

The New Chivalry

This seems to be a good time for us to jar ourselves loose from some of the prejudices and beliefs which we have outgrown. It is time for readjustment surely, a time for spiritual and mental housecleaning, when we are justified in looking things over very carefully and deciding whether or not we shall ever need them again.

Some of us have suspected for a long time that a good deal of the teaching of the world regarding women has come under the general heading of 'dope.' Now 'dope' is not a slang word, as you may be thinking, gentle reader. It is a good Anglo-Saxon word (or will be), for it fills a real need, and there is none other to take its place. 'Dope' means anything that is calculated to soothe, or hush, or put to sleep. 'Sedative' is a synonym, but it lacks the oily softness of 'dope.'

One of the commonest forms of dope given to women to keep them quiet is the one referred to in a previous chapter: 'The hand that rocks the cradle rules the world.' It is a great favorite with politicians and not being original with them it does contain a small element of truth. They use it in their pre-election speeches, which they begin with the honeyed words: 'We are glad to see we have with us this evening so many members of the fair sex; we are delighted to see that so many have come to grace our gathering on this occasion; we realize that a woman's intuition is oftentimes truer than a man's reasoning, and although women have no actual voice in politics, they have something far more strong and potent—they have the wonder power of indirect influence.' Just about here comes in 'the hand that rocks!'

Having thus administered the dope, in this pleasing mixture of molasses and soft soap, which is supposed to keep the 'fair sex' quiet and happy for the balance of the evening, the aspirant for public honors passes on to the serious business of the hour, and discusses the affairs of state with the electorate. Right here, let us sound a small note of warning. Keep your eye on the man who refers to women as the 'fair sex'—he is a dealer in dope!

One of the oldest and falsest of our beliefs regarding women is that they are protected—that some way in the battle of life they get the best of it. People talk of men's chivalry, that vague, indefinite quality which is supposed to transmute the common clay of life into gold.

Chivalry is a magic word. It seems to breathe of foreign strands and moonlight groves and silver sands and knights and earls and kings; it seems to tell of glorious deeds and waving plumes and prancing steeds and belted earls—and things!

People tell us of the good old days of chivalry when womanhood was really respected and revered—when brave knight rode gaily forth to die for his lady love. But in order to be really loved and respected there was one hard and fast condition laid down, to which all women must conform—they must be beautiful, no getting out of that. They simply had to have starry eyes and golden hair, or else black as a raven's wing; they had to have pale, white, and haughty brow, and a laugh like a ripple of magic. Then they were all right and armored knights would die for them quick as wink!

The homely women were all witches, dreadful witches, and they drowned them, on public holidays, in the mill pond!

People tell us now that chivalry is dead, and women have killed it, bold women who instead of staying at home, broidering pearls on a red velvet sleeve, have gone out to work—have gone to college side by side with men and have been so unwomanly sometimes as to take the prizes away from men. Chivalry cannot live in such an atmosphere. Certainly not!

Of course women can hardly be blamed for going out and working when one remembers that they must either work or starve. Broidering pearls will not boil the kettle worth a cent! There are now thirty per cent of the women of the U.S.A. and Canada, who are wage-earners, and we will readily grant that necessity has driven most of them out of their homes. Similarly, in England alone, there are a million and a half more women than men. It would seem that all women cannot have homes of their own—there does not seem to be enough men to go around. But still there are people who tell us these women should all have homes of their own—it is their own fault if they haven't; and once I heard of a woman saying the hardest thing about men I ever heard—and she was an ardent anti-suffragist too. She said that what was wrong with the women in England was that they were too particular—that's why they were not married, 'and,' she went on, 'any person can tell, when they look around at men in general, that God never intended women to be very particular.' I am glad I never said anything as hard as that about men.

There are still with us some of the conventions of the old days of chivalry. The pretty woman still has the advantage over her plainer sister—and the opinion of the world is that women must be beautiful at all costs. When a newspaper wishes to disprove a woman's contention, or demolish her theories, it draws ugly pictures of her. If it can show that she has big feet or red hands, or wears unbecoming clothes, that certainly settles the case—and puts her where she belongs.

This cruel convention that women must be beautiful accounts for the popularity of face-washes, and beauty parlors, and the languor of university extension lectures. Women cannot be blamed for this. All our civilization has been to the end that women make themselves attractive to men. The attractive woman has hitherto been the successful woman. The pretty girl marries a millionaire, travels in Europe, and is presented at court; her plainer sister, equally intelligent, marries a boy from home, and does her own washing. I am not comparing the two destinies as to which offers the greater opportunities for happiness or usefulness, but rather to show how widely divergent two lives may be. What caused the difference was a wavy strand of hair, a rounder curve on a cheek. Is it any wonder that women capitalize their good looks, even at the expense of their intelligence? The economic dependence of women is perhaps the greatest injustice that has been done to us, and has worked the greatest injury to the race.

Men are not entirely blameless in respect to the frivolity of women. It is easy to blame women for dressing foolishly, extravagantly, but to what end do they do it? To be attractive to men; and the reason they continue to do it is that it is successful. Many a woman has found that it pays to be foolish. Men like frivolity—before marriage; but they demand all the sterner virtues afterwards. The little dainty, fuzzy-haired, simpering dolly who chatters and wears toe-slippers has a better chance in the matrimonial market than the clear-headed, plainer girl, who dresses sensibly. A little boy once gave his mother directions as to his birthday present—he said he wanted 'something foolish' and therein he expressed a purely masculine wish.

A man's ideal at seventeen

Must be a sprite —

A dainty, fairy, elfish queen

Of pure delight;

But later on he sort of feels

He'd like a girl who could cook meals.

Life is full of anomalies, and in the mating and pairing of men and women there are many.

Why is the careless, easy-going, irresponsible way of the young girl so attractive to men? It does not make for domestic happiness; and why, Oh why, do some of our best men marry such odd little sticks of pin-head women, with a brain similar in caliber to a second-rate butterfly, while the most intelligent, unselfish, and womanly women are left unmated? I am going to ask about this the first morning I am in heaven, if so be we are allowed to ask about the things which troubled us while on our mortal journey. I have never been able to find out about it here.

Now this old belief that women are protected is of sturdy growth and returns to life with great persistence. Theoretically women are protected—on paper—traditionally—just like Belgium was, and with just as disastrous results.

A member of the English Parliament declared with great emphasis that the women now have everything the heart could desire—they reign like queens and can have their smallest wish gratified. ('Smallest' is right.) And we very readily grant that there are many women living in idleness and luxury on the bounty of their male relatives, and we say it with sorrow and shame that these are estimated the successful women in the opinion of the world. But while some feast in idleness, many others slave in poverty. The great army of women workers are ill-paid, badly housed, and their work is not honored or respected or paid for. What share have they in man's chivalry? Chivalry is like a line of credit. You can get plenty of it when you do not need it. When you are prospering financially and your bank account is growing and you are rated A1, you can get plenty of credit—it is offered to you; but when the dark days of financial depression overtake you, and the people you are depending upon do not 'come through,' and you must have credit—must have it!—the very people who once urged it upon you will now tell you that 'money is tight!'

The young and pretty woman, well dressed and attractive, can get all the chivalry she wants. She will have seats offered her on street cars, men will hasten to carry her parcels, or open doors for her; but the poor old woman, beaten in the battle of life, sick of life's struggles, and grown gray and weather-beaten facing life's storms—what chivalry is shown her? She can go her weary way uncomforted and unattended. People who need it do not get it.

Anyway, chivalry is a poor substitute for justice, if one cannot have both. Chivalry is something like the icing on the cake, sweet but not nourishing. It is like the paper lace around the bonbon box—we could get along without it.

There are countless thousands of truly chivalrous men, who have the true chivalry whose foundation is justice—who would protect all women from injury of insult or injustice, but who know that they cannot do it—who know that in spite of all they can do, women are often outraged, insulted, ill-treated. The truly chivalrous man, who does reverence all womankind, realizing this, says: 'Let us give women every weapon whereby they can defend themselves; let us remove the stigma of political nonentity under which women have been placed. Let us give women a fair deal!'

This is the new chivalry—and on it we build our hope.