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<APRON-STRINGS.>

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Among other classifications, the world of men and women may be divided

into those who wear aprons and those who are tied to the strings

thereof ~~ those who determine the length of the tether and those who

are bound to browse within its circuit ~~ those who hold the reins and

those who go bitted. All men and women are fond of power, but there is

a wide difference in the ways in which they use it. To men belong the

grave political tyrannies at which nations revolt and history is

outraged, to women the small conventional laws framed against

individual liberty by Mrs. Grundy and society; men rule with rods of

iron and drive with whips of steel, women shorten the tether and tie

up close to apron-strings; men coerce, women forbid. In fact, the

difference is just that which lies between action and negation,

compulsion and restraint; between the masculine jealousy of equality

and the feminine fear of excess. If men debar women from all entrance

into their larger sphere, women try to dwarf men's lives to their own

measure, and not a few hold themselves aggrieved when they fail. They

think that everything which is impossible to them should be

forbidden to others, and they maintain that to be a lamentable extreme

which is simply in excess of their own powers. Not content with

supremacy in the home which is their own undisputed domain, nor

satisfied with binding on men the various rules distinguishing life in

the drawing-room, the dining-room and the breakfast-parlour, they

would, if they could, carry their code outside, and sweep into its

narrow net the club-house and the mess-table, the billiard-room and

the race-course, and wherever else men congregate together ~~ delivered

from the bondage of feminine conventionalities.

For almost all women have an uneasy feeling when their men are out of

sight, enjoying themselves in their own way. They fear on all

sides ~~ both bodily harm and moral evil; and regard men's rougher

sports and freer thoughts as a hen regards her wilful ducklings when

they take to the water in which she would be drowned, and leave her

high and dry lamenting their danger and self-destruction. The man they

love best for his manliness they would, in their loving cowardice, do

their utmost to make effeminate; and, while adoring him for all that

makes him bold and strong in thought as well as in frame, they would

tie him up to their apron-strings, and keep him there till he became

as soft and narrow as themselves. Not that they would wish to do so;

if you asked them they would tell you quite the contrary. But this

would be the result if they had their own way, their love being

at all times more timid than confident.

To home-staying women, a brilliant husband courted by the world and

loving what courts him, is a painful cross to bear, however much he

may be beloved ~~ the pain, in fact, being proportionate to the love.

Perhaps no life exemplifies this so much as Moore's. Poor <p> "Bessy" </p>

suffered many things because of the looseness of the apron-string by

which her roving husband was tied, and the length of the tether which

he allowed himself. <hi> Farfallone amoroso </hi> as he was, his incessant

flutterings out of range and reach caused her many a sad hour; and in

after years she was often heard to say that the happiest time of her

life was when his mind had begun to fail, for then she had him all to

herself and <reg orig=”no one”>no-one</reg> came in between them ~~ no great world swept him away to be the idol of a <hi> salon </hi>, and left her alone at home casting up her accounts with life and love, and quaking at the result that came out.

When the brilliancy and the idolatry came to an end, then her turn

began; and she tied up her dulled and faltering idol close to her side

for ever after, and was happier to have him there helpless, affectionate, dependent and imbecile than when he was at his brightest ~~ and a rover.

Many a wife has felt the same when sickness has broken down the strong

man's power to a weakness below her own, and made her, so long the

inferior, now the more powerful of the two, and the supreme. She

gathers up the reins with that firm, tight hand peculiar to

women, and ties her master to her apron-string so that he cannot

escape. It is quite a matter of pride with her that she has got him

into such good order. He obeys her so implicitly about his medicines,

and going to bed early, and wrapping himself up, and avoidance of

draughts and night-air, that she feels all the reflected glory of one

who has conquered a hero. The Samson who used to defy the elements and

break her careful strings like bands of tow, has at last laid his head

in her lap and suffered himself to be covered by her apron. It is

worth while to have had the anxiety and loss of his illness for the

sake of the submission resulting; and she generally ends by gaining a

hold over him which he can never shake off again.

It is pitiful though, to see the stronger life thus dwarfed and bound.

But women like it; and while the need for it lasts men must submit.

The danger is lest the habit of the apron-string should become

permanent; for it is so perilously pleasant to be petted and made much

of by women, that few men can resist the temptation when it offers;

and many have been ruined for the remainder of their days by an

illness which gave them up into the keeping of wife and sisters ~~ those

fireside Armidas who will coddle all the real manliness out of their

finest heroes, if they are let. If this kind of thing occurs at the

break of life, the <hi> mezzo cammino </hi> between maturity and age, it is

doubly difficult to throw off; and many a man who had good years

of vigour and strength, before him if he had been kept up to the mark,

sinks all at once into senility because his womankind got frightened

at that last small attack of his, and thought the best way to preserve

him from another was to weaken him by over-care out of all wish for

dangerous exposure.

Perhaps the greatest misfortune that can befall a man is to have been

an only son brought up by a timid widow mother. It is easy to see at a

glance, among a crowd of boys, who has been educated under exclusively

feminine influence. The long curled shining hair, the fantastic

tunic ~~ generally a kind of hybrid between a tunic and a frock ~~ the

lavish use of embroidery, the soft pretty-behaved manner, the clean

unroughened hands, all mark the boy of whom his mother has so often

wished that he had been a girl, and whom she has made as much like a

girl as possible. His intellectual education has been as unboylike as

his daily breeding. Mothers' boys are taught to play the piano, to

amuse themselves with painting, or netting, or perhaps a little

woolwork in the evenings ~~ anything to keep them quietly seated by the

family table, without an outbreak of boyish restlessness or

inconvenient energy; but they are never taught to ride, to hunt, to

shoot, to swim, to play at cricket, football, nor billiards, unless a

stalwart uncle happens to be about who takes the reins in his own hand

at times, and insists on having a word to say to his nephew's

education.

There is danger in all, and evil in some, of these things; and

women cannot bear that those they love should run the risk of either.

Wherefore their boys are modest and virtuous truly, but they are not

manly; and when they go out into the world, as they must sooner or

later, they are either laughed at for their priggishness, or they go

to the bad by the very force of reaction. The mother has allowed them

to learn nothing that will be of solid use to them, and they enter the

great arena wholly unprepared either to fight or to resist, to push

their own way or to take their own part. They have been kept tied up

to the apron-string to the last moment, and only when absolutely

forced by the necessity of events will she cut the knot and let them

go free. But she holds on to the last moment. Even when the time comes

for college-life and learning, she often goes with her darling, and

takes lodgings in the town, that she may be near at hand to watch over

his health and morals, and continue her careful labours for his

destruction.

The chances are that a youth so brought up never becomes a real man,

nor worth his salt anyhow. He is a prig if he is good, a debauchee of

the worst kind if he kicks over the traces at all. He is more likely

the first, carrying the mark of the apron-string round his wrist for

life. Like a tame falcon used to the hood and the perch and the lure

home, no matter what the temptation of the quarry afield, he is

essentially a domestic man, at ease only in the society of women; a

fussy man; a small-minded man; delicate in health; with a dread

of strong measures, physical, political, or intellectual; a crotchety

man given to passing quackeries; but not a man fit for man's society

nor for man's work. When there are many boys, instead of only one, in

a widow's family, the opposite of all this is the case. So soon as

they have escaped from the nursery, they have escaped from all control

whatsoever; and if one wants to realize a puerile pandemonium of dirt,

discomfort, noise and general disorganization, the best place in the

world is the household of a feeble-spirited mother of many sons where

there is no controlling masculine influence.

Daughters, who are naturally and necessarily tied up to the mother's

apron-string, suffer occasionally from too tight a strain; though

certainly it is not the fault of the present day that girls are too

closely fettered, too home-staying or subdued. Still, every now and

then one comes across a matron who has crushed all individuality out

of her family, and whose grown-up daughters are still children to her

in moral go-carts and intellectual leading-strings. They may be the

least attractive of their sex, but a mother of this kind has one fixed

delusion respecting them ~~ namely, that the world is full of wolves

eager to devour her lambs, and that they are only safe when close to

the maternal apron and browsing within an inch of the tether stake.

These are the girls who become hopeless old maids. Men have an

instinctive dread of the maternal apron-string. They do not want to

marry a mother as well as a wife, and to live under a double

dominion and a reduplicated opposition.

It is all very well to say that a girl so brought up is broken in

already, and therefore more likely to make a good wife than many

others, seeing that it is only a transfer of obedience. That may do

for slaves who cannot be other than slaves whoever is the master; but

it does not do for women who, seeing their friends freer than

themselves, reflect with grief and longing that, had fate so ordered

it, they might have been free too. The chances here, as with the

mothers' boys, are, that the girl kept too close to the apron-string

during her spinsterhood goes all abroad so soon as she gets on the

free ground of matrimony, and lets her liberty run into license. Or

she keeps her old allegiance to her mother intact, and her husband is

never more than the younger branch at best. Most likely he is a

usurper, whom it is her duty to disobey in favour of the rightful

ruler when they chance to come into collision.

If women had their will, all national enterprise would be at an end.

There would be no Arctic Expeditions, no Alpine Clubs, no dangerous

experiments in science, no firearms at home, no volunteering ~~ in their

own family at least. All the danger would be done by the husbands and

brothers and sons of other women, but each would guard her own. For

women cannot go beyond the individual; and the loss of one of their

own, by misadventure, weighs more with them than the necessity of

keeping up the courage and hardihood of the nation. Nor do they

see the difference between care and coddling, refinement and

effeminacy; consequently, men are obliged to resist their influence,

and many cut the apron-string altogether, because delicate fingers

will tie the knots too tight. They do not remember that the influence

to which men yield as a voluntary act of their own grace is a very

different thing from obedience to the open denial, the undisguised

interference and restraint, which some women like to show. Men respect

the higher standard of morality kept up by women; they obey the major

and the minor laws of refinement which are framed for home life and

for society; and they confess that, without woman's influence, they

would soon degenerate into mere savages and be no better than so many

Choctaws before a generation was over; but they do not like being

pulled up short, especially in public, and hounded into the safe

sheepfold for all the world to see them run. And they resent the

endeavour. And the world resents it too, and feels that something is

wrong when a woman shows that she has the whip hand, and that she can

treat her husband like a petted child or bully him like a refractory

one; that she has him tied to her apron-strings and tethered to the

stake of her will. But there is more of this kind of thing in families

than the world at large always knows of; and many a fine, stalwart

fellow who holds his own among men, who is looked up to at his

club and respected in his office for his courage, decision and

self-reliance, sinks into mere poodledom at home, where his wife has

somehow managed to get hold of the leading-strings, and has taught him

that the only way to peace is by submission and obedience.