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Lecture 2/1 '24

The Extravagance of Women

I have long believed the general accusation of natural extravagance brought against women was falacious. So far as my acquaintance with the members of the sex goes they seem to me naturally thrifty; but how is one to get documents to sustain a theory so contrary to popular opinion.

I never had any fall into my hands of any account until the other day there came along the results of a questionnaire which Dr. Lorine Pruette - a serious and lively-minded student of her sex, has recently been making. She has been prying into the minds of some 375 high school girls, trying to find out what they wanted - marriage or a career. The questions had been about what you would expect in such an undertaking. "If you could choose anything in the world, what would you most like to be?" "Why do you want this?", etc., etc. Now, among her questions was one as to the day dreams of these young ladies. - "Sometimes when you are sitting before the fire with nothing to do, or are doing work with your hands which does not occupy your mind, your thoughts wander far away and you make up wonderful romances and stories about yourself. You dream of things which perhaps might never happen but which you would enjoy having happen. Probably every girl in the world has these dreams in which she is the heroine and has wonderful things happen to her. Write down in the space below and on the back of this paper all that you can remember of one of these day dreams. How long ago did you have this dream?"

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Of course the answers to this question were just what any woman who remembers her youth would expect them to be. But that is not the point here. The point here is the modesty of the set which the majority built for the life drama in which they were to play leading lady. It was simple, homelike, restrained. It is quite evident that the girls were thinking of their hearts' desires and that these desires were not primarily material.

What most of them wanted was a cottage, not a palace. They wanted something simple, white, cheerful - not something vast, gorgeous, complicated. There were few mansions but many cottages. There was a general desire for activity, little for indolence.

I do not begin to say that there was not an occasional fantastic creation, something that you might properly call extravagant. I should say that the young lady who dreamed of being a great opera singer, to whom the manager came one night and raised her salary from two millions to two billions a month, was an extravagant dreamer. And I should say that the young woman who wanted to be a movie actress and dreamed that she had "a harem, including Wallace Reid, Dick Barthelmes, Ralph Graves, and a million other wonderful men," could properly be said to be extravagant. And I suepect them, now moreover, of a desire common enough to youth when held up and asked to disclose to the world ~~that which seems to be~~ its precious inner self - a desire to hoodwink, to lead the questioner into a blind trail!

That this simplicity of taste in the majority of

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these girls is fairly general in homes the country over is corroborated by the observations of anyone who travels much about these States, keeping his eyes open. In the last twenty years there has been an extraordinary change of ideas among well-to-do people about what is desirable in a home. Back in the 70's and 80's and 90's, the class which I have in mind, when they came to the point of building, put up a huge structure - big reception rooms, wide halls, bed rooms in which one lost himself, with spaces set aside for all sorts of unnecessary purposes. Throughout the prosperous Middle West cities ~~particularly~~ where this kind of building raged for many years, these great houses are being turned into clubs, dress-making establishments, sales houses. And those who build think primarily not of size but of convenience, livableness, beauty. It is woman's natural good sense asserting itself. She wants something that she can make what she calls homelike.

But if there is something in what I am saying, what is at the bottom of woman's reputation for extravagant spending? Is it that the sex as a whole is tagged because everywhere there are a certain number of its members who are extravagant, and though in a town of 10,000 women there will probably not be over 100 that deserve the characterization, this 100 is so much more conspicuous than the9900 that the whole mass is accursed. That is the way we generalize about all sorts of things, as a rule. Take a city of 2,000,000 people in which a dozen new crimes are described each

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morning at length on the front page of its newspapers, and the country soon calls it a criminal city, forgetful of the fact that it has hundreds of thousands of citizens who work faithfully all day, love and serve their families and friends, and go to bed regularly at ten o'clock!

A generalization to be worth anything must consider all the facts not the few that fall under the eye in a hasty glance at the newspaper or the exhibits which one sees as he walks down the street. Even undeniable feminine extravagance does not prove that the exhibitor has not a natural vein of thriftiness in her. She probably has, but other veins have ~~obscured~~ surmised it, for the time being, ~~at least~~. A woman is strongly imitative - like all human beings whatever the sex. She does as others do, but while multitudes of women dress, keep house, entertain imitatively, they do it on a strict budget. There will always be a few, however, in whom imitation is so dominating a quality that they lose the sense of proportion, spend extravagantly, and they stand out because they are exceptions.

And then, too, a woman operates under Nature's strict orders to preen, to decorate herself, in order to attract the male. It is a factor in her business. It is not to be wondered at that among women, driven as they are by natural necessity, there should be those whose preening and decorating are out of proportion.

But a still stronger factor than either of these is the pressure that a certain type of men bring upon the women whom they love, to outdo the wives and daughters of other men ~~with whom they~~ all

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their ambitions
are rivals. The display their women make aids their worldly success.
They wish their women to shine, want to be proud of them. It is
frequently a generous although hardly a noble impulse.

Take all the exhibits of women's extravagance that the
country yields - pile them together and weigh them in the balance
with the exhibits of her thriftiness, and they amount to but little.
outweigh the heavier weight
But that little is a glittering thing. Attention is centered on it, too,
because it is pretty generally thought to be foolish and reprehensible.
The unfairness is in tagging womankind which taken as a whole is careful,
saving, self-sacrificing, as a spendthrift and waster.

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