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<THE DISCONTENTED WOMAN.>

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The discontented woman would seem to be becoming an unpleasantly

familiar type of character. A really contented woman, thoroughly well

pleased with her duties and her destiny, may almost be said to be the

exception rather than the rule in these days of tumultuous revolt

against all fixed conditions, and vagrant energies searching for

interest in new spheres of thought and action. It seems impossible to

satisfy the discontented woman by any means short of changing the

whole order of nature and society for her benefit. And even then the

chances are that she would get wearied of her new work, and, like

Alexander, would weep for more worlds to rearrange according to her

liking--with the power to take or to leave the duties she had

voluntarily assumed, as she claims now the power of discarding those

which have been hers from the beginning. As things are, nothing

contents her; and the keynote which shall put her in harmony with

existing conditions, or make her ready to bear the disagreeable

burdens which she has been obliged to carry from Eve's time downward,

has yet to be found. If she is unmarried, she is discontented at the

want of romance in her life; her main desire is to exchange her

father's house for a home of her own; her pride is pained at the

prospect of being left an old maid unsought by men; and her instincts

rebel at the thought that she may never know maternity, the strongest

desire of the average woman.

But if she is married, the causes of her discontent are multiplied

indefinitely, and where she was out of harmony with one circumstance

she is now in discord with twenty. She is discontented on all sides;

because her husband is not her lover, and marriage is not perpetual

courtship; because he is so irritable that life with him is like

walking among thorns if she makes the mistake of a hair's-breadth; or

because he is so imperturbably good-natured that he maddens her with

his stolidity, and cannot be made jealous even when she flirts before

his eyes. Or she is discontented because she has so many household

duties to perform--the dinner to order, the books to keep, the

servants to manage; because she has not enough liberty, or because she

has too much responsibility; because she has so few servants that she

has to work with her own hands, or because she has so many that she is

at her wit's end to find occupation for them all, not to speak of

discipline and good management.

As a mother, she is discontented at the loss of personal freedom

compelled by her condition; at the physical annoyances and mental

anxieties included in the list of her nursery grievances. She would

probably fret grievously if she had no children at all, but she frets

quite as much when they come. In the former case she is humiliated, in

the latter inconvenienced, and in both discontented. Indeed, the way

in which so many women deliver up their children to the supreme

control of hired nurses proves practically enough the depth of their

discontent with maternity when they have it.

If the discontented woman is rich, she speaks despondingly of the

difficulties included in the fit ordering of large means; if she is

poor, life has no joys worth having when frequent change of scene is

unattainable, and the milliner's bill is a domestic calamity that has

to be conscientiously staved off by rigorous curtailment. If she lives

in London, she laments the want of freedom and fresh air for the

children, and makes the unhappy father, toiling at his City office

from ten till seven, feel himself responsible for the pale cheeks and

attenuated legs which are probably to be referred to injudicious diet

and the frequency of juvenile dissipations. But if she is in the

country, then all the charm of existence is centred in London and its

thoroughfares, and not the finest scenery in the world is to be

compared with the attractions of the shops in Regent Street or the

crowds thronging Cheapside.

This question of country living is one that presses heavily on many a

female mind; but we must believe that, in spite of the plausible

reasons so often assigned, the chief causes of discontent are want of

employment and deadness of interest in the life that lies around. The

husband makes himself happy with his rod and gun, with his garden or

his books, with huntsmen or bricklayers, as his tastes lead him; but

the wife--we are speaking of the wife given over to disappointment and

discontent, for there are still, thank Heaven, bright, busy, happy

women both in country and in town--sits over the fire in winter and by

the empty hearth in summer, and finds all barren because she is

without an occupation or an interest within doors or without. Ask her

why she does not garden--if her circumstances are of the kind where

hands are scarce and even a lady's energies would do potent service

among the flower beds; and she will tell you it makes her back ache,

and she does not know a weed from a flower, and would be sure to pick

up the young seedlings for chickweed and groundsel. And if she is rich

and has hands about her who know their business and guard it

jealously, she takes shelter behind her inability to do actual manual

labour side by side with them.

Within doors active housekeeping is repulsive to her; and though her

servants may be quasi-savages, she prefers the dirt and discomfort of

idleness to the domestic pleasantness to be had by her own industry

and practical assistance. Unless she has a special call towards some

particular party in the Church, she does nothing in the parish, and

seems to think philanthropy and help to one's poorer neighbours part

of the ecclesiastical machinery of the country, devolving on the

Rectory alone. She gets bilious through inaction and heated rooms, and

then says the place disagrees with her and will be the death of her

before long. She cannot breathe among the mountains; the moor and

plain are too exposed; the sea gives her a fit of melancholy whenever

she looks at it, and she calls it cruel, crawling, hungry, with a

passion that sounds odd to those who love it; she hates the leafy

tameness of the woods and longs for the freer uplands, the vigorous

wolds, of her early days.

Wherever, in short, the discontented woman is, it is just where she

would rather not be; and she holds fate and her husband cruel beyond

words because she cannot be transplanted into the exact opposite of

her present position. But mainly and above all she desires to be

transplanted to London. If you were to get her confidence, she would

perhaps tell you she thinks the advice of that sister who counselled

the Lady of Groby to burn down the house, whereby her husband would be

compelled to take her to town, the wisest and most to the purpose that

one woman could give to another. So she mopes and moons through the

days, finding no pleasure anywhere, taking no interest in anything,

viewing herself as a wifely martyr and the oppressed victim of

circumstances; and then she wonders that her husband is always ready

to leave her company and that he evidently finds her more tiresome

than delightful. If she would cultivate a little content she might

probably change the aspect of things even to finding the mountains

beautiful and the sea sublime; but dissatisfaction with her condition

is the Nessus garment which clings to the unhappy creature like a

second self, destroying all her happiness and the chief part of her

usefulness.

Women of this class say that they want more to do, and a wider field

for their energies than any of those assigned to them by the natural

arrangement of personal and social duties. As administrators of the

fortune which man earns, and as mothers--that is, as the directors,

caretakers, and moulders of the future generation--they have as

important functions as those performed by vestrymen and surgeons. But

let that pass for the moment; the question is not where they ought to

find their fitting occupation and their dearest interests, but where

they profess a desire to do so. As it is, this desire for an enlarged

sphere is one form among many which their discontent takes; yet when

they are obliged to work, they bemoan their hardship in having to find

their own food, and think that men should either take care of them

gratuitously or make way for them chivalrously. In spite of Scripture,

they find that the battle is to the strong and the race to the swift;

and they do not like to be overcome by the one nor distanced by the

other. Their idea of a clear stage is one that includes favour to

their own side; yet they put on airs of indignation and profess

themselves humiliated when men pay the homage of strength to their

weakness and treat them as ladies rather than as equals.

Elsewhere they complain when they are thrust to the side by the

superior force of the ungodly sex; and think themselves ill-used if

fewer hours of labour--and that labour of what Mr. Carlyle called a

'slim' and superficial kind--cannot command the market and hold the

field against the better work and more continuous efforts of men.

There is nothing of which women speak with more bitterness than of the

lower rates of payment usually accorded to their work; nothing wherein

they seem to be so utterly incapable of judging of cause and effect;

or of taking to heart the unchangeable truth that the best must

necessarily win in the long run, and that the first condition of

equality of payment is equality in the worth of the work done. If

women would perfect themselves in those things which they do already

before carrying their efforts into new fields, we cannot but think it

would be better both for themselves and the world.

Life is a bewildering tangle at the best, but the discontented woman

is not the one to make it smoother. The craze for excitement and for

unfeminine publicity of life has possessed her, to the temporary

exclusion of many of the sweeter and more modest qualities which were

once distinctively her own. She must have movement, action, fame,

notoriety; and she must come to the front on public questions, no

matter what the subject, to ventilate her theories and show the

quality of her brain. She must be professional all the same as man,

with M.D. after her name; and perhaps, before long, she will want to

don a horsehair wig over her back hair, and address 'My Lud' on behalf

of some interesting criminal taken red-handed, or to follow the

tortuous windings of Chancery practice. When that time comes, and as

soon as the novelty has worn off, she will be sure to complain of the

hardness of the grind and the woes of competition; and the obscure

female apothecary struggling for patients in a poor neighbourhood--the

unemployed lady lawyer waiting in dingy chambers for the clients who

never come--will look back with envy and regret to the time when women

were cared for by men, protected and worked for, and had nothing more

arduous to do than attend to the house, spend the money they did not

earn and forbear to add to the anxieties they did not share. Could

they get all the plums and none of the suet it would be fine enough;

but we question whether they will find the battle of life as carried

on in the lower ranks of the hitherto masculine professions one whit

more ennobling or inspiriting than it is now in their own special

departments. Like the poor man who, being well, wished to be better,

and came to the grave as the result, they do not know when they are

well off; and in their search for excitement, and their discontent

with the monotony, undutifulness and inaction which they have created

for themselves, they run great danger of losing more than they can

gain, and of only changing the name, while leaving untouched the real

nature, of the disease under which they are suffering.