

THE TRUTH ABOUT WOMEN

BY ALEXANDER BLACK

"WHEN I have one foot in the grave," said Tolstoy to Maxim Gorky, "I will tell the truth about women. I shall tell it, jump into my coffin, pull the lid over me, and say, 'Do what you like now.'" That the threat was not merely whimsical is more than suggested by Gorky's comment: "The look he gave us was so wild, so terrifying, that we all fell silent for a time."

Gorky, who, on his own account, seldom gives us occasion to suspect him of being a postponing commentator, makes it plain enough in the narration of his talks with the awesome compatriot that Tolstoy was usually ready with the ultimate word, that he was willing to call a spade something just as bad. Yet in this matter of the truth about women there is the effect of pause before the unspeakable. We are, indeed, left with a feeling that, after saying so much about women in one way or another, Tolstoy, impatient of codes, excoriatingly contemptuous of trimmed opinion, tolerated the pressure of one reserve—that one complex was to be the last to die.

Any theory that his deferred analysis was simply something ungentlemanly is, of course, scarcely tenable, since he had been unquotably candid on many an occasion which seemed to establish clearly enough a fact of no reserve whatever. If he had been a devout feminist all his life, the last-moment declaration might have been, for example, a simple recantation, a leering or passionate confession of hatred long concealed, a defiance of all cowardly conveniences. Having published his disenchantment, having grinned at the puerilities of romance, having stripped sex of its glamour, having rivaled St. Chrysostom in

scathing description of the female, what could remain to be spilled at the brink of the grave? Certainly that "terrifying" look could not promise anything sensationally sweet.

Aside from the foolishness of planning for a one-foot-in-the-grave crisis, it is to be noted that even a Tolstoy would, with the best or worst of intentions, or the keenest of expectations, find himself to be Tolstoy to the end. And being Tolstoy to the end, Tolstoy habits were likely to hold.

A marked Tolstoy habit was that of promising to be more violent if not more conclusive. Probably this habit is always likely to be present in those whose business is expression. The best that may be said will leave art in debt to the thought and the emotion. Only one who is greater than anything he does is ever likely to do anything great. Thus margins of the unexpressed are inevitable. And what is true of the artist is doubtless true, in some degree, of all of us. Indeed, it is quite evident that it was not the artist side of Tolstoy that recognized, or lamented, or threatened as to things unspoken. The grizzled seer who raged before Gorky was starkly human in his ways, and was never more male than after he had long accustomed himself to maleness as a reminiscence, and to femaleness as a spectacle. Old age, even of the mellow kind, seldom fails to secrete some acrid distillation. A theory, a prejudice, a rebellion, can acquire in the fermentation of years a bitterness of savor that is often shockingly in contrast to perhaps conspicuous urbanities which accompany them.

Amid all such survivals sex hostilities present a sharp effect. Perhaps the

effect is accentuated by fading signs of sex. We do not need the support of Mr. Freud to believe, for instance, that old maids of both sexes (for I speak of a state of mind) are often the most acrimonious critics of the drama of sex. Simple old age, whatever its history, naturally recruits the non-participating gallery, and we often have occasion to suspect the making of common cause between those who have always been aloof from the drama and those who are aloof at last—between irritated non-participants and disenchanted survivors. Naturally, too, a Tolstoy, confessing a history, would claim to speak with special authority. A participant is always the more dogmatic. If he has seen the folly of a thing, he feels superior in authority to one who has only guessed it, or reasoned it, or has lacked the enterprise to reach the limits of folly.

In this matter Tolstoy would have admitted or insisted that he knew what he was talking about. His disciples unite in revealing his definitive style of speech. Coleridge wished that he might be as sure of anything as Tom Macaulay was of everything. Gorky and the rest found that it was better to let Tolstoy keep the floor when he chose to take it. Johan Bojer said to me of a certain eminent British literary man he had met, "I wondered why he was so *angry* about things." Evidently one never wondered about Tolstoy. His angers had a sublimity. He could be Messianic, and he could slash like a Hebrew prophet. His denunciations were appalling. They were more likely to make his hearers "silent for a time" than to loosen contradictory talk; so that Gorky was following the practice in leaving as it fell this mystery of a promised last cry. Yet it would have been appropriate, I am sure, for some one to suggest that Tolstoy write the tremendous thing and leave it with his codicils, marked, "The Truth About Women."

Men have always exhibited an anxiety as to this matter of the truth about

women. Sometimes the anxiety has shown in an eagerness to tell it themselves. Again it has appeared in the tone of their welcome to some one else's disclosure. The great thing, we might gather, was recognized as having the truth told somehow, this with the implication that the truth had hitherto been withheld, or perhaps merely mislaid. The very young or the very old have been most conspicuous in the field of revelation. Male creatures of, say, seventeen, have been known to acquire a sudden and absolutely conclusive insight into all womenkind. Beginning without bias, perhaps (and quite usually), with a special disposition of favor, these very young investigators have been known to emerge with a conviction of having been grossly deceived. No later sureness can hope quite to equal this first sureness. In its passion of resentment, in its squirming humiliation at being fooled, in its bitter betrayal, as at the altar of all hope, adolescent conviction can reach a suicidal intensity. The soured adoration of a boy does not say, "You know how women are." In the midst of the cataclysm a boy believes that no one hitherto has known how women are. He is the appointed Columbus on the sea of sex.

Where the young cynic is indignant, the old cynic is progressively contemptuous. He perhaps recovered from that first indignation, and passed through a long mid-period of mature and judicial investigation. Then he knew. He has not merely a belief. He has a knowledge. In the presence of a cross section of feminine psychology, with all of its revolting revelatory detail, he intrenches himself at last in a settled exasperation or in a complacent disillusionment capable of sitting up, under challenge, to be witheringly final. The old cynic may have preferred, or may think he has preferred, the meek, "womanly" type. He may, on the other hand, have had a dream of a woman who would be not only easily inflammable, but gorgeously explosive, and of himself as carrying the

only flame. He may have looked for violet eyes, or for some one named Iseult, for a woman superbly stupid or for one as sophisticated as a blonde stenographer. It does not matter, once he has reached the stage of well-ripened disappointment. He acquires a rich store of citations. He backs contemporary testimony with classical examples. He points to a history reeking with evidences of the awful truth about women. He is ready to indorse the report of the Preacher, who found one sought-for man among a thousand, "but a woman among all those have I not found."

Possibly there was a time, in the youth of the world, when the truth about women was less a discovery, less something flashed in an apocalyptic moment, and more a brazen fact of common understanding. Yet this seems doubtful. Some truths are essentially of the hiding kind. It may be that men have intuitively aided the hiding of this one. They have claimed as much. They have seemed to drape woman with what they have wished her to be, then exulted in tearing off the covering. They have set her up like a graven image, then hurled missiles at her because she did not answer their prayers.

Literature is rich in anthologies of disenchantment. As a subject, woman has been as necessary to pessimism as to romance. She has been the goddess, and she has been the goat. *Cherchez la femme*. Something has always been wrong with the world. Nothing could be clearer in the records than that it has been convenient to find woman as the explanation. If any era gets ready to decline and fall, track down the odor of musk. When a man or a civilization is "successful" there is a rush to woman. When there is failure, it is toward woman that the accusing finger is pointed. The Bible begins with the sad story of woman's culpability, and it ends with a scathing allegory that sets the image of her erring body in a high and horrible prominence. The devil is male, as befits his large functions, but no literature

conceals his chief weapon. The sacrifice of the anchorite is an escape from women. The mind hates abstractions. Even the male mind, that alone is supposed to be capable of abstractions, has preferred to personify. Having decided that angels are male, it fixed the images of Life and Death. For Temptation it made a digression. Woman is Temptation, *vide* Genesis and all the epics. Having envisaged Woman as Temptation, it has been easy, under the spell of antithesis, to envisage Man as the eternal St. Anthony, with the supreme preoccupation of not succumbing. He is the searcher for the Holy Grail. She is the vampire. He is pictured as persistently aspiring, she as persistently vamping.

The truth about her, then, would be assumed to point toward unmasking some secret whose betrayal would destroy her power, or at least, and at last, fortify men against the danger. Man has felt compelled to go on marrying her and, by the promptings of a dogged optimism, even to go on pretending that she is what she ought to be. But he has always found something pleasurable in confessing the pretense at the right moment; and he has never ceased to hope that the coming of the truth, something more than the superficial truth with which everybody is familiar—the penetrating, ultimate truth—might do its great work. In a large literature of exasperation there are countless signs of a feeling that illusion should be dispelled for good and all; that, as in the matter of some dog ordinance, women should be tied up, muzzled, or otherwise subjected to a safe restraint, and that the sex hitherto victimized should be educated to a new caution, a new severity, and especially to a new sense of custodian responsibility.

This sense of a custodian responsibility doubtless explains much that has happened and much that has been said. A ruling that women shall not smoke in some place where men are freely permitted to smoke, is no more indicative of this sense of custodianship than ten

thousand acts and opinions which have gone before. The past is littered with eloquent indications of man's intention to take care of women. His peculiar methods of taking care of them are often hard to read at a distance, but these methods have been steadfastly maintained. The need to take care of them was predicated upon theories which he was at some trouble to invent. And he was continually forced to do fresh inventing, for new considerations came up. His ingenuity never waned. Even when social rearrangements introduced extraordinary complications, he was ready. He still worked on a basic premise. He was in charge.

I knew a man who had not done any real work for twenty years. His wife was the wage earner. He let her add to this the cooking and the mending of his clothes. But he remained the head of the house, took her money, and made a tight allowance to her for lunches and carfare. He was not original or peculiar. He had the basic philosophy to go on. He was a perfect example of a tenacious tradition. Once the world had its formulas beautifully arranged.

There came a time, however, when the basic philosophy began to look frayed. The whole theory of taking care of woman involved her occupying a "place," so that one who played the part of a showman exhibiting the world might be free to say that over there, in a cage, were the women. But the women broke out of the cage. They roved over the whole picture. This made it exceedingly difficult to go on thinking about taking care of them. And conditions that made it difficult to take care of them made it not less difficult to know the truth about them. The first condition of taking care of children, for example, is knowing just where they are. When women stopped knowing that their proper place is in the kitchen the trouble began.

Then some one announced that there was a sex war. A sex war, like any other war, must have an original lie back of it.

The original lie back of a sex war would be that the sexes are essentially antagonistic. There are people who believe that. Such a belief can breed a state of mind in which there arises a yearning to tell the truth about women. Some people have a passion for discovering antagonisms. They would like to build an inverted monism that revealed the universe as an extension of the Killenny cats. To tell them that the antagonism was not in sex but in interests growing out of sex, that these interests had grown to a great extent under a one-sided pressure, and that they were subject to change with world change, would be to take away a certain comfortable misery. Moreover, it would to an awkward extent interfere with, or, at all events, take some of the zest from the attainment of that great ideal of revealing the truth about women.

The tendency to believe that there is a special and sinister "truth" about women, in whatever types of mind it may appear, and in whatever states of age or youth it may manifest itself, was nourished by conditions that quite plainly have begun to disappear. No supplanting conditions can be quite so favorable to a successful attitude of male supervision or privileged male analysis. Womankind will never again be an incidental element of mankind. As civilization advances it will grow harder to indicate women as representing one of the minor appointments, harder to think of them as a creature group. They have smashed the tradition of "place." They have overrun the forbidden industries and professions. They are doing all the things they are unfitted for. They occupy judgeships. They sit in legislatures. They have accepted fusion in the melting pot of world effort.

This ought to prove, I suppose, that the truth about women must now be much more complicated than it used to be. It ought to prove that a vision of the truth about women must become a vastly more subtle matter. It might

turn out to be a more annoying truth than it ever was before. Yet there is a better hope. If maleness can no longer be put on one side of the picture, and femaleness on the other, where each group may glare at and accuse the other; if the blending of effort in affairs means anything; if there is any wisdom in saying that there is no sex in science or in art; if religion may revise its bisecting dogmas; if women themselves may join the preachers and prophets, the obliterations mus. do something to traditions of antipathy, must at some point begin to suggest, even to stodgy or senile minds, the oneness of mankind.

A new Tolstoy who should threaten that, when he had one foot in the grave, he would tell the truth about humanity, would not be credited with a superior impudence. He would be credited with

an inferior humor. The notion of a separable truth about women will begin to wear the same complexion. The real truth about women will be known when the real truth about men is known. To have read one will be to have read the other. The aspiration to do the reading will always be praiseworthy. Such an aspiration is indeed inevitable. It has always existed. It has always been defeated. But it would be a misfortune if frustration enfeebled the wish. This supreme curiosity is indicative of mankind's desire to be a participating creator. So long as man wants to know, his power will increase. If he ever really knows, he may be awed. He may indeed find the truth terrifying. Yet he will by then have lost some of his fears, perhaps even his fear of women and of words.

MAGIC

BY LAURA SPENCER PORTOR

THE year is weary, its boughs are bare.
 It has borne such sorrow! known such care!
 It is old, old, old! It cannot see
 Save disillusion and vanity;
 Nor a moment so fleet it would bid it stay;
 Nor a day so sweet it were worth delay.
 Its veins are cooled, and its life blood runs
 Low, like the splendor of setting suns
 Soon to be gone. O Faust-like year!
 Your dreams are fallen; your hopes are sere.
 You have only to die and end it all,
 And rest you under the snow's white pall.

But lo, came one, and her still hand held
 A magic chalice chased of eld;
 I could have sworn 'twas the spring moon, slim,
 That she, murmuring, stooped and offered him;
 I could have sworn that I saw her tip
 The spring moon to his aged, complaining lip;
 I could have sworn that he drank of it deep.
 But it did not bring him peace nor sleep;
 Nay, rather, a marvelous thing occurred—
 I swear to you solemnly, give you my word—
 I saw him lose, suddenly, age and pain;
 Faust-like, the year was young again.