

A REVALUATION OF MOTHERHOOD

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IT is the unnatural divorce, due to erroneous conceptions, between the fact of motherhood and the work which the modern woman is called upon to perform, that constitutes, to my mind, what is still called the woman problem. Motherhood is one of the last great forces of life to become modernized or utilized in accordance with its full potentialities. We have old-fashioned conceptions in regard to it—passed on to us almost unmodified, from the days when the handicrafts prevailed—and we have a new type of woman. In the old days, under the domestic form of industry, the mighty powers of water were not required, and its full potentialities were not realized. In the old days when home industries flourished, motherhood served an adequate and useful purpose, but its full potentialities were neither surmised nor required. To-day, in this “machinofacture” age, water power is indispensable,—the power that has been released and harnessed through the brain of man. And to-day the world is sorely in need of the kind of mother power that bears upon it the stamp of the modern woman,—of her brain and heart and soul.

But as matters now stand, this mighty power for good has not been properly harnessed by woman, because no concerted effort has been made on her part to adapt it to modern conditions. Until such an adaptation or adjustment takes place, we shall continue to have on the one hand the dissemination of such popular sentiments as are expressed in—“*She sacrificed her career when she married,*”—“*A married woman has no business to work outside the home,*”—and on the other, that unrest in women themselves which so often results in a discord, an unnatural division within themselves between the claims of what they call their “individuality” and the claims of natural instincts.

What is there about the motherhood of to-day that tends to make it “unpopular” with the ambitious type of woman, the woman who longs to express herself in some form of work that will call into action her fullest powers, the woman who by very virtue of her spirit and independence and ambition would make—from the point of view of the eugenist—an excellent type of mother? Well,

the first great fact that we find in regard to it, of course, is that, in order to fulfil the function of motherhood, the woman, as wife, is expected to enter a home which, in many significant ways, has become depleted. Especially has it become depleted in an economic sense. The woman is no longer the productive factor that she once was in the home, under the domestic form of industry, and she becomes, therefore, a dependent. We are all, of course, familiar with the causes that have taken from women the use of occupations which formerly made of them producers within the home,—the spinning, weaving, garment-making, dyeing, baking, brewing, jam, candle and soap making, etc. But we do not always realize the implications of such facts. And so while many of the old slogans persist, a change in conditions has relentlessly taken place, and what is really needed is not an impossible return to conditions that no longer exist, but an adjustment to present conditions.

The fact that woman is no longer the productive factor that she once was in the home is the crux of the economic side of the question—the side which tends to be most important, not only in its actual monetary bearings, but in its moral implications. The modern woman outside the home has proved that she can achieve an economic independence which is most conducive to her own self-respect. Upon the salary she is capable of earning, even at its lesser rates, she is able to maintain herself according to a fairly high standard, to have good clothes, to buy the things she requires to keep alive her mental life, and to have recreation and amusement. On marriage, however—marriage under the ordinary conditions which make it usual for a girl of a certain class to marry a man of her own class,—she is expected to give up her precious economic independence, with all its implications, and to become financially dependent upon one who, in the ordinary scheme of things, as a member of her set, is probably earning only about one-third more salary than she herself was able to earn.

We are all aware, if we have studied reliable statistics carefully, that on our North American continent, for example, by far the largest percentage of those gainfully employed have incomes suitable to the requirements of one individual, with a fairly high standard of life, but quite inadequate for the proper maintenance of even a small family. (See, for example, *The Income in the United States*, 1921, by Mitchell, Macaulay, King and Knauth,—a study made under the auspices of the National Bureau of Economic Research). We are aware, also, that our existing economic system is somewhat unstable, and that those who earn wages or salaries do so under precarious conditions. See, then, what follows: the

state of motherhood deprives a woman of economic independence, and it makes the state dependent upon the precarious economic existence of one side. This, moreover, in an age when the complications of modern life make it necessary for children to have special courses of training if they are to make their way at all in the world! It is not surprising, under the circumstances, that many thoughtful men and women are hesitating to contract the obligations of marriage.

We find, then, just what we might expect to find,—that the birth rate is highest among those who are the most shiftless and least capable of making plans for the future,—and that the fertile one-quarter of the adult generation that begets one-half of the succeeding generation tends to correspond with the percentage of humanity the least fit to propagate the species. The feeble-minded, the thriftless, the diseased, still continue to drift into parenthood and to propagate the species at an appalling rate; but the women with the clear visions, the good physiques, the bright and practical intellects, are, in the heyday of their youth and strength, concerning themselves mainly about the kind of work they shall take up that will insure them the means of preserving their self-respect and a fairly high standard of living. Marriage, instead of being a primary consideration in the lives of young women, has become a secondary one.

Yet this process has been in existence sufficiently long to make some of its after-results in the lives of women patent. We are all familiar with the confessions of successful but “no longer quite so young” spinsters, who declare that they would have been happier *minus* a career and *plus* husband, home, and children. The point that such women overlook is that the impulse which caused them to concentrate upon a career, to the exclusion of marriage, was just as strong and imperious as the thwarted instinct which rather belatedly makes them exclaim that they would have been “happier” in a domestic sphere. What they really want is their life-work *and* a husband, home, and children. The work of the depleted home would not have fully satisfied them, any more than it fully satisfies the many wives and mothers who, in various ways—often very ineffectual—strive to express themselves in work outside the home—in half-day positions, in club and church work, and so on. Their dissatisfaction arises from the fact that between two perfectly legitimate impulses there was an unnatural conflict. On the one hand, they felt the need to express themselves in work which would insure their independence, and on the other the need—although at the time, perhaps, subconsciously—to fulfil themselves as wives

and mothers. The repressed "maternal instinct", in other words, in some women does not make itself troublesome until after first youth has passed. But "there is something rotten in the state of Denmark" when a woman feels that, in order to express herself as a human being, she must forego motherhood and wifehood.

Is it not time that a revaluation of motherhood was made? Or some practical attempt to bring it into harmony with conditions that are very different from any previous conditions in the history of man—at any rate, among English-speaking peoples? If one glances back upon the stages through which motherhood has passed in our English-speaking world, one notes, roughly speaking, two main sorts, which might be called the Utilitarian, and the Sentimental.

In the *Utilitarian Stage*, child-bearing was looked upon as a necessary function of womanhood. It was the *raison d'être* of a woman's existence. There was no virtue attached to it. A constant state of warfare made life cheap, and the gaps had to be continuously filled in.

In the *Sentimental Stage*, in which we still linger, an attempt to shed glamour over the utilitarian side of motherhood was made, and motherhood was acclaimed by poet and priest as a most sacred and beautiful calling. Motherhood was sentimentally lauded on every side as a virtue in itself, quite irrespective of other considerations, and the woman really most unsuited to be a mother at all, from physical and mental defects, received the plaudits showered indiscriminately upon all who share her state. It was not very long ago that Theodore Roosevelt was making much ado about "large families,"—although hardly, perhaps, from a wholly sentimental point of view, yet still sharing the sentimental fallacy in regard to indiscriminate motherhood,—and our "Mothers' Days" are eloquent evidence of the sentimental valuation.

But out of this sentimental stage is emerging a third stage, which might be called the *self-conscious* stage,—a stage in which, among the most thoughtful men and women, there is not only the exercise of foresight in marriage and a deliberate limiting of the number of children to meet the economic capacity of the family, but the tendency to take into serious consideration the scientific facts relating to heredity. Man, so long satisfied to confine his efforts and knowledge in the matter of breeding to the lower animals, is now at last turning his attention to his own kind. He has begun to realize to some good purpose that brains tend to beget brains, and that stupidity is extremely prolific of its own type. In some of the colleges and high schools of the United States and other

countries special courses in heredity and eugenics have been established. Young men and young women are at last learning to think of marriage in terms somewhat different from those of their ancestors.

But what have we to meet this growing race-consciousness on the part of thoughtful young men and women? These young people are the very class whose intellectual qualities, ambition, and spirit induce them to seek careers that will draw out the best in themselves. The young man desires to stand high in his profession or calling—be it that of lawyer, doctor, teacher, accountant, salesman—but the higher the calling, the longer and more arduous is the training. He therefore naturally tries to put from him all that serves as a “stumbling-block” in the path of his progress; and unfortunately, as matters now stand, an early marriage is undoubtedly one of these impediments. He knows that the young woman who would make him a fitting mate has as high standards as his own; and he realizes quite frankly that he cannot maintain her according to those standards. Hence his delay of marriage, a delay that frequently becomes a chronic habit, or at best results in a late union and few if any children.

The young woman, on the other hand, realizes keenly the state of affairs. She is quite averse to becoming a “stumbling-block,” and moreover she sees in the depleted home little to call forth those higher energies which she is as anxious as the man to exercise. She turns, then, to some kind of work. Frequently, unlike the work which woman formerly performed in the homes, it bears no relation whatever to motherhood, and she seeks to stifle the instinct that at a later period may manifest itself as a distinctly thwarted one. How different might be the attitude of this young woman, and how different the opportunities afforded her, if she saw in marriage and motherhood a career recognized at a high valuation by society, and rewarded accordingly!

Now I do not propose any endowment of motherhood on a wholesale scale, an endowment given to women simply by reason of the fact that they had borne so many children. That would be merely reverting, in a sense, to the sentimental stage, with results that might be even more disastrous than they are at present. But I do suggest that the whole plane of parenthood might be raised by such methods as the following:—

1. The institution, even in our elementary schools, of simple courses of instruction on the beginnings of life, with special stress laid upon the vital importance of good stock.

2. Courses in heredity and eugenics and the study of the effects of environment, in our high schools, night schools, technical schools, and universities, and in connection with these courses scholarships.

3. The endowment, upon a selective basis, of wives and mothers who had taken such courses, and who could show, in regard both to themselves and to their husbands, "clean bills" in the matter of their family histories, of which, of course, they would have made a special study.

4. The establishment of state or provincial departments of research for the special purpose of enquiry into the problems of heredity and environment, with special branches allocated to the experiences in this connection of actual wives and mothers.

All these courses would tend to prepare for professions (open to both men and women) that would be dedicated solely to the study of the problems of parenthood, with their immense implications. They should be made as accessible as possible to all young girls and women, so that none could justly complain that they had not the opportunity of qualifying for an endowment or a profession related to the problems of parenthood.

The whole trend of such courses and endowment would be in the direction of the real elevation of parenthood, and especially of motherhood. Many young women, who now compete with men in the labour market, would have, by special preparation, qualified themselves to occupy callings that had in them so much dignity and financial independence. Many young men, who now delay or eschew marriage, would regard with a different attitude the marriage relation when they realized that it meant, not a financial burden, but a real economic partnership. Such problems as those relating to birth control, the segregation of the feeble-minded, the merits or large or small families, pauperism and crime, would tend to be dealt with efficiently and practically in the research departments set aside for the study of such problems.

And what of woman's work in the home, in which she would be a dignified partner of her husband, bringing with her a "dowry" in the shape of a state endowment—an endowment which might be graduated, beginning with an initial amount upon marriage, and increasing in dimension up to, say, the birth of the fourth child?

In the first place, she would be no longer a dependent—great and beneficent change!—affecting not only her whole outlook upon life, but vitally her husband's attitude toward her. The fact that by her very presence in the home she was contributing to its economic upkeep would tend to give her a spacious outlook, removed from

the petty irritations incident to financial dependence. She would realize that her valuation was high in the eyes of the community, and that the expression of her views in political and social life would be not only welcomed, but seriously taken into account.

In the second place, she would be able to give her children, during the critical years of their lives, that intelligent companionship, based upon her own preparation for motherhood, that the mother of to-day, so often beset by minor worries and an irritating position, is not always able to give her children.

Thirdly, she would have leisure to devote to some avocation, which she would not have to leave the home to follow and which would tend to be fashioned by her experience and training—such as a contribution to science along the lines of research into the problems relating to parenthood, or the expression of her views in art, literature or social welfare work. Incidentally, "Household Science," now taught in connection with our universities, high schools and technical schools, would have a chance of being practically applied when the wife and mother had not only leisure in which to continue her study of such a science, but the means wherewith to purchase the labour-saving devices that play a necessary part in it.

And when the last child left the home or reached maturity, she would have the solid contribution of the experience she gained as wife and mother to contribute to a society which, setting so large a value upon motherhood, would tend to become imbued with that spirit of larger and enlightened motherhood that is so sorely needed in our social life to-day.

Out of the self-conscious stage of motherhood—a period of intense research into the problems related to parenthood—would emerge, let us hope, a superior state, which might be called the stage of *Self-possession*. In that stage it is conceivable that the fruits of research might manifest themselves in a healthy human stock from which the deleterious strains had been almost entirely eliminated. But until we apply our God-given intelligence to the solution of the present problems that beset us, it is not likely that we shall make much progress even in the self-conscious state, into which we have only just begun to enter.