

THE IMITATIVE WOMAN

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I HAVE recently seen two plays which supported my contention that, in our day, women—after a considerable period of exercising the vote—have made little change in the pattern of life. That pattern, whether in totalitarian Germany and Italy, or in democratic America and Great Britain—remains predominantly masculine. The plays conveyed the same moral—that a man will forgive a woman for possessing brains equal to his own, if she will, with appropriate feminine grace, capitulate to him and dedicate those brains to his service.

One of these plays was *The Flashing Stream*, by Charles Morgan. In it a truly great woman is depicted; or rather, a woman with the makings of true greatness. A career could doubtless have been hers. But the woman in her shrinks from sterile fame. She searches for co-ordination, and finds it, as she thinks, in a man whose genius is akin to her own. And to what is his genius dedicated? To the invention of an instrument of destruction to be used in time of war! With her genius subordinated to his, one foresees that the invention will be carried to a successful issue; that is, be accepted as worthy to play a part in a world in which the last arbitrament is the masculine one of force.

Much the same conclusion is reached in the other and lighter play, *Service de Luxe*. Like the hero of *The Flashing Stream*, the leading man is engaged in a search for a formula that will add another destructive device to the already extensive list of such inventions. The girl he loves abandons a lucrative occupation to be his "helpmate" in his labor of—destruction.

Now it is conceivable that if these women had realized the full implications of motherhood, their capitulations might not have been so unconditional. A state of greater "conflict" might have ensued, and the victories might not have been to the men. Women, in truth, possess a power which they have not, thus far, employed in the cause of peace. It is resident in the fact that they are the custodians of human life;—a tremendous fact that, so far, has not sufficiently impressed them. Women continue to revolve round men, in matrimony, in business, in practically all the affairs of life; and one wonders, when one surveys the pattern of life, in which the masculine strands

are so predominant, whether things might not have been different if the feminine strands had been stronger. Oh, yes, we see the feminine strands in abundance. They add colour and charm to the pattern. But the design is man's. I, for one, would like to see women play a real part in the design of life.

Just suppose that the two women in the plays had declined to enter a relationship of which the logical outcome was motherhood, because they declined to accept the implications of a social system governed by force: would not the presentation of their resistance have made some contribution, at least, to the cause of reason? The prospect of bringing children into a world in which it is necessary to pile up ever increasing implements of destruction might very well have constituted a fine, courageous, and reasonable motive for their refusal to yield unconditionally to the dictates of love.

Here and there we might find women capable of such abnegation. But they would not be represented in plays intended for popular taste. The difficulty is that women, since securing the vote, have not envisaged a cause large enough to enlist their united energies. That they can act together was amply demonstrated during the years of campaign for woman suffrage. Forgetful of differences of class, creed, and color, women threw themselves, with characteristic feminine zeal, into the obtaining of the vote. In some countries women endured for the cause every manner of persecution, cheerfully going to prison, fasting, and offering themselves as targets for degradation and death. This was because they envisaged the Vote as the Magic Key which would unlock for them the door to a kingdom of opportunity. Once within, they really expected to be able to "remould the world a little nearer to the heart's desire." But, as usual in the case of women, the heart played a larger part in their reckonings than the head. Filled with zeal, and with many plans—on paper and in fiery speeches—of what they would do for the amelioration of the human lot when they entered their kingdom, they overlooked tactical methods by which those plans could be made effective. *Win the Vote, and the rest will follow* seemed to be their slogan.

Well, they secured the Vote. They realized their objective. And many women, satisfied with this, rested from their labors. As time went on, some of them vaguely wondered why nothing spectacular happened. Others lost faith in its value, and ceased to use it. Skepticism, in many instances, took the place of zeal. Yes, women had the Vote, but how did they use it? The answer

is that they used it very much like the men. The masculine design remained.

Without a platform or party of their own, women, like men, were influenced by propaganda put out by party leaders. At first it had been a matter of pride to them that they would stand clear of party politics, and vote, not for party, but for what a candidate represented. But this independent attitude served only to divide their allegiances. In any event, their field of choice was dictated to them by men, who at conventions met in inside groups to which women have not yet found an *entrée*. The design remains masculine.

Now, I am one of those who believe that women have a contribution to make to life different from that of men. That they have not yet discovered the means of making an effective contribution is due, largely, to that "vicious circle" which perpetually operates to subordinate women to the masculine outlook. In our two plays the heroes were just as avid as the Prince in Tennyson's poem to subjugate their women; so little have we separated ourselves since Victorian days from tradition in the relationship of men and women, in a world that, otherwise, has undergone staggering changes. In fact, we might group the women of *The Princess*, *The Flashing Stream*, and *Service de Luxe* together. All three women were endowed with brains, strength of character, and initiative. The men they attracted were drawn by these very qualities. Perhaps, quite unconsciously, they derived fresh strength and courage from the strength and courage of the women they loved. But, true to their masculine codes, they could not leave this strength unchallenged. They demanded capitulation. And one just wonders whether, after that capitulation, they did not feel a little "let down", in the well-known manner of the married man, who admits that the honeymoon is the best part of the nuptial programme, and that, after it, he must get down to "reality" and the conventions that make him the "provider" and his wife the household drudge.

If one further examines these plays, one is dissatisfied with the rôles that these women would have played if they had refused to capitulate. In each instance, they would have adopted a career that was the replica of that pursued by men. In a word, they would have expressed themselves, not as women, but as imitators of men. We—men and women alike—despise imitators. We must concede that, thus far, women have failed to make the impress of their essential womanhood on life in

any large and constructive way. Their crying need, as I see it, is to identify themselves with a unifying principle that will make a satisfying demand upon their brains, hearts, and souls, synthetically, and enable them to make a contribution to civilization that will be different from that made by men.

Poets, philosophers, and scientists have all concurred in the belief that women are much more concerned with human values than are men. Their interests centre round persons, from the cradle to the grave. In this fact may we not discover a clue that will guide us to the vocation that I believe women are destined to assume—that of acting as intelligent custodians of life? The building up of an enlightened consciousness of custodianship would effectually prohibit women from easy capitulations, would challenge the genius of men, save them from *ennui* and disillusion, and promote that evolution of character and personality that so woefully lags behind the gigantic advances made in science and invention.