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<IN SICKNESS.>

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Life not being holiday-making throughout, we have to allow for the bad

half-hours that must come to us; and, if we are wise, we make

provision to pass them with as little annoyance as possible. And of

all the bad half-hours to which we are destined, those to be spent in

sickness need the greatest amount of care to render them endurable.

Without going to the length of Michelet's favourite theory, which sees

in every woman nothing but an invalid more or less severely afflicted

according to individual temperament, but always under the influence of

diseased nerves and controlled by sickly fancies, there is no doubt

that women suffer very much more than men; while their patience under

physical ailments is one of the traditional graces with which they are

credited. Where men fume and fret at the interruption to their lives

brought about by a fit of illness, calculating anxiously the loss they

are sustaining during the forced inaction of their convalescence,

women submit resignedly, and make the best of the inevitable. With

that clear sense of Fate characteristic of them, they do not fight

against the evil which they know has to be borne, but wisely try to

lighten it by such wiles and arts as are open to them, and set

themselves to adorn the cross they must endure. One thing indeed,

makes invalidism less terrible to them than to men; and that is their

ability to perform their home duties, if not quite as efficiently as

when they are up and about, yet well enough for all practical purposes

in the conduct of the family. The woman who gives her mind to it can

keep her house in smooth working gear by dictation from her sick

couch; and what she cannot actively overlook she can arrange. So far

this removes the main cause of irritation with which the man must

battle in the best way he can, when his business comes to a

stand-still; or is given up into the hands of but a makeshift kind of

substitute taken at the best; while he is laid on his back undergoing

many things from doctors for the good of science and the final

settling of doubtful pathological points.

Another reason why women are more patient than men during sickness is

that they can amuse themselves better. One gets tired of reading all

day long with the aching eyes and weary brain of weakness; yet how few

things a man can do to amuse himself without too great an effort, and

without being dependent on others! But women have a thousand pretty

little devices for whiling away the heavy hours. They can vary their

finger-work almost infinitely, and they find real pleasure in a new

stitch or a stripe of a different colour and design from the last. In

the contempt in which needlework in all its forms is held by the

advanced class of women, its use during the period of convalescence,

when it helps the lagging time as nothing else can, is forgotten. Yet

it is no bad wisdom to remember that the day of sickness will probably

come some time to us all; and to lay in stores of potential interest

and cheerfulness against that day is a not unworthy use of power.

Certain it is that this greater diversity of small, unexciting,

unfatiguing occupations enables women to bear a tedious illness with

comparative patience, and helps to keep them more cheerful than men.

But when the time shall have come for the perfect development of the

androgynous creature, who is as yet only in the pupal state of her

existence, women will have lost these two great helps. Workers outside

the home like their husbands and brothers, like them they will fume

and fret when they are prevented from following their bread-winning

avocations; calculations of the actual money loss they are sustaining

coming in to aggravate their bodily pains. And, as the needle is

looked on as one of the many symbols of feminine degradation, in the

good time coming there will be none of that pretty trifling with silks

and ribbons which may be very absurd by the side of important work,

but which is invaluable as an invalid's pastime. Consequently, what

with the anguish of knowing that her profession is neglected, and what

with the unenlivened tedium of her days, sickness will be a formidable

thing to women of the androgynous type ~~ and to the men belonging to

them.

Again, care and tact are required to rob sickness of its more painful

features, and to render it not too distressing to the home companions.

A real woman, with her instincts properly developed ~~ among them the

instinct of admiration ~~ knows how to render even invalidism beautiful;

and indeed, with her power of improving occasions, she is never more

charming than as an invalid or a convalescent. There is a certain

refined beauty about her more seductive than the robuster bloom of

health. Her whole being seems purified. The coarser elements of

humanity are obscured, passions are at rest, and all those fretful,

anxious strivings, which probably afflict her when in the full swing

of society, are put away as if they had never been. She is forced to

let life glide, and her own mind follows the course of the quieter

flow. She knows too how to make herself bewitching by the art which is

not artifice so much as the highest point to which her natural

excellences can be brought. If the radiance of health has gone, she

has the sweeter, subtler loveliness of fragility; if her diamonds are

laid aside, and all that glory of dress which does so much for women

is perforce abandoned, the long, loose folds of falling drapery, with

their antique grace, perhaps suit her better, and the fresh flowers on

her table may be more suggestive and delightful than artificial ones

in her hair.

Many a drifting husband has been brought back to his first enthusiasm

by the illness of a wife who knew how to turn evil things into good,

and to extract a charm even out of suffering. It is a turn of the

kaleidoscope; a recombination of the same elements but in a new

pattern and with fresh loveliness; whereas the androgynous woman, with

her business worries and her honest, if impolitic, self-surrender to

hideous flannel wraps and all the uglinesses of a sick room crudely

pronounced, would have added a terror to disease which probably would

have quenched his waning love for ever. For the androgynous woman

despises every approach to coquetry, as she despises all the other

insignia of feminine servitude. It is not part of her life's duties to

make herself pleasing to men; and they must take her as they find her.

Where the true woman contrives a beauty and creates a grace out of her

very misfortune, the androgynous holds to the doctrine of spades and

the value of the unvarnished truth. Where the one gives a little

thought to the most becoming colour of her ribbon or the best

arrangement of her draperies, the other pushes the tangled locks off

her face anyhow, and makes herself an amorphous bundle of brown and

lemon colour. Her sole wish is to get the bad time over. How it would

be best got over does not trouble her; and to beautify the inherently

unlovely is beyond her skill to compass. Hence her hours of sickness

go by in ugliness and idle fretting; while the true woman finds

graceful work to do that enlivens their monotony, and in the

continuance of her home duties loses the galling sense of loss from

which the other suffers.

In sickness too, who but women can nurse? Men make good nurses enough

out in the bush, where nothing better can be had; and a Californian

<p> 'pardner' </p> is tender enough in his uncouth way to his mate stricken

down with fever in the shanty, when he comes in at meal-times and

administers quinine and brick tea with horny hands bleeding from cuts

and begrimed with mud. But this is not nursing in the woman's sense.

To be sure the strength of men makes them often of value about an

invalid. They can lift and carry as women cannot; and the want of a

few nights' sleep does not make them hysterical. Still they are

nowhere as nurses, compared with women; and the best of them are not

up to the thoughtful cares and pleasant attentions which, as medical

men know, are half the battle in recovery. And this is work which

suits women. It appeals to their love of power and tenderness

combined; it gratifies the maternal instinct of protection and

self-sacrifice; and it pleasantly reverses the usual order of things,

and gives into their hands Hercules twirling a distaff the wrong way,

and fettered by the length of his skirts.

The bread-winning wife knows nothing of all this. To her, sickness in

her household would be only a degree less destructive than her own

disablement, if she were called on to nurse. She would not be able to

leave her office for such unremunerative employment as soothing her

children's feverish hours or helping her husband over his. She would

calculate, naturally enough, the difference of cost between hired help

and her own earnings; and economy as well as inclination would decide

the question. But the poor fellow left all day long to the

questionable services of a hired nurse, or to the clumsy honesty of

some domestic Phyllis less deft than faithful, would be a gainer by

his wife's presence ~~ granting that she was a real woman and not an

androgyne ~~ even if he lost the addition to their income which her work

might bring in; as he would rather, when he came home from his work to

her sick bed, find her patient and cheerful, making the best of things

from the woman's point of view and with the woman's power of

adaptation, than be met with anxious queries as to the progress of

business; with doubts, fears, perplexities; the office dragged into

the sick room, and unnecessary annoyance added to unavoidable pain.

There is a certain kind of woman, sweet always, who yet shows best

when she is invalided. Cleared for a while from the social tangles

which perplex and distress the sensitive, she is as if floated into a

quiet corner where she has time to think and leisure to be her true

self undisturbed; where she is able too, to give more to her friends,

if less to the world at large than at other times. And she is always

to be found. The invalid-couch is the rallying point of the household,

and even the little children learn to regard it as a place of

privilege dearer than the stately drawing-room of ordinary times. Her

friends drop in, sure to find her at home and pleased by their

coming; and her afternoon teas with her half-dozen chosen intimates

have a character of their own, æsthetic and delightful; partly owing

to the quiet and subdued tone that must perforce pervade them, partly

to the unselfishness that reigns on all sides. <reg orig=”Every one”>

Everyone </reg> exerts

himself to bring her things which may amuse her, and she is loaded

with presents of a graceful kind ~~ new books, early fruit, and a wealth

of flowers to which even her poorest friend adds his bunch of violets,

if nothing else. She is the precious child of her circle, and but for

her innate sweetness would run a risk of being the spoilt one. Clever

men come and talk to her, give her cause of thought, and knowledge to

remember and be made glad by for all time; her lady friends keep her

abreast of the outside doings of the world and their own especial

coteries, contributing the dramatic element so dear to the feminine

mind; <reg orig=”every one”> everyone </reg> tells her all

that is afloat on the sea of society,

but only all that is cheerful ~~ <reg orig=”no one”> no-one </reg>

brings her horrors, nor disturbs

the frail grace of her repose with petty jealousies and tempers. Her

atmosphere is pure and serene, and the dainty loveliness of her

surroundings lends its charm to the rest.

To her husband she is even more beautiful than in the early days; and

all men feel for her that chivalrous kind of tenderness and homage

which the true woman alone excites. The womanly invalid, gentle,

cheerful, full of interest for others, active in mind if prostrate in

body, sympathetic and patient, is for the time the queen of her

circle, loved and ministered to by all; and when she goes to Cannes or

San Remo to escape the cruelty of the English winter, she carries with

her a freight of good wishes and regrets, and leaves a blank which

nothing can fill up until she returns with the summer roses to take

her place once more as the popular woman of her society.