

PLAIN WORDS ON THE WOMAN QUESTION.

If any species or race desires a continued existence, then above all things it is necessary that that species or race should go on reproducing itself.

This, I am aware, is an obvious platitude; but I think it was John Stuart Mill who once said there were such things in the world as luminous platitudes. Some truths are so often taken for granted in silence, that we are in danger at times of quite losing sight of them. And as some good friends of mine have lately been accusing me of "barren paradoxes," I am anxious in this paper to avoid all appearance of paradox, barren or fertile, and to confine myself strictly to the merest truisms. Though the truisms, to be sure, are of a particular sort too much overlooked in controversy nowadays by a certain type of modern lady writers.

Let us look then briefly at the needful conditions under which alone the human race can go on reproducing itself.

If every woman married, and every woman had four children, population would remain just stationary. Or rather, if every marriageable adult man and woman in a given community were to marry, and if every marriage proved fertile, on the average, to the extent of four children, then, under favourable circumstances, that community, I take it, would just keep up its numbers, neither increasing nor decreasing from generation to generation. If less than all the adult men and women married, or if the marriages proved fertile on the average to a less degree than four children apiece, then that community would grow smaller and smaller. In order that the community may keep up to its normal level, therefore, either all adults must marry and produce to this extent, or else, fewer marrying, those few must have families exceeding on the average four children, in exact proportion to the rate of abstention. And if the community is to increase (which on Darwinian principles I believe to be a condition precedent of national health and vigour), then either all adults must marry and produce more than four children apiece, or else, fewer marrying, those few must produce as many more as will compensate for the abstention of the remainder and form a small surplus in each generation.

In Britain, at the present day, I believe I am right in deducing (after Mr. F. Galton) that an average of about six children per marriage (not per head of female inhabitants) is necessary in order to keep the population just stationary. And the actual number of children per marriage is a little in excess of even that high figure,

thus providing for the regular increase from census to census and for overflow by emigration.

These facts, all platitudes as they are, look so startling at first sight that they will probably need for the unstatistical reader a little explanation and simplification.

Well, suppose, now, every man and every woman in a given community were to marry; and suppose they were in each case to produce two children, a boy and a girl; and suppose those children were in every case to attain maturity: why, then, the next generation would exactly reproduce the last, each father being represented by his son, and each mother by her daughter, *ad infinitum*. (I purposely omit, for simplicity's sake, the complicating factor of the length and succession of generations, which by good luck in the case of the human species practically cancels itself.) But as a matter of fact, all the children do not attain maturity: on the contrary, nearly half of them die before reaching the age of manhood—in some conditions of life, indeed, and in some countries, more than half. Roughly speaking, therefore (for I don't wish to become a statistical bore), it may be said that in order that two children may attain maturity and be capable of marriage, even under the most favourable circumstances, four must be born. The other two must be provided to cover risks of infant or adolescent mortality, and to insure against infertility or incapacity for marriage in later life. They are wanted to make up the categories of soldiers, sailors, imbeciles, cripples, and incapables generally. So that even if every possible person married, and if every married pair had four children, we should only just keep up the number of our population from one age to another.

Now, I need hardly say that not every possible person does marry, and that we do actually a good deal more than keep up the number of our population. Therefore it will at once be clear that each actual marriage is fertile to considerably more than the extent of four children. That is, indeed, a heavy burden to lay upon women. One aim, at least, of social reformers should certainly be to lighten it as much as possible.

Nevertheless, I think it will be abundantly apparent from these simple considerations that in every community, and to all time, the vast majority of the women must become wives and mothers, and must bear at least four children apiece. If some women shirk their natural duties, then a heavier task must be laid upon the remainder. But in any case almost all must become wives and mothers, and almost all must bear at least four or five children. In our existing state six are the very fewest that our country can do with.

Moreover, it is pretty clear that the best-ordered community will be one where as large a proportion of the women as possible marry, and where the burden of maternity is thus most evenly shared

between them. Admitting that certain women may have good reasons for avoiding maternity on various grounds—unfitness, or, what is probably much the same thing at bottom, disinclination—and admitting also that where such good reasons exist, it is best those women should remain unmarried, we must still feel that in most cases marriage is in itself desirable, and that limited families are better than large ones. In other words, it is best for the community at large that most women should marry, and should have moderate families, rather than that fewer should marry and have unwieldily large ones; for if families are moderate there will be a greater reserve of health and strength left in the mothers for each birth, the production of children can be spread more slowly over a longer time, and the family resources will be less heavily taxed for their maintenance and education. Incidentally this will benefit both parents, as well as the community. That is to say, where many marriages and small families are the rule, the children will on the average be born healthier, be better fed, and be launched more fairly on the world in the end. Where marriages are fewer and families large, the strain of maternity will be most constant and most heavily felt; the father will be harder-worked, and the children will be born feebler, will be worse fed, and will start worse equipped in the battle of life.

Hence I would infer that the goal a wise community should keep in view is rather more marriages and fewer children per marriage, than fewer marriages and more children per marriage.

Or, to put these conclusions another way: in any case, the vast majority of women in any community must needs become wives and mothers: and in the best-ordered community, the largest possible number will doubtless become so, in order to distribute the burden equally, and to produce in the end the best results for the nation.

Well, it may be brutal and unmanly to admit these facts or to insist upon these facts, as we are often told it is by maiden ladies; but still, if we are to go on existing at all, we must look the facts fairly and squarely in the face, and must see how modern tendencies stand with regard to them.

Now, I have the greatest sympathy with the modern woman's demand for emancipation. I am an enthusiast on the Woman Question. Indeed, so far am I from wishing to keep her in subjection to man, that I should like to see her a great deal more emancipated than she herself as yet at all desires. Only, her emancipation must not be of a sort that interferes in any way with this prime natural necessity. To the end of all time, it is mathematically demonstrable

(1) Oh, yes, I know all about Malthus; but Mr. Galton has shown that a certain amount of over-population is necessary for survival of the fittest, and that if the best and most intelligent classes abstain, the worst and lowest will surely make up the leeway for them.

that most women must become the mothers of at least four children, or else the race must cease to exist. Any supposed solution of the woman-problem, therefore, which fails to look this fact straight in the face, is a false solution. It cries "Peace, peace!" where there is no peace. It substitutes a verbal juggle for a real way out of the difficulty. It withdraws the attention of thinking women from the true problem of their sex to fix it on side-issues of comparative unimportance.

And this, I believe, is what almost all the Woman's Rights women are sedulously doing at the present day. They are pursuing a chimæra, and neglecting to perceive the true aim of their sex. They are setting up a false and unattainable ideal, while they omit to realise the true and attainable one which alone is open to them.

For let us look again for a moment at what this all but universal necessity of maternity implies. Almost every woman must bear four or five children. In doing so she must on the average use up the ten or twelve best years of her life: the ten or twelve years that immediately succeed her attainment of complete womanhood. For note, by the way, that these women must also for the most part marry young: as Mr. Galton has shown, you can quietly and effectually wipe out a race by merely making its women all marry at twenty-eight: married beyond that age, they don't produce children enough to replenish the population. Again, during these ten or twelve years of child-bearing at the very least, the women can't conveniently earn their own livelihood; they must be provided for by the labour of the men—under existing circumstances (in favour of which I have no Philistine prejudice) by their own husbands. It is true that in the very lowest state of savagery special provision is seldom made by the men for the women even during the periods of pregnancy, childbirth, and infancy of the offspring. The women must live (as among the Hottentots) over the worst of these periods on their own stored-up stock of fat, like hibernating bears or desert camels. It is true also that among savage races generally the women have to work as hard as the men, though the men bear in most cases the larger share in providing actual food for the entire family. But in civilised communities—and the more so in proportion to their degree of civilisation—the men do most of the hardest work, and in particular take upon themselves the duty of providing for the wives and children. The higher the type, the longer are the wives and children provided for. Analogy would lead one to suppose (with Comte) that in the highest communities the men would do all the work, and the women would be left entirely free to undertake the management and education of the children.

Seeing, then, that these necessities are laid by the very nature of our organization upon women, it would appear as though two duties were clearly imposed upon the women themselves, and upon all those men who sympathize in their welfare: First, to see that their train-

ing and education should fit them above everything else for this their main function in life; and, second, that in consideration of the special burden they have to bear in connection with reproduction, all the rest of life should be made as light and easy and free for them as possible. We ought frankly to recognise that most women must be wives and mothers: that most women should therefore be trained, physically, morally, socially, and mentally, in the way best fitting them to be wives and mothers; and that all such women have a right to the fullest and most generous support in carrying out their functions as wives and mothers.

And here it is that we seem to come in conflict for a moment with most of the modern Woman-Question agitators. I say for a moment only, for I am not going to admit, even for that brief space of time, that the doctrine I wish to set forth here is one whit less advanced, one whit less radical, or one whit less emancipatory than the doctrine laid down by the most emancipated women. On the contrary, I feel sure that while women are crying for emancipation they really want to be left in slavery; and that it is only a few exceptional men, here and there in the world, who wish to see them fully and wholly enfranchised. And those men are not the ones who take the lead in so-called Woman's Rights movements.

For what is the ideal that most of these modern women agitators set before them? Is it not clearly the ideal of an unsexed woman? Are they not always talking to us as though it were not the fact that most women must be wives and mothers? Do they not treat any reference to that fact as something ungenerous, ungentlemanly, and almost brutal? Do they not talk about our "casting their sex in their teeth"?—as though any man ever resented the imputation of manliness. Nay, have we not even, many times lately, heard those women who insist upon the essential womanliness of women described as "traitors to the cause of their sex"? Now, we men are (rightly) very jealous of our virility. We hold it a slight not to be borne that anyone should impugn our essential manhood. And we do well to be angry: for virility is the keynote to all that is best and most forcible in the masculine character. Women ought equally to glory in their femininity. A woman ought to be ashamed to say she has no desire to become a wife and mother. Many such women there are no doubt—it is to be feared, with our existing training, far too many: but instead of boasting of their sexlessness as a matter of pride, they ought to keep it dark, and to be ashamed of it—as ashamed as a man in a like predicament would be of his impotence. They ought to feel they have fallen short of the healthy instincts of their kind, instead of posing as in some sense the cream of the universe, on the strength of what is really a functional aberration.

Unfortunately, however, just at the present moment, a considerable number of the ablest women have been misled into taking this

unfeminine side, and becoming real "traitors to their sex" in so far as they endeavour to assimilate women to men in everything, and to put upon their shoulders, as a glory and privilege, the burden of their own support. Unfortunately, too, they have erected into an ideal what is really an unhappy necessity of the passing phase. They have set before them as an aim what ought to be regarded as a *pis-aller*. And the reasons why they have done so are abundantly evident to anybody who takes a wide and extended view of the present crisis—for a crisis it undoubtedly is—in the position of women.

In the first place, the movement for the Higher Education of Women, in itself an excellent and most praiseworthy movement, has at first, almost of necessity, taken a wrong direction, which has entailed in the end much of the present uneasiness. Of course, nothing could well be worse than the so-called education of women forty or fifty years ago. Of course, nothing could be narrower than the view of their sex then prevalent as eternally predestined to suckle fools and chronicle small beer. But when the need for some change was first felt, instead of reform taking a rational direction—instant of women being educated to suckle strong and intelligent children, and to order well a wholesome, beautiful, reasonable household,—the mistake was made of educating them like men—giving a like training for totally unlike functions. The result was that many women became unsexed in the process, and many others acquired a distaste, an unnatural distaste, for the functions which nature intended them to perform. At the present moment, a great majority of the ablest women are wholly dissatisfied with their own position as women, and with the position imposed by the facts of the case upon women generally: and this as the direct result of their false education. They have no real plan to propose for the future of women as a sex: but in a vague and formless way they protest inarticulately against the whole feminine function in women, often even going the length of talking as though the world could get along permanently without wives and mothers.¹

In the second place, a certain real lack of men to marry, here and now, in certain classes of society, and those the classes that lead thought, has made an exceptional number of able women at present husbandless, and thus has added strength to the feeling that women must and ought to earn their own living. How small and local this cause is I shall hereafter try to show: but there can be no doubt that it has much to do with the present discontents among women. There is a feeling abroad that many women can't get married: and this feeling, bolstered up by erroneous statistics and misunderstood facts, has greatly induced women to erect into an ideal for all what

(1) A short time ago I received an angry letter from a correspondent in Iowa, full of curious bluster about "doing without the men altogether." Apparently this lady really imagined that the human race could be recruited from the gooseberry bushes.

is really a *pis-aller* for a small fraction of their body—self-support in competition with men.

But are there not seven hundred thousand more women than men in the United Kingdom? And must not these seven hundred thousand be enabled to earn their own living? That is the one solid fact which the "advanced" women are always flinging at our heads; and that is the one fallacious bit of statistics which seems at first sight to give some colour of reasonableness to the arguments in favour of the defeminization of women.

As a matter of fact, the statistics are not true. There are not 700,000 more women than men, but 700,000 more *females* than *males* in the United Kingdom. The people who say "seven hundred thousand women," picture to themselves that vast body of marriageable girls, massed in a hollow square, and looking about them in vain across wide leagues of country for non-existent husbands. But figures are things that always require to be explained, and above all, to be regarded in their true proportions to one another. These 700,000 females include infants in arms, lunatics, sisters of charity, unfortunates, and ladies of eighty. A large part of the excess is due to the greater longevity of women; and the number comprises the great mass of widows, who have once in their lives possessed a husband of their own, and have outlived him, partly because they are, as a rule, younger, and partly by dint of their stronger constitutions. Moreover, this total disparity of 700,000, including babies, lunatics, and widows, is a disparity on a gross population of something more than thirty-five millions. Looking these figures straight in the face, we find the actual proportion of the sexes to be as 172 males to 179 females. Speaking very roughly, this makes about four females in every hundred, including babies, widows, and so forth, who haven't a complementary male found for them. This in itself is surely no very terrible disproportion. It doesn't more than cover the relative number of women who are naturally debarred from marriage, or who under no circumstances would ever submit to be married. Out of every hundred women, roughly speaking, ninety-six have husbands provided for them by nature, and only four need go into a nunnery or take to teaching the higher mathematics. And if the marriageable men and women only are reckoned in the account, as far as I can gather from existing statistics, the disproportion sinks to a quite insignificant fraction.

Nevertheless, it is a fact, that both in England and America the marriageable men of the middle and upper classes are not to the fore, and that accordingly in these classes—the discussing, thinking, agitating classes—an undue proportion of women remains unmarried. The causes of this class-disparity are not far to seek. In America, the young man has gone West. In England he is in the army, in the navy, in the Indian Civil Service, in the Cape Mounted Rifles.

He is sheep-farming in New Zealand, ranching in Colorado, growing tea in Assam, planting coffee in Ceylon; he is a cowboy in Montana, or a wheat-farmer in Manitoba, or a diamond-digger at Kimberley, or a merchant at Melbourne: in short, he is anywhere, and everywhere, except where he ought to be, making love to the pretty girls in England. For, being a man, I, of course, take it for granted that the first business of a girl is to be pretty.

Owing to these causes, it has unfortunately happened that a period of great upheaval in the female mind has coincided with a period when the number of unmarried women in the cultivated classes was abnormally large. The upheaval would undoubtedly have taken place in our time, even without the co-operation of this last exacerbating cause. The position of women was not a position which could bear the test of nineteenth-century scrutiny. Their education was inadequate; their social status was humiliating; their political power was *nil*; their practical and personal grievances were innumerable: above all, their relations to the family—to their husbands, their children, their friends, their property—was simply insupportable. A real Woman Question there was, and is, and must be. The pity of it is that the coincidence of its recognition with the dearth of marriageable men in the middle and upper classes has largely deflected the consequent movement into wrong and essentially impracticable channels.

For the result has been that instead of subordinating the claims of the unmarried women to the claims of the wives and mothers, the movement has subordinated the claims of the wives and mothers to the claims of the unmarried women. Almost all the Woman's Rights women have constantly spoken, thought, and written as though it were possible and desirable for the mass of women to support themselves, and to remain unmarried for ever. The point of view they all tacitly take is the point of view of the self-supporting spinster. Now, the self-supporting spinster is undoubtedly a fact—a deplorable accident of the passing moment. Probably, however, even the most rabid of the Woman's Rights people would admit, if hard pressed, that in the best-ordered community almost every woman should marry at twenty or thereabouts. We ought, of course, frankly to recognise the existence of the deplorable accident; we ought for the moment to make things as easy and smooth as possible for her; we ought to remove all professional barriers, to break down the absurd jealousies and prejudices of men, to give her fair play, and if possible a little more than fair play, in the struggle for existence. So much our very chivalry ought to make obligatory upon us. That we should try to handicap her heavily in the race for life is a shame to our manhood. But we ought at the same time fully to realise that she is an abnormality, not the woman of the future. We

ought not to erect into an ideal what is in reality a painful necessity of the present transitional age. We ought always clearly to bear in mind—men and women alike—that to all time the vast majority of women must be wives and mothers; that on those women who become wives and mothers depends the future of the race; and that if either class must be sacrificed to the other, it is the spinsters whose type perishes with them that should be sacrificed to the matrons who carry on the life and qualities of the species.

For this reason a scheme of female education ought to be mainly a scheme for the education of wives and mothers. And if women realised how noble and important a task it is, that falls upon mothers, they would ask no other. If they realised how magnificent a nation might be moulded by mothers who devoted themselves faithfully and earnestly to their great privilege, they would be proud to carry out the duties of their maternity. Instead of that, the scheme of female education now in vogue is a scheme for the production of literary women, schoolmistresses, hospital nurses, and lecturers on cookery. All these things are good in themselves, to be sure—I have not a word to say against them; but they are not of the centre. They are side-lines off the main stream of feminine life, which must always consist of the maternal element. "But we can't know beforehand," say the advocates of the mannish training, "which women are going to be married, and which to be spinsters." Exactly so; and therefore you sacrifice the many to the few, the potential wives to the possible lady-lecturers. You sacrifice the race to a handful of barren experimenters. What is thus true of the blind groping after female education is true throughout of almost all the Woman Movement. It gives precedence to the wrong element in the problem. What is essential and eternal it neglects in favour of what is accidental and temporary. What is feminine in women it neglects in favour of what is masculine. It attempts to override the natural distinction of the sexes, and to make women men—in all but virility.

The exact opposite, I believe, is the true line of progress. We are of two sexes: and in healthy diversity of sex, pushed to its utmost, lies the greatest strength of all of us. Make your men virile: make your women womanly. Don't cramp their intelligence: don't compress their waists: don't try to turn them into dolls or dancing girls: but freely and equally develop their feminine idiosyncrasy, physical, moral, intellectual. Let them be healthy in body: let them be sound in mind: if possible (but here I know even the most advanced among them will object) try to preserve them from the tyranny of their own chosen goddess and model, Mrs. Grundy. In one word, emancipate woman (if woman will let you, which is more than doubtful) but leave her woman still, not a dulled and spiritless epicene automaton.

That last, it is to be feared, is the one existing practical result of the higher education of women, up to date. Both in England and America, the women of the cultivated classes are becoming unfit to be wives or mothers. Their sexuality (which lies at the basis of everything) is enfeebled or destroyed. In some cases they eschew marriage altogether—openly refuse and despise it, which surely shows a lamentable weakening of wholesome feminine instincts. In other cases, they marry, though obviously ill adapted to bear the strain of maternity; and in such instances they frequently break down with the birth of their first or second infant. This evil, of course, is destined by natural means to cure itself with time: the families in question will not be represented at all in the second generation, or will be represented only by feeble and futile descendants. In a hundred years, things will have righted themselves. But meanwhile, there is a danger that many of the most cultivated and able families of the English-speaking race will have become extinct, through the prime error of supposing that an education which is good for men must necessarily also be good for women.

I said just now that many women at present eschew marriage, and that this shows a weakening of wholesome feminine instinct. Let me hasten to add, for fear of misconception,—I mean, of course, if they eschew it for want of the physical impulse which ought to be as present in every healthy woman as in every healthy man. That independent-minded women should hesitate to accept the terms of marriage as they now and here exist, I do not wonder. But if they have it really at heart to alter those terms, to escape from slavery, to widen the basis of the contract between the sexes, to put the wife on a higher and safer footing, most sensible men, I feel sure, will heartily co-operate with them. As a rule, however, I observe in actual life that "advanced" women are chary of either putting forward or accepting modifications in this matter. They dread the frown of their Grundian deity. They usually content themselves with vague declamation and with erecting female celibacy into a panacea for the ills that woman is heir to, while they refuse to meddle at all in definite terms with the question of marriage or its substitute in the future. While denouncing loudly the supremacy of man, they seem ready to shake off that supremacy only for the celibate minority of their sex, without attempting to do anything for the married majority.

To sum up the point whither this long, and I confess discursive, argument is tending. There is, and ought to be, a genuine Woman Question and a genuine Woman Movement. But that movement, if it is ever to do any good, must not ignore—nay, on the contrary, must frankly and unreservedly accept and embrace the fact that the vast majority of adult women are and will always be wives and mothers (and when I say "wives," I say so only in the broadest

sense, subject to all possible expansions or modifications of the nature of wifehood). It must also recognise the other fact that in an ideal community the greatest possible number of women should be devoted to the duties of maternity, in order that the average family may be kept small, that is to say, healthy and educable. It must assume as its goal, not general celibacy and the independence of women, but general marriage and the ample support of women by the men of the community. While allowing that exceptional circumstances call for exceptional tenderness towards those women who are now compelled by untoward conditions to earn their own livelihood, it will avoid creating that accident into a positive goal, and it will endeavour to lessen the necessity for the existence of such exceptions in the future. In short, it will recognise maternity as the central function of the mass of women, and will do everything in its power to make that maternity as healthy, as noble, and as little burdensome as possible.

If the "advanced" women will meet us on this platform, I believe the majority of "advanced" men will gladly hold out to them the right hand of fellowship. As a body we are, I think, prepared to reconsider, and to reconsider fundamentally, without prejudice or preconception, the entire question of the relations between the sexes—which is a great deal more than the women are prepared to do. We are ready to make any modifications in those relations which will satisfy the woman's just aspiration for personal independence, for intellectual and moral development, for physical culture, for political activity, and for a voice in the arrangement of her own affairs, both domestic and national. As a matter of fact, few women will go as far in their desire to emancipate woman as many men will go. It was Ibsen, not Mrs. Ibsen, who wrote the *Doll's House*. It was women, not men, who ostracized George Eliot. The slavishness begotten in women by the *régime* of man is what we have most to fight against, not the slave-driving instinct of the men—now happily becoming obsolete, or even changing into a sincere desire to do equal justice. But what we must absolutely insist upon is full and free recognition of the fact that, in spite of everything, the race and the nation must go on reproducing themselves. Whatever modifications we make must not interfere with that prime necessity. We will not aid or abet women as a sex in rebelling against maternity, or in quarrelling with the constitution of the solar system. Whether we have wives or not—and that is a minor point about which I, for one, am supremely unprejudiced—we must at least have mothers. And it would be well, if possible, to bring up those mothers as strong, as wise, as free, as sane, as healthy, as earnest, and as efficient as we can make them. If this is barren paradox, I am content to be paradoxical; if this is rank Toryism, I am content for once to be reckoned among the Tories.

GRANT ALLEN.