scolding harridan. For these, well-loved of the gods, should, in fiction at least, die young.

Truth compels us to own regretfully that man in his self-indulgence shrinks from both the giving and receiving of dull moments, whilst woman, believing devoutly in their saving grace, is altruistic enough to devote herself with enthusiasm to the task of their administration. Now, dull moments are apt to lie hidden about the creases of the severely classic robe, which, in the story-books at any rate, these heroines always wear. We must all agree that during the last twenty years this type, with its portentous accumulation of self-conscious responsibility has increased alarmingly. To what is the increase to be attributed? The too rapid growth of the female population stands out plainly as prime cause. Legislators are athirst for things practical. Is it beyond their power to devise some method of dealing with this problem? The Chinese plan is painfully obvious, but only as a last and despairful resource, when the wise men of Westminster sitting on committees and commissions have failed, can it be mentioned for adoption in Europe. We are, alas! Science-ridden, and are likely to remain thus bridled and saddled for weary years to come. Every bush and every bug grows its own specialist, and yet we, the patient, the long-suffering public, are left to endure both the fogs that make of London one murky pit, and the redundant female birth-rate which threatens more revolutions than all the forces of the Anarchists in active combination. Meanwhile these devotees of the abstract play about with all sorts of trifles, masquerading as grave thinkers, hoping thus to escape their certain judgment-day. The identification of criminals by the variation of thumb-prints is a pretty conceit; so too is the record of the influence of the

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moon on the tides, which, we are informed, employs all to itself a whole and highly paid professor with a yearly average of three pupils at Cambridge. But what are these save mere fads, on a par with leapfrog and skittles, in the presence of the momentous problems about and around us? Let these gentlemen jockeys look to it. The hour is not far distant when public opinion shall discover their uselessness and send them about their business.

In humbler ways, too, much might be done to stem the morbid activity of the collective female conscience. Big sins lie at the doors of the hosts of good men and women who turn out year by year tons of "books for the young" to serve as nutriment for the hungry nestlings of culpable, thoughtless parents. It is hard to overstate the pernicious effect of this class of *motif* literature. *Féerie* in old or new dress is the only nourishing food for the happy child who is to remain happy. The little girl, aged seven, who lately wrote in her diary before going to bed, "Of what *real* use am I in the world?" had, it is certain, been denied her Andersen, her Grimm, her Carroll, even her Blue fairy book. Turned in to browse on "Ministering Children," "Agatha's First Prayer," and the fatal "Eric"—into how many editions has this last well-meaning but poisonous romance not passed—the little victim of parental stupidity is thus left with an organ damaged for life by over-much stimulation at the start. This new massacre of the innocents is of purely nineteenth-century growth. It dates from the era of the awakened conscience, and is coincident with the formation of all the societies for the regeneration of the human race.

Per contra, the wife-woman, though but seldom to be met with in the multitudinous pages written by women, is the well-beloved, the chosen of the male artist. Week-days and Sundays he paints her portrait. Shakespeare returns to her again and again,

as though it were hard to part from her. Wicked Trix stands out as bold leader of one bad band. Tess belongs to the family, though she is of another branch ; so does Cathy of Wuthering Heights, and Lyndall of the African Farm ; whilst latest and slightest scamp of the lot comes dancing Dodo of Lambeth. Save in a strictly specialised sense, none of this class can be said to contrive the greatest good of the greatest number. These are the women to whom the nursery is at best but an interlude, and at worst a real interruption of their life's strongest interests. They are not skilled in dealing with early teething troubles, nor in the rival merits of Welsh and Saxony flannel stuffs. Their crass ignorance of all this deep lore may, it is true, go far to kill off superfluous offspring, but, unjust as it would appear, these are the mothers who each succeeding year become more and more adored of their sons. Fribblers though they be, they sweeten the world's corners with the perfume of their charm. And the bit of world's work in which they excel is the keeping alive the tradition of woman's witchery. Who, then, can deny them their plain uses ? When Fate is kind and bestows the fitting partner, the fires of their love never die down. They remain lovers to the end. Their husbands need fear no rival, not even in the person of their own superior son. When Fate is unkind and things go crookedly, these are the women whose wreckage strews life's high road, and from whom their wiser sisters turn reprovingly away. For the good woman who has to "work for her living," and who pretends to enjoy the healthful after-pains in her moral system, is rarely tolerant of the existence of the *leichtsinnige* sister for whom, as to Elijah at the brook, dainty morsels without labour are cheerfully provided by that inconsequent raven, man. This lady goes gaily, wearing what she has not spun, reaping where she has not sown. Sad reflections these for the high-souled woman whose enlightened demand

demand for justice turns in its present day impotency to wrath and bitterness.

Wisdom and foresight are never the attributes of the wife-woman. Charm, beguilement, fascination of sorts, form her poor equipment for life's selective struggle. These gifts cannot be said to promise, save when the stars are in happiest conjunction, long life and useful days for her intimates. Variations of the two types of Primitive Woman may abound, but the broad distinction between them is clearly cut and readily to be made out by the dullest groper after truth. We can imagine a modern Daniel addressing (quite uselessly) a modern disciple thus :

“Look to it now, O young man ! that your feet go straight, and slip not in search for the pearl that may be hid away for you. For she who loveth you best may work you all evil, and she who loveth her own soul's travail best will hardly fail you in the days and the years. But Love remaineth, and the way of return is not.”