<Saturday Review, 27 February 1869, 275-6>

<DOLLS.>

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The love of dolls is instinctive with girl children; and a nursery

without some of these silent simulacra for the amusement of the little

maids is a very lifeless affair. But outside the nursery door dolls

are stupid things enough; and, whether improvised of wisped-up bundles

of rags or made of the costliest kind of composition, they are at the

best mere pretences for the pastime of babies, not living creatures to

be loved nor artistic creations to be admired. Certainly they are

pretty in their own way, and some are made to simulate human actions

quite cleverly; and one of their charms with children is that they can

be treated like sentient beings without a chance of retaliation. They

can be scolded for being naughty; put to bed in broad daylight for a

punishment; seated in the corner with their impassive faces turned to

the wall, just as the little ones themselves are dealt with; the doll

all the time smiling exactly as it smiled before, its round blue beads

staring just as they stared before; neither scolding nor cornering

making more impression on its sawdust soul than do little missy's sobs

and tears when nurse is cross and dolly is her only friend. But

the child has had its hour of play and make-believe sentiment of

companionship and authority; and so, if the doll can do no good of

itself, it can at least be the occasion of pleasantness to others.

Now there are women who are dolls in all but the mere accident of

material. The doll proper is a simple structure of wax or wood, 'its

knees and elbows glued together;' and the human doll is a complex

machine of flesh and blood. But, saving such structural differences,

these women are as essentially dolls as those in the bazaar which open

and shut their eyes at the word of command enforced by a wire, and

squeak when you pinch them in the middle. There are women who seem

born into the world only as the playthings and make-believes of human

life. As impassive as the waxen creatures in the nursery, no

remonstrance touches them and no experience teaches them. Their final

cause seems to be to look pretty, to be always in perfect drawing-room

order, and to be the occasions by which their friends and companions

are taught patience and self-denial. And they perfectly fulfil their

destiny; which may be so much carried to their credit. A doll woman is

hopelessly useless and can do nothing with her brains or her hands. In

distress or sickness she can only sit by you and look as sorrowful as

her round smooth face will permit; but she has not a helping

suggestion to make, not a fraction of practical power to put forth.

When a man has married a doll wife he has assigned himself to absolute

loneliness or a double burden. He cannot live with his pretty toy in

any more reality of sympathy than does a child with her puppet. He can

tell her nothing of his affairs, nothing of his troubles nor of his

thoughts, because she can impart no new idea, even from the woman's

point of view, not from want of heart but from want of brains to

understand another's life. Is she not a doll? and does not the very

essence of her dollhood lie in this want of perceptive faculty both

for things and feelings? What are the hot flushes of passion, the

bitter tears of grief, the frenzy of despair, to her? She sees them;

and she wonders that people can be so silly as to make themselves and

her so uncomfortable; but of the depth of the anguish they express she

knows no more than does her waxen prototype when little missy sobs

over it in her arms and confides her sorrows to its deaf ears.

Whatever anxieties oppress her husband, he must keep them to himself,

he cannot share them with her; and the last shred of his credit, like

the last effort of his strength, must be employed in maintaining his

toy wife in the fool's paradise where alone she can make her

habitation. Many a man's back has broken under the strain of such a

burden; and many a ruined fortune might have been held together and

repaired when damaged, had it not been for the exigencies and

necessities of the living doll, who had to be spared all want or

inconvenience at the cost of everything else. How many men are

groaning in spirit at this moment over the infatuation that made them

sacrifice the whole worth of life for the sake of a pretty face and a

plastic manner!

The doll woman is as helpless practically as she is useless morally.

If she is in personal danger, she either faints or becomes dazed,

according to her physiological conditions. Sometimes she is hysterical

and frantic, and then she is actively troublesome. In general,

however, she is just so much dead weight on hand, to be thought for as

well as protected; a living corpse to be carried on the shoulders of

those who are struggling for their own lives. She can foresee no

possibilities, measure no distances, think of no means of escape.

Never quick nor ready, pressure paralyzes such wits as she possesses;

and it is not from selfishness so much as from pure incapacity to help

herself or to serve others that the poor doll falls down in a helpless

heap of self-surrender, and lets her very children perish before her

eyes without making an effort to protect them.

As a mother indeed, the doll woman is perhaps more unsatisfactory than

in any other character. She gives up her nursery into the absolute

keeping of her nurse, and does not attempt to control nor to

interfere. This again, is not from want of affection, but from want of

capacity. In her tepid way she has a heart, if only half-vitalized

like the rest of her being; and she is by no means cruel. Indeed, she

has not force enough to be cruel nor wicked anyhow; her worst

offence being a passive kind of selfishness, not from greed but from

inactivity, by which she is made simply useless for the general good.

As for her children, she understands neither their moral nature nor

their physical wants; and beyond a universal 'Oh, naughty!' if the

little ones express their lives in the rampant manner proper to young

things, or as a universal 'Oh, let them have it!' if there is a howl

over what is forbidden or unwise, she has no idea of discipline or

management. If they teaze her, they are sent away; if they are

naughty, they are whipped by papa or nurse; if they are ill, the

doctor is summoned and they have medicine as he directs; but none of

the finer and more intimate relations usual between mother and child

exist in the home of the doll mother. The children are the property of

the nurse only; unless indeed the father happens to be a specially

affectionate and a specially domestic man, and then he does the work

of the mother ~~ at the best clumsily, but at the worst better than the

doll could have done it.

Very shocking and revolting are all the more tragic facts of human

life to the smooth-skinned easy-going doll. When it comes to her own

turn to bear pain, she wonders how a good God can permit her to

suffer. Had she brains enough to think, the great mystery of pain

would make her atheistical in her angry surprise that she should be so

hardly dealt with. As dolls have a constitutional immunity from

suffering, her first initiation into even a minor amount of

anguish is generally a tremendous affair; and though it may be pain of

a quite natural and universal character, she is none the less

indignant and astonished at her portion. She invariably thinks herself

worse treated than her sisters, and cannot be made to understand that

others suffer as much as, and more than, herself. As she has always

shrunk from witnessing trouble of any kind, and as what she may have

seen has passed over her mind without leaving any impression, she

comes to her own sorrows totally inexperienced; and one of the most

pitiable sights in the world is that of a poor doll woman writhing in

the grasp of physical agony, and broken down or rendered insanely

impatient by what other women can bear without a murmur.

When she is in the presence of the moral tragedies of life, she is as

lost and bewildered as she is with the physical. All sin and crime are

to her odd and inexplicable. She cannot pity the sinner, because she

cannot understand the temptation; and she cannot condemn from any

lofty standpoint, because she has not mind enough to see the full

meaning of iniquity. It is simply something out of the ordinary run of

her life, and the doll naturally dislikes disturbance, whether of

habit or of thought. Yet if a noted criminal came and sat down by her,

she would probably whisper to her next friend, 'How shocking!' but she

would simper when he spoke, and perhaps in her heart feel flattered by

the attention of even so doubtful a notoriety. If she be a doll

with a bias towards naughtiness, the utmost limit to which she can go

is a mild kind of curiosity about the outsides of things ~~ the mere

husk and rind of the forbidden fruit ~~ such as wondering how such and

such people look who have done such dreadful things; and what they

felt the next morning; and how could they ever come to think of such

horrors! She would be more interested in hearing about the dress and

hair and eyes of the female plaintiff or defendant in a famous cause

than many other women would be; but she would not give herself the

trouble to read the evidence, and she would take all her opinions

secondhand. But whether the colour of the lady's gown was brown or

blue, and whether she wore her hair wisped or plaited, would be

matters in which she would take as intense an interest as is possible

to her.

The utmost limit to which enthusiasm can be carried with her is in the

matter of dress and fashion; and the only subject that thoroughly

arouses her is the last new colour, or the latest eccentricity of

costume. Talk to her of books, and she will go to sleep; even novels,

her sole reading, she forgets half an hour after she has turned the

last page; while of any other kind of literature she is as profoundly

ignorant as she is of mathematics; but she can discuss the mysteries

of fashion with something like animation, these being to her what the

wire is to the eyes of the dolls in the bazaar. Else she has no power

of conversation. At the head of her own table she sits like a

pretty waxen dummy, and can only simper out a few commonplaces, or

simper without the commonplaces, satisfied if she is well appointed

and looks lovely, and if her husband seems tolerably contented with

the dinner. She is more in her element at a ball, where she is only

asked to dance and not wanted to talk; but her ball-room days do not

last for ever, and when they are over she has no available retreat.

If a rich doll woman is a mistake, a poor one who has been rich is

about the greatest infliction that can be laid on a suffering

household. Not all the teaching of experience can make wax and glue

into flesh and blood, and nothing can train the human doll into a

dignified or a capable womanhood. She still dresses in faded

finery ~~ which she calls keeping up appearances; and still has

pretensions which no 'inexorable logic of facts' can destroy. She

spends her money on sweets and ribbons and ignores the family need for

meat and calico; and she sits by the fireside dozing over a trashy

novel, while her children are in rags and her house is given over to

disorder. But then she has a craze for the word 'lady-like,' and

thinks it synonymous with ignorance and helplessness. She abhors the

masculine-minded woman who helps her ~~ sister, cousin, daughter ~~ so far

as she can abhor anything; but she is glad to lean on her strength,

despite this abhorrence, and, while grumbling at her masculinity, does

not disdain to take advantage of her power. The doll is only passively

disagreeable though; and for all that she carps under her breath,

will remain in any position in which she is placed. She will not act,

but she will let you act unhindered; which is something gained when

you have to deal with fools.

This quiescence of hers passes with the world for plasticity and

amiability; it is neither; it is simply indolence and want of

originating force. While she is young, she is nice enough to those who

care only for a pretty face and a character founded on negatives; but

when a man's pride of life has gone, and he has come into the phase of

weakness, or under the harrow of affliction, or into the valley of the

shadow of death, then she becomes in sorrowful truth the chain and

bullet which make him a galley-slave for the remainder of his days,

and which sign him to drudgery and despair.

As an old woman the doll has not one charm. She has learned none of

that handiness, come to none of that grand maternal power of helping

others, which should accompany maturity and age and has still to be

thought for and protected, to the exclusion of the younger and

naturally more helpless, as when she was young herself, and beautiful

and fascinating, and men thought it a privilege to suffer for her

sake. Nine times out of ten she has lost her temper as well as her

complexion, and has become peevish and unreasonable. She gets fat and

rouges; but she will not consent to get old. She takes to false hair,

dyes, padded stays, arsenic or 'anti-fat,' and to artful contrivances

of every description; but alas! there is no 'dolly's hospital' for her

as there used to be for her battered old prototype in the nursery

lumber-closet; and, whether she likes it or not, she has to succumb to

the inevitable decree, and to become faded, worn out, unlovely, till

the final <hi> coup de grâce </hi> is given and the poor doll is no more. Poor, weak, frivolous doll! it requires some faith to believe

that she is of any good whatsoever in this overladen life of ours; but

doubtless she has her final uses, though it would puzzle a Sanhedrim

of wise men to discover them. Perhaps in the great readjustment of the

future she may have her place and her work assigned to her in some

inter-stellar Phalansterie; when the meaning of her helpless earthly

existence shall be made manifest and its absurd uselessness atoned for

by some kind of celestial <p> 'charing.' </p>