

## SARAH GRAND

### [Francis Clarke McFall] (1854–1943)

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Coining the term “the New Woman” (in 1894) and hailing her as an inevitability, feminist Sarah Grand’s influential novels, essays, and speeches exposed to direct sunlight the most sensitive issues of Victorian sexuality, ranging from the education of women, marriage laws and customs, the sexual double standard, and venereal disease to vivisection, temperance, and the changing roles and behavior of women in both private and public life. She was born Frances Elizabeth Bellenden Clarke in County Down, Northern Ireland, the fourth of five children of English parents Edward John Bellenden Clarke, a Royal Navy lieutenant, and Margaret Bell Sherwood Clarke, who raised their children in an atmosphere of squalor and alcoholic violence. Edward died when she was seven, whereupon the family returned to her mother’s native Yorkshire in a state of shabby gentility. After being educated at home until age 14, she attended a stifling naval boarding school in Twickenham then a mindless finishing school at Holland Road, Kensington. To escape, at 16 she married Lieutenant-Colonel David Chambers McFall, a 39-year-old army surgeon and widower with two sons aged 10 and 8. Her own son Archie was born a year later, in 1871. She became more and more unhappy as her new family traveled to Singapore, Ceylon, China, and Japan before returning to England in 1879 to settle in Norwich, then Warrington. After finally managing to build a small nest egg from publishing stories in magazines and self-publishing her first novel, Francis McFall left the marriage in 1890, young son in tow, for an independent life and career in London as Madame Sarah Grand (a pseudonym suggesting feminist pride and aspirations), without ever divorcing her husband. When he died in 1898, Grand moved to Tunbridge Wells and increased her feminist activism, taking prominent roles in the battles for suffrage, rational dress, and social purity. She also undertook an arduous lecture tour of the United States. In 1920, after suffrage was granted, her time of celebrity ended. She moved to Bath, where she was six times elected “mayoress” serving under widower Cedric Cheevers, her role as a provincial dignitary contrasting significantly with her earlier literary and feminist fame. Sarah Grand died at the age of 88 in Calne, Wiltshire, where she had fled to escape the Blitz.

Between 1888 and 1900 Grand published six novels and several other works, which have been variously described as psychological realism, propaganda, melodrama, and problem fiction. Her first novel *Ideala* (1888), which she self-published anonymously while she was still Francis McFall but which was successful enough to be twice republished commercially, is a controversial story of mismarriage, female sexual awakening, and adultery. Her second novel, *A Domestic Experiment* (1891), was perceived to be, like *Ideala*, a justification of adultery. But far from supporting adultery, divorce, or “free love,” Grand sought to have men adopt stricter standards of sexual and moral conduct, and to have both men and women be adequately prepared to choose the right mate, to be able to recognize their true value to each other and to the human race. Her very popular and influential *The Heavenly Twins* (1893) illustrates the heartache that ensues when one is not prepared — the highly intelligent and self-educated heroine

marries a brutish man whom she barely knows, only to discover that he has syphilis; she refuses to consummate the marriage but nevertheless must stay in it to maintain the appearance of respectability, thus sacrificing love, sexual fulfillment, and motherhood. In challenging the very manliness of men, Grand reminded women of their duties not to men, but to the sisters and daughters who could benefit from their experience. *The Beth Book* (1897), a thinly veiled autobiographical novel, is another probing exploration of the social and psychological forces that shape a young girl into a New Woman and a successful writer and lecturer. Her later work, some of which addressed land reform and the last of which appeared in 1922, is noticeably toned down, lighter in tone, and generally did not receive nearly as much attention.

George Bernard Shaw considered Sarah Grand a genius on the order of Whistler, Ibsen, and Wagner. Her feminist trilogy, *Ideala*, *The Heavenly Twins*, and *The Beth Book*, whose heroines all come to know one another, remains a poignant portrayal of the turmoil that existed during the ascendancy of the New Woman. The earnestness of ideology and experimental narrative techniques in Grand's books, characterized by daring innovative style and aggressive wit, made them politically and literarily significant in their day and made Grand herself a central figure in the nineties debates about what women were, should be, and could be.