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<WOMANLINESS.>

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There are certain words, suggestive rather than descriptive, the value

of which lies in their very vagueness and elasticity of

interpretation, by which each mind can write its own commentary, each

imagination sketch out its own illustration. And one of these is

Womanliness; a word infinitely more subtle in meaning, with more

possibilities of definition, more light and shade, more facets, more

phases, than the corresponding word manliness. This indeed must

necessarily be so, since the character of women is so much more varied

in colour and more delicate in its many shades than that of men.

We call it womanliness when a lady of refinement and culture overcomes

the natural shrinking of sense, and voluntarily enters into the

circumstances of sickness and poverty, that she may help the suffering

in their hour of need; when she can bravely go through some of the

most shocking experiences of humanity for the sake of the higher law

of charity; and we call it womanliness when she removes from herself

every suspicion of grossness, coarseness, or ugliness, and makes her

life as dainty as a picture, as lovely as a poem. She is womanly when

she asserts her own dignity; womanly when her highest pride is the

sweetest humility, the tenderest self-suppression; womanly when she

protects the weaker; womanly when she submits to the stronger. To bear

in silence and to act with vigour; to come to the front on some

occasions, to efface herself on others, are alike the characteristics

of true womanliness; as is also the power to be at once practical and

æsthetic, the careful worker-out of minute details and the upholder of

a sublime idealism--the house-mistress dispensing bread and the

priestess serving in the temple. In fact, it is a very Proteus of a

word, and means many things by turns; but it never means anything but

what is sweet, tender, gracious and beautiful. Yet, protean as it is

in form, its substance has hitherto been considered simple enough, and

its limits have been very exactly defined; and we used to think we

knew to a shade what was womanly and what was unwomanly--where, for

instance, the nobleness of dignity ended and the hardness of

self-assertion began; while no one could mistake the heroic sacrifice

of self for the indifference to pain and the grossness belonging to a

coarse nature:--which last is as essentially unwomanly as the first is

one of the finest manifestations of true womanliness. But if this

exactness of interpretation belonged to past times, the utmost

confusion prevails at present; and one of the points on which society

is now at issue in all directions is just this very question--What is

essentially unwomanly? and, what are the only rightful functions of

true womanliness? Men and tradition say one thing, certain women say

another thing; and if what these women say is to become the rule,

society will have to be reconstructed \_ab initio\_, and a new order of

human life must begin. We have no objection to this, provided the new

order is better than the old, and the modern phase of womanhood more

beautiful, more useful to the community at large, more elevating to

general morality than was the ancient. But the whole matter hangs on

this proviso; and until it can be shown for certain that the latter

phase is to be undeniably the better we will hold by the former.

There are certain old--superstitions must we call them?--in our ideas

of women, with which we should be loth to part. For instance, the

infinite importance of a mother's influence over her children, and the

joy that she herself took in their companionship--the pleasure that it

was to her to hold a baby in her arms--her delight and maternal pride

in the beauty, the innocence, the quaint ways, the odd remarks, the

half-embarrassing questions, the first faint dawnings of reason and

individuality, of the little creatures to whom she had given life and

who were part of her very being--that pleasure and maternal pride were

among the characteristics we used to ascribe to womanliness; as was

also the mother's power of forgetting herself for her children, of

merging herself in them as they grew older, and finding her own best

happiness in theirs. But among the advanced women who despise the

tame teachings of what was once meant by womanliness, maternity is

considered a bore rather than a blessing; the children are shunted to

the side when they come; and ignorant undisciplined nurses are

supposed to do well for wages what mothers will not do for love.

Also we held it as womanliness when women resolutely refused to admit

into their presence, to discuss or hear discussed before them, impure

subjects, or even doubtful ones; when they kept the standard of

delicacy, of purity, of modesty, at a high level, and made men

respect, even if they could not imitate. Now the running between them

and men whose delicacy has been rubbed off long ago by the intimate

contact of coarse life is very close; and some of them go even beyond

those men whose lives have been of a quiet and unexperimental kind.

Nothing indeed, is so startling to a man who has not lived in personal

and social familiarity with certain subjects, and who has retained the

old chivalrous superstitions about the modesty and innocent ignorance

of women, as the easy, unembarrassed coolness with which his fair

neighbour at a dinner-table will dash off into thorny paths, managing

between the soup and the grapes to run through the whole gamut of

improper subjects.

It was also an old notion that rest and quiet and peace were natural

characteristics of womanliness; and that life had been not unfairly

apportioned between the sexes, each having its own distinctive duties

as well as virtues, its own burdens as well as its own pleasures. Man

was to go out and do battle with many enemies; he was to fight with

many powers; to struggle for place, for existence, for natural rights;

to give and take hard blows; to lose perhaps this good impulse or that

noble quality in the fray--the battle-field of life not being that

wherein the highest virtues take root and grow. But he had always a

home where was one whose sweeter nature brought him back to his better

self; a place whence the din of battle was shut out; where he had time

for rest and spiritual reparation; where a woman's love and gentleness

and tender thought and unselfish care helped and refreshed him, and

made him feel that the prize was worth the struggle, that the home was

worth the fight to keep it. And surely it was not asking too much of

women that they should be beautiful and tender to the men whose whole

life out of doors was one of work for them--of vigorous toil that they

might be kept in safety and luxury. But to the advanced woman it seems

so; consequently the home as a place of rest for the man is becoming

daily more rare. Soon, it seems to us, there will be no such thing as

the old-fashioned home left in England. Women are swarming out at all

doors; running hither and thither among the men; clamouring for arms

that they may enter into the fray with them; anxious to lay aside

their tenderness, their modesty, their womanliness, that they may

become hard and fierce and self-asserting like them; thinking it a

far higher thing to leave the home and the family to take care of

themselves, or under the care of some incompetent hireling, while they

enter on the manly professions and make themselves the rivals of their

husbands and brothers.

Once it was considered an essential of womanliness that a woman should

be a good house-mistress, a judicious dispenser of the income, a

careful guide to her servants, a clever manager generally. Now

practical housekeeping is a degradation; and the free soul which

disdains the details of housekeeping yearns for the intellectual

employment of an actuary, of a law clerk, of a banker's clerk. Making

pills is held to be a nobler employment than making puddings; while,

to distinguish between the merits of Egyptians and Mexicans, the

Turkish loan and the Spanish, is considered a greater exercise of mind

than to know fresh salmon from stale and how to lay in household

stores with judgment. But the last is just as important as the first,

and even more so; for the occasional pill, however valuable, is not so

valuable as the daily pudding, and not all the accumulations made by

lucky speculation are of any use if the house-bag which holds them has

a hole in it.

Once women thought it no ill compliment that they should be considered

the depositaries of the highest moral sentiments. If they were not

held the wiser nor the more logical of the two sections of the human

race, they were held the more religious, the more angelic, the better

taught of God, and the nearer to the way of grace. Now they repudiate

the assumption as an insult, and call that the sign of their

humiliation which was once their distinguishing glory. They do not

want to be patient, self-sacrifice is only a euphemism for slavish

submission to manly tyranny; the quiet peace of home is miserable

monotony; and though they have not come to the length of renouncing

the Christian virtues theoretically, their theory makes but weak

practice, and the womanliness integral to Christianity is by no means

the rule of life of modern womanhood. But the oddest part of the

present odd state of things is the curious blindness of women to what

is most beautiful in themselves. Granting even that the world has

turned so far upside down that the one sex does not care to please the

other, still, there is a good of itself in beauty, which some of our

modern women seem to overlook. And of all kinds of beauty that which

is included in what we mean by womanliness is the greatest and the

most beautiful.

A womanly woman has neither vanity nor hardness. She may be

pretty--most likely she is--and she may know it; for, not being a

fool, she cannot help seeing it when she looks at herself in the

glass; but knowing the fact is not being conscious of the possession,

and a pretty woman, if of the right ring, is not vain, though she

prizes her beauty as she ought. And she is as little hard as vain. Her

soul is not given up to ribbons, but neither is she indifferent to

externals, dress among them. She knows that part of her natural

mission is to please and be charming, and she knows that dress sets

her off, and that men feel more enthusiastically towards her when she

is looking fresh and pretty than when she is a dowdy and a fright.

And, being womanly, she likes the admiration of men, and thinks their

love a better thing than their indifference. If she likes men she

loves children, and never shunts them as nuisances, nor frets when

forced to have them about her. She knows that she was designed by the

needs of the race and the law of nature to be a mother; sent into the

world for that purpose mainly; and she knows that rational maternity

means more than simply giving life and then leaving it to others to

preserve it. She has no newfangled notions about the animal character

of motherhood, nor about the degrading character of housekeeping. On

the contrary, she thinks a populous and happy nursery one of the

greatest blessings of her state; and she puts her pride in the perfect

ordering, the exquisite arrangements, the comfort, thoughtfulness and

beauty of her house. She is not above her \_métier\_ as a woman; and she

does not want to ape the manliness she can never possess.

She has always been taught that, as there are certain manly virtues,

so are there certain feminine ones; and that she is the most womanly

among women who has those virtues in greatest abundance and in the

highest perfection. She has taken it to heart that patience,

self-sacrifice, tenderness, quietness, with some others, of which

modesty is one, are the virtues more especially feminine; just as

courage, justice, fortitude, and the like, belong to men.

Passionate ambition, virile energy, the love of strong excitement,

self-assertion, fierceness, an undisciplined temper, are all qualities

which detract from her ideal of womanliness, and which make her less

beautiful than she was meant to be. Consequently she has cultivated

all the meek and tender affections, all the unselfishness and thought

for others which have hitherto been the distinctive property of her

sex, by the exercise of which they have done their best work and

earned their highest place. She thinks it no degradation that she

should take pains to please, to soothe, to comfort the man who, all

day long, has been doing irksome work that her home may be beautiful

and her life at ease. She does not think it incumbent on her, as a

woman of spirit, to fly out at an impatient word; to answer back a

momentary irritation with defiance; to give back a Roland to his

Oliver. Her womanliness inclines her to loving forbearance, to

patience under difficulties, to unwearied cheerfulness under such

portion of the inevitable burden as may have been laid on her. She

does not hold herself predestined by nature to receive only the best

of everything, and deem herself affronted where her own especial cross

is bound on her shoulders. Rather, she understands that she too must

take the rough with the smooth; but that, as her husband's way in

life is rougher than hers, his trials are greater, his burden is

heavier, it is her duty--and her privilege--to help him all she can

with her tenderness and her love; and to give back to him at home, if

in a different form, some of the care he has expended while abroad to

make her path smooth.

In a word, the womanly woman whom we all once loved and in whom we

have still a kind of traditional belief, is she who regards the wishes

of men as of some weight in female action; who holds to love rather

than opposition; to reverence, not defiance; who takes more pride in

the husband's fame than in her own; who glories in the protection of

his name, and in her state as wife; who feels the honour given to her

as wife and matron far dearer than any she may earn herself by

personal prowess; and who believes in her consecration as a helpmeet

for man, not in a rivalry which a few generations will ripen into a

coarse and bitter enmity.