

# THE MISERABLE MALE

BY EDITH M. STERN

WOMAN is a subject that has been with us for a long time, yet recently an incredible amount of verbiage has been devoted to her and her dilemmas. *Ad nauseam*, in books and magazine articles, from the lecture platform and at conferences, there have been more or less long-winded discussions on her frustrations and conflicts in modern life. Through all this verbiage, however elaborately the woes of the unfortunate creature are described, whether she is pictured as having too much or too little to do, certain common assumptions seem to recur. Modern woman has great difficulty in being herself. Conditions of present-day living war with her biological nature. The difficulty of reconciling instinctual and cultural factors renders her lost, neurotic, psychotic, alcoholic or just plain restless and bored.

As one of these much-pitied wretches I feel it is high time that some sympathy also be extended to the other half of humanity. After all, modern man in his own way is just as basically biological as modern woman and yet, poor devil, what an un-

natural, psychologically ruinous life he has to lead. Small wonder that there are more men who commit suicide than women, that males outnumber females as mental hospital patients and that the incidence of the nervous symptom, stuttering, is at least five times greater among men and boys than among women and girls.

Pugnacity, for instance, is certainly an innate male characteristic, yet very soon the small boy must learn to restrain it. True, for a while Daddy and usually Mom, too, consider it a fine sign of normality and masculinity for Junior to wallop other lads on the block but in all respectable strata of our society by the time he reaches maturity he is expected to repress the aggressive instinct he has in common with other male animals. Against his boss' indignities, for example, under our nature-distorting customs, no swift kick is permissible. When his wife's tirades become unbearable he pulls the covers over his ears or retires behind the newspaper — sorry, inhibited substitutes for a slap in the face, and consequently

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the genesis of many a stomach ulcer, that typically male disorder.

Likewise modern man, except perhaps for a few sweet vacation weeks a year, is frustrated in his normal, primitive rôle as the Hunter. To spear a wild animal and lay it at the beloved's feet is a far cry from handing over the weekly pay envelope, procured, not through stalking cleanlimbed and swift over the hills, but by hunching over a desk or making repetitive monotonous movements at the assembly line. Man has made pathetic attempts to find substitute satisfactions for his emotional and physical need to hunt by such emasculated, artificial performances as chasing a golf ball about the links; but how maladjusted the frustrated hunter remains is evidenced by a curious perversion of his natural impulse. Thoroughly thwarted by civilization, he sinks to a biologically subnormal point where he is unable to hunt for anything, such as a mislaid fountain pen or checkbook or a pair of sneakers or his dress studs, and modern woman, nervously upset and disorganized as she may be, has to take over.

## II

But perhaps what runs most cruelly and disturbingly counter to man's real nature is the institution of marriage, for alone among all male mammals he is expected to stand by, to love and to cherish, as a lifelong concomitant of fulfilling his quickly aroused and quickly satisfied sexual urges. A raging, albeit often uncon-

scious conflict arises when man's natural proclivity to be footloose and free, promiscuous and irresponsible, is checked by society's demand that he come home in time for dinner, live surrounded by squalling, untidy human young and preserve at least the appearance of monogamy. Since writers on the disastrous consequences of women working outside the home never let us forget that it is biologically natural for females to stay close by their young, let us, along the same line of reasoning, recognize that prolonged paternal responsibility is just as biologically unnatural. Matrimony is a mere cultural superimposition. Its effect upon man is evident in any psychiatrist's office, any divorce court.

Also, discussions of woman's plight emphasize the profound effect her reproductive system and her endocrine glands have upon her psychology, with the corollary that no solution of her various dilemmas can be valid unless it is based on these, rather than on some extraneous little thing like her brain. For once let us be equally fundamental in our attitude towards men. Let us recognize that they, too, are emotionally fashioned by their reproductive system and their endocrine glands. If then, home, marriage and children are the answer for women, they cannot be for men. Incidental benefits of marriage are available outside wedlock; sex is man's for the asking and bed and board for the buying. The institution of marriage, in short, has much more to offer women than men. Its bondage

is a violation of elemental maleness, no more psychically comfortable than the more publicized conflict of careerism with elemental femaleness.

Formerly, however ill-adjusted a man may have been to the matrimonial set-up, he had one great bolster to his sense of virility. If the marriage turned out to be childless, it was the woman's fault. And as long as he remained potent, he felt no biological frustration. Today too often modern medicine and the laboratory cruelly shatter the lusty self-assurance indigenous to men and roosters alike by demonstrating that it may be the husband, not the wife, who is sterile. Here, again, civilization and its technological refinements destroy the satisfaction of the male need, dating back to the Garden of Eden, to put blame on the female. Modern man is scientifically unable even to condemn his wife for producing half a dozen girls and no male child. The ill effects of such frustration, especially when combined with the frustration of realizing that from his loins can come no little prototypes of his magnificent self, can be as devastating as the conflicts and maladjustments which ensue when women, who, we are told, find their greatest happiness in living through others, achieve some self-expression on their own.

### III

Adding to his emotional discomfort is man's sense of insecurity, of displacement, in his home. Most family-occupied houses and apartments exude

such a spirit of femininity that the male feels as ill at ease in them as a woman would feel in the men's room of a Pullman. Peach taffeta curtains and satin coverlets in the bedroom that is supposed to be His and Hers render it far more hers than his. Fragile ornaments strewn on almost as fragile little tables inhibit the passage of big feet. Of the four shelves of the conjugal medicine closet, three and three quarters are usually taken up with an assortment of feminine creams, powders and lotions. About the only place in his own home a man can feel he really belongs is in the basement or the garage.

Even at table, a male's needs are not met. Though he is naturally carnivorous and, like his dog, craves a diet of red meat exclusively, he is regularly confronted with such unsatisfying fare as greens, fruits and gooey messes of marshmallow, whipped cream, mayonnaise or gelatin.

Unhappy modern man is often as frustrated in his gainful occupation as in his home. The necessity to support wife and children may trap him, early in life, into work he loathes and continued necessity keep him at it. For every suffering woman, neurotic because she has a career and would rather have a home and children, or because she is tied down by home and children and wants a career, or because she has both and cracks under the double burden, there is a miserable man, neurotic simply because he does what he does. There are editors who wish they were writers, business

men who wish they were lawyers, and accountants who wish they were doctors. There are successful writers who wish they could write as they please and to hell with the mortgage payments, successful lawyers who writhe under the bootlicking they must give clients, and successful doctors who wish they could devote themselves to laboratory work instead of catering to hypochondriacal rich women. There are, also, that large number of males who fancy they could live easily and happily on a sailboat, doing odd jobs to supply their modest food and clothing needs, but with families to support dare not renounce their present executive positions. Finally there is a great category of men not especially unhappy in the particular kind of work they do, but worn down by the inexorability of having to make the 8:15 every day, punching a time clock, or packing and unpacking in a monotonous succession of hotel rooms in a monotonous succession of towns.

From the dissatisfactions of their work lives, men seek escape. Many congregate at bars. Some putter about their gardens, regardless of the incongruity that among primitives agriculture is women's work. Some try to forget the drabness of their days by burying themselves in detective stories, precisely as bored and virtuous housewives relish the carryings-on of hussies in period costumes. Great numbers of men band together as Elks, Kiwanians and Rotarians, to yawn through luncheon speeches or

disport themselves in fantastic costumes. Such vapid attempts to fill their empty lives parallel those of the emotionally unsatisfied women whose club activities have been the objects of both pity and ridicule.

One apparently minor, but really quite fundamental thwarting of man's true self is the drabness of modern man's dress. Alone among all animals, his is not the more gorgeous of the sexes. Today what the peacock can do for himself, by spreading his tail, man — except in Hollywood or by way of ties — can achieve only vicariously, by furnishing the cash wherewithal for his wife or mistress to adorn herself. This is obviously such a weak, indirect means of expression for a strong basic male instinct to preen that it is as psychologically unsatisfying as many of those conversions of instinct for which women get deep sympathy — keeping a canary in lieu of having children, for instance.

Furthermore, as insult added to injury, the clean-shaven appearance contemporarily considered desirable not only brings about the continual nuisance and irritation of shaving, more frequent if not so prolonged as women's sessions at the beauty parlor, but also deprives man of the pleasure of flaunting the hirsute adornments, which, whatever may be his other masculine deficiencies, at least evidence to the world that he is that glorious thing, a male. Whatever neuroses would be acquired by a pouter pigeon prevented from swell-

ing his chest, a rooster shorn of his cockscorn or a Beta fish without the opportunity to show his colors, are shared by close-cropped, beardless modern man.

#### IV

Not only does modern man suffer from many frustrations but also he has anxieties from which his ancestors were free. For the first time his status as a member of the dominant sex is jeopardized. The fact that wife-beating is no longer socially acceptable is only part of it. So is the widely deplored feminization of our culture; culture has been feminized before, as in the courts of the Louis', without affecting man's superior position.

More serious is man's loss of his formerly unchallengeable status as the more intelligent, wiser and better-educated of the two sexes. Whereas Mother used to listen with deference to Father's pronouncements on politics, if she listened at all, today she thinks nothing of cutting in on his declamations and riddling his arguments full of holes. Very likely Mother and Father met originally at a coed university where she got As and he Cs. On a lower intellectual level, a recent study of morons revealed that the typical male moron married a woman better educated than himself. All this, to a sex historically conditioned to being top dog mentally, is, to put it mildly, unsettling.

But the greatest threat to man's ages-old sense of superiority comes

from woman's increasing economic self sufficiency. For despite the handicap that women do not receive equal pay for equal work, many a charming and glamorous girl earns more than her male escort, and when he pays the dinner check both he and she know they are acting in a silly farce. Many a wife contributes more than half the family income although she does all the housework besides. Uncles and brothers no longer have to support the unmarried ladies in their families, and hence have no justification for issuing commands. Even teen-age daughters are getting more and more out of control because of the economic independence they achieve through baby-sitting. Slowly but certainly the check book that has replaced the caveman's club as a means of domination over women is slipping out of man's hands.

So great is his consequent anxiety over the business and professional ascent of modern woman that he is driven to irrational ways of trying to stay its course. He debars women from his professional clubs on such flimsy excuses as that an additional lavatory would have to be installed. He blocks a perfectly qualified woman's office promotion with the curious argument that because she is a woman she cannot do a job a less well qualified man can do. He refuses to let his Ph.D. wife go back to her laboratory or library to earn the money to pay a maid on the ground that it would put him in a humiliating position, and keeps her at household chores con-

sidered suitable for feeble-minded girls placed out by institutions. He sentimentalizes about the work of home-making and child-rearing which he will not undertake for as much as an hour at a time. He even deludes himself and his wife that her soggy cakes are infinitely more delicious than the masterpieces produced at the French bakery on the corner, not realizing his unconscious motivation for his preference; while she is baking, at least, she must stay at home and cannot be a wage earner. The illogic man directs against woman's invasion of his world is more a cause for pity

than for indignation. It is the reaction of someone in a state bordering on panic.

And a maladjusted, miserable state that is; a challenge to the psychiatrists so concerned over the maladjustments of women. There has been an unfair concentration of interest and attention on one sex and neglect of the other. For the way his problems have been overlooked; for the psychically devastating repressions of his masculine drives and instincts imposed by our civilization; for his frustrations and anxieties, my womanly heart goes out to miserable modern man.

## PHRASE ORIGINS—39

**TO DRUM UP BUSINESS:** *This homely phrase, meaning to go out seeking business, survives in everyday usage despite the fact that the original metaphors from which it derives have long since disappeared. Most of us remember when traveling salesmen were called drummers, although they had no visible connection with drums. In pre-railroad days these drummers were peddlers who traveled with a pack on the back, or with a horse, out on the roads to sell wares from door to door. Most of us were probably perplexed by their name, and by the fact that they had to go out on the road to drum up business. A hint of the explanation can be found in George Borrow's *Romano Lavo-Lil*. Borrow, who had lived with the gypsies in both the British Isles and Spain, listed the word *drom* as the *Romany* (Wallachian) word for road in this book. Writing a little later (in 1874), C. G. Leland, in his *English Gypsies and Their Language*, cited *drum* or *drom* as a *Romany* word for road, and testified that it had already entered English slang, as a word for both highways and roadhouses. This identification of *drom* with *drum* was probably reinforced by the old British custom of using a drum for gathering people together in public, for the recruiting of military personnel, etc. At any rate, the phrase is now unmistakably to drum up business, and has become well established on the level of standard English usage.*

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