The Middle−Aged Woman

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CHOOSE any artist that you know — the one with the kindliest nature and the finest perceptions — and ask him to give you his idea of the genius of the commonplace, and any word for it, he paints you a middle−aged woman. The thing, he will say, proves itself. Here is a creature jogging on leisurely at midday in the sight of all men along a well−tramped road. The mists of dawn are far behind her; she has not yet reached the shadows of evening. The softness and blushes, and shy, sparkling glances of the girl she was, have long been absorbed into muddy thick skin, sodden outlines, rational eyes. There are crows' feet at either temple, and yellowish blotches on the flesh below the soggy under−jaw. Her chestnut−brown hair used to warm and glitter in the sun, and after a few years it will make a white crown upon her head, a sacred halo to her children; but just now it is stiff with a greasy hair dye, and is of an unclean and indescribable hue.

Young girls, with that misty dawn about them, may lack both beauty and wit; but there is a charm in their fresh untainted homeliness, in the ardor of their foolishness. They pour forth their thoughts in silly school essays, and they seem to run no deeper than roses and moonlight and eternal friendships. They talk all day long about their lovers and pretty finery, and we listen with delight to it all, and do not ask for common sense any more than we would in the chatter of the swallows building their nests. It is the fresh morning air which blows about them and revives us. It is because they "bear white shields of expectation."

But the middle−aged woman expects nothing; she has proved, gauged it all. She does not carry a white shield, that we all can see, but a basket of undarned stockings. Her talk is of butter and cures of catarrh, and if she adverts to roses, it is to tell you the secret of her success in raising them and the manure which they prefer.

What can any artist, with either pen or pencil, make of this bare ordinary shape? Shakespeare himself, driven to the limning of her can only

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"Let husbands know
Their wives have sense like them; they see, and smell,
And have their palates, both for sweet and sour."
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The average American husband does not lack such practical knowledge of his wife. There may have been an uncertain glamour about her in the days when she stood, half child, half woman, trying to unbar with her soft pink−tinted hand certain doors of life. It may gather around her again in old age, when the dreadful prophetic shadow begins to fall upon her gray head. But in middle−age she is the unromantic center of an unromantic world of daily dinners, anxieties about children, and worries about cooks and chambermaid. Underneath all this the husband may have a dateless love, even passion for his wife, just as he has a stone foundation for the house he lives in. But he does not drag his friends down to the cellar every day to examine his foundation; and he does not pose at his wife's feet in public, or write verses in her honor. When his affection takes that form of chills and fever there is a strong probability that poses and verses will some day be tested in a divorce suit.

It is certain, however, that this woman, just at the age when the poet and novelist will have none of her, is the fittest subject for the student of human nature. After thirty her whims have hardened into prejudices, her foibles into character. There she is unmistakably, domestic machine, fool, saint. The features of the landscape are surely

best seen at high noon. If the misty romance is gone from her it is because she grapples now with the real pain and joy and devils that beset life. Dolly at sixteen finds herself neglected at a ball, and writes in her diary of relentless destiny, of intolerable loneliness. At forty she finds herself a widow, penniless, with half a dozen children, and goes out bravely to get machine−sewing to do. At sixteen she weeps poetic tears over the fate of the lost Pleiad; some day she will lay her little baby in the grave and go on with her work, carrying a cheerful face through the house "for the sake of father and the boys;" only at night, when she misses the little hand fumbling at her breast, daring to cry her bitter tears out upon her pillow, when none but God can see or hear.

Whoever would gain a clear idea of the condition of American society, too, must take the middle−aged woman as the index. The generation of gray−headed grandmothers are carrying out of the world its old−fashioned prejudices; the young woman is in an uneasy transition stage, not quite sure whether she would rather next week write a book, be married, or perform a capital operation in surgery.

But take a woman of forty anywhere in the States, and you have an embodied history and prophecy of the social condition of the country, practical and minute as you can find nowhere else except in a daily newspaper.

If you have a curiosity, for example, to inspect the development of woman from the fifteenth century until now, there is no need of materialized spirits to make up the panorama. For the beginning, take a horse or mule, and penetrate for a hundred miles or two the mountains of North Carolina, making friends as you go with the farmers' wives. There is her biography written, page after page, clearer than type. If you want white villanage, go into the hovels in the Nantahela range, where your hostess shall give you corn−cakes and fried opossum (which you eat with your fingers), and rye coffee poured into a gourd. This matron has, therefore, no dishes to wash and no beds to make, as by an ingenious contrivance the boards of the floor are lifted at night, disclosing a trench filled with straw, in which the whole family kennel. Life is reduced for her to the simple elements of child−bearing and eating as necessities, and the luxury of wearing a hoop−skirt (which invariably hangs on the wall) under the calico rag yclept a dress.

Down in the gorges cut by the Okonalufta you will find a house made of a dozen log huts squatted together with open passage−ways between, through which a cart could be driven. Pigs and chickens run riot through these passages in summer, and bears in winter come down at night and peer curiously into them. My friend, Mistress Pitloe, is the head of this household. Her loom, heavy and home−made, with logs for beams, stands in one of the passages. The indigo−dyed cloth, which she, her husband and sons, all wear, was sheared in the wool, carded, spun, woven, and sewed by herself. She is a tall, raw−boned woman of fifty, scrupulously clean, with grizzled hair drawn back from the dark, clear−cut face, which betrays her French Huguenot descent. Squire Pitloe (Colonel in the war) is the wealthiest farmer in the country, a knowing politician, as politics go there. His son edits "The Haywood County Times." In Pennsylvania his wife would drive her old horses and family carriage into town, and in her seeded black silk preside as chairman of committees on jelly or pianos at the State fair. But Mistress Pitloe, as she is called, has not left the farm for five years; her chances for reading consists of the Bible and a yellow pile of Baptist tracts which lie on the chest of drawers. They belonged to her father, she tells you, but she never has had time to read them.

Her house has not a glass window in it; the walls inside show the bare logs with the mud chunking; empty boxes serve for chairs; but she has hung white homespun netting from ceiling to floor; the delicate cleanliness everywhere, the very smell of the drying herbs overhead, somehow convince you that you are in the house of a chaste wife and careful mother.

She goes afield every day with the Squire and the farm−hands (both white and black) to plow or hoe corn, and hurries back to help the negro cook with the dinner. When it is served, she sits down with her husband and sons, but only to wait on them; she eats with the servants, and is held in effect their social companion and equal. Yet, if you talk with her for an hour, you find her more keen−witted and just than any man of the household; she will give you shrewd hints of the real condition of the freed slaves or polygamous Cherokees about her — a condition

her husband has hardly yet suspected to exist. But it has not yet occurred to her that emancipation waits for her. She is no more inclined to question the limitations which make a beast of burden of her, than she is to quarrel with the monotonous hill−ranges, clad in the funereal black of the balsam, that have shut her in since her birth.

I tremble to think of the consequences should Mrs. Fanning, or any other emancipated Bostonian, be tempted next summer to penetrate this prison−house of nature, and share the fried chicken and corn bread of Squire Pitloe at his boarding rate of one dollar per week. How her freed soul would yearn to carry back Mistress Pitloe, and produce her in the parlors of the Radical Club as she might a bone of the Megalosaurus, or any other relic of an extinct era!

But I am tolerably sure that grave, slow−spoken Mistress Pitloe would put this lady, or any other reformer, outside of her gates in two days' time. To her, and to her like, an unusual idea of any sort has always something in it of indecent and devilish.

Could any contrast be stronger in Mrs. Fanning's eyes than that of this obscure, gray−headed drudge, and brilliant little Mrs. Pettit, whose thoughts and opinions everybody has heard, but who is only known in the flesh to a small coterie in New York? She is too diffident to appear in public as lecturer or even reader, and too unconventional to tolerate the fashionable mobs of society. People who have been stirred by her trenchant editorials, or have felt the tears rise and their hearts soften at the pathos of her poems, manage with difficulty to penetrate to her home, and are amazed to find a little roly−poly, rose−tinted, merry dot of a woman, busied with orphan asylums, or cr ches for babies, or any other business which will bring children about her. Her husband is Professor J. Petit, well known to the scientific world; he confesses that for much of the research in German libraries, and all the statistics of his great work on "The Political History of European Peoples," we are indebted to his wife, who felt it her duty to be his helpmate in that work as much as in preparing the delicious game suppers in which his soul delights.

During the last two years, as all the writing world knows, Mrs. Petit has had charge of one of the leading monthly periodicals of the country, the popular author whose name weights it as editor being only a figure−head for the public eye. She has a little closet of an office in the publishing house, where she sits for five hours each day in close−fitting gown of brown serge, grappling with the heap of manuscripts that grows with every mail. There is probably no subject or fact known to modern thought with which she is not thus brought in contact in the course of the year. At 4 P. M. she locks her office door, and goes home, and there is not a more picturesque, or better−dressed woman, or daintier dinner in New York, than those which welcome her husband, and her boys an hour later. Her sons are very proud of their little mother; there is nothing which she does not know, they will tell you, though perhaps babies and pottery are her strong points. She is infallible in questions of teething, and doles out the most advanced theories of hygiene to young mothers. Collectors of rare china, or Japanese bronzes, take their specimens to her for a final verdict; indeed, one can hardly tell whether her touch is more affectionate and tender when handling a new−born baby or an old cracked tea−pot.

But, after all, Mrs. Petit, pen in hand in her office, and Mistress Pitloe holding the plow, have only taken different handles of the same electric battery. As far as each is able, she is making life healthfuller and cheerfuller, and nearer to God for her husband and children and neighbors, whether these last mean a few half−breed Indians or the hundred thousand readers of a magazine. It is precisely the same work as that of countless other unpicturesque, middle−aged women, from Maine woods to Pennsylvania villages, or California ranches — the great, decent, religious, unknown majority, never to be interviewed, or published in any shape, out of those daily lives grow the modesties, the strength, the virtue of American homes, the safety of our future.

Such women, whether they be wives of millionaires or laborers, always make real again in the world the one poetic ideal of a middle−aged woman — Bunyan's Christiana, who set out with her little ones along the weary way from the City of Destruction to the dark flood which barred heaven from them. It is worth while for wives and mothers, even now in 1875, to read of her daily work — how she urged her boys, and carried her babies in her arms, and did not fall into the Slough of Despond, as her husband had done, and never forgot to take Mercy

along with her. How one day her task was to face Apollyon, and the next, to "cure Matthew of stomach−gripes from eating green apples." How there gathered about her, in the course of the long, painful journey, children's children and friends, and the poor, the lame, and the blind, and walked with her, and were a joyous, happy company, until the end came. There is nothing to me more pathetic in any history than the words which tell of how one day the messenger came to this gray−haired woman to say that her work as wife and mother at last was done. Then she called her children about her, and was gladdened in that last hour to see that they had kept their garments so white; and after she had put them in the care of her old friends, she went down with a beckon of farewell into the dark river, beyond which the gate stood open where her Lord waited for her, and the husband of her youth, and was seen no more.

"And at her departure her children wept. But Greatheart played upon the well−tuned cymbal and the harp for joy."