

ARE WOMEN TO BLAME?

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Is woman the more to blame for unhappiness in marriage?

Does any contributor to *THE NORTH AMERICAN REVIEW* hope to answer that question finally?

Why, Adam and Eve argued it at the very outset of their wretched married life—wretched, because she was sharp and ambitious and he weak and a glutton. Who was to blame for the result? The dispute has been going on ever since, in almost every household, of every age and nation. How can any new word be said about it?

Because, after all, this partnership of marriage between the man and woman has always been the same in every time of the world and every state of civilization; and the man and woman are the same though their skins be white, black, or yellow; whether they are of royal blood or negroes in a Georgia rice-field. Precisely the same qualities in husband or wife bring happiness or misery under a roof in New York or Philadelphia to-day as in that first city which Cain built.

A prince of the house of Hapsburg—rulers for six hundred years—loved another woman better than his wife and, the other day, put a bullet through his brain to rid himself of trouble. The same story was told on the same day of a Dutch puddler in Cincinnati. The Bible tells us how Rebekah, daughter of Laban, was tempted by jewels of gold and fine raiment to marry a man whom she had never seen and did not love, and how she became a tricky, rapacious wife, and brought misery into his house; and each morning's newspaper tells us the story of some lovely American girl who, a year or two ago, was brought out for sale to the highest bidder, who became a greedy, false wife, and who now

furnishes entertainment to the public in a hideous scandal and divorce case.

Solomon, even among his swarm of wives, was rasped to madness by one brilliant woman, whose tongue wagged incessantly; so was Socrates; so was Thomas Carlyle. Kind, genial Sir Walter carried through life the weight of a well-meaning, stolid, priggish wife. The same thing was true of Byron, of Goldsmith—it may be true of my reader.

There is no new lesson to be preached on this subject. You never read a tragedy or comedy on the married life of the dark ages the facts of which you could not duplicate in the next street.

It is the same relation and the same man and woman, after all, and the same rules of life apply to them always!

Give to a husband and wife some genuine love, a habit of honest thinking and acting, a little leisure in their lives, and, above all, reverence for a Power higher than themselves, and there will be happiness between them, whether they live in Congo or Chicago, just as there would have been in the days before the flood.

Whether this kind of marriage is likely to grow out of the present conditions of our American social life is the question which concerns us all just now.

We are told that it will not. Newspaper moralists, clergymen, and, above all, English tourists, incessantly bewail the degraded level of domestic life among us. The Nation, they tell us, is given up to the pursuit of money, in order to spend it in vulgar display. Our young people know nothing of love, the fierce, unreasonable, inexplicable passion which has moved the world since time began. They only covet horses, jewelry, establishments. Young girls learn the value of these things when they are children, and are taught that they must earn them by marriage. They are put in training for a rich match, and they know that they are in training. Hair, figure, skin, voice, dancing, French accent—all these things are of importance to the chances of the débutante of making a good match. She is brought out at last like a horse upon the course, with as much *éclat* as is possible to her family. Every step she takes, every triumph, is recorded in the vulgar publicity of the Society columns of the newspapers. If she marries a rich man, she is congratulated in them as having made good running.

Poor young fellows, of course, have no chance of winning these tid-bits of humanity ; they usually are bought by rich old men. Besides, the young men will not marry unless they find brides with dower sufficient to provide them with luxuries. After marriage, these young people, hitherto intent only upon selling themselves, suddenly discover that there is such a reality as love—a force that sweeps down all consideration of money, position, honor. Then follow scandals, divorces, disgrace, unutterable shame.

These are some of the ugly facts brought forward by those who believe that our domestic life is as corrupt as are our politics, and that marriage in this country is rapidly becoming only a matter of bargain and sale, ending in wretchedness.

But are they facts ?

These statements may be measurably true of a certain fashionable, vulgar set in our large cities, just as they are true of the same class in London, Paris, or Berlin. If a woman makes amusement and luxury the end of life, she will naturally sacrifice everything else to gain the rank or wealth which commands them. Ethel Newcome is sold here for dollars as in England for a title. In these mercenary marriages the wife is more guilty than the husband, because she sinks lower to gain her end. Love and personal honor usually count for more to a woman than to a man.

Unfortunately for our National reputation, the clergymen and foreign critics, who hold the public ear, are most familiar with fashionable city communities, and are apt to mistake the few thousand men and women who compose them for the American people. Outside of Society in the great cities mercenary marriages are rare. The American *per se*, not the dancing man of Murray Hill or the Back Bay, but the Southern planter, the Western railway man, the Pennsylvania tradesman, seldom marries without a hearty, honest throb of love in his heart. He is, at bottom, too honest and hearty a fellow to sell himself. His traits are manly. He reverences women. He flings his money to asylums, hospitals, schools, with a large, free generosity. Not the man surely to make marriage a matter of barter!

But even in the great, obscure, unpublished mass of people to whom he belongs, it is true that the greed for riches, which is debasing and vulgarizing our whole life, makes many marriages unhappy which at first were based on the purest affection. Here,

it seems to me, the men are most in fault. As soon as John is bitten by the madness for money, the first thing he sacrifices to it is the time which he has hitherto given to his wife and children. He rushes away to office or shop from the breakfast-table, spends the day there, is glum and silent at home, and carries his business into his dreams. A wife clings longer to the romance of love than her husband. She does not willingly lose the lover in the man who signs checks for her. Neither is it true that many unhappy marriages are due to the silly extravagance of wives.

Extravagance with the majority of us women is an acquired taste. Most of us have a positive relish for small economies, and enjoy the dime which we have saved more than the dollar we have to spend. It is a little niggling virtue, if it be a virtue; but American women have it—a relic of the days when their only part in the household economy was to save.

I am not at all sure, either, that there are more unhappy marriages than there were fifty years ago. There are more divorces, and divorce-bills drag the secret unhappiness to light. I remember, in the Virginia town in which I passed my childhood, there was one *divorcée*, and so rare was the legal severance of marriage in those days, and so abhorrent to public feeling, that the poor young woman was regarded with horror as though she had been a leper. But were there no wretched marriages among the good people who held her at arms' length? no drunken, brutal husbands? no selfish, nagging wives? Nowadays the lax divorce laws bring out all these secret skeletons to dance in the streets.

In our Western States, the consciousness that divorce is easily possible, no doubt, often makes wives restless and insurgent under petty annoyances. When that is the case, it is certainly the woman who is in fault.

In the South, where divorce is still looked upon as a disgrace, and where religious feeling is more stringent than in any other part of the country, the old-fashioned Domestic woman is still to be found. She is gentle; she has infinite tact; she hates a fuss; she knows the art of managing men. I think that she is not often to blame if her home is unhappy.

In some of the New-England States, where the women outnumber the men six to one, it is the hard, lean-natured man who has the game in his own hands. He knows that when he tires of

the patient, half-fed drudge who has slaved for him so long, he has but to "get a bill" and he is free to woo and marry again. He is not likely to kindle a heartsome blaze upon the domestic altar!

But, upon the whole, I believe that, owing to downright true love, to conscience, and to the sound sense and large good-humor characteristic of the American, the vast majority of marriages in this country are happy.

How can we decide whether the credit of this is due to the husband or the wife?

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It is a trite but very true saying that "it takes two to make a quarrel." And in answering the question which forms the title of this article, I desire to premise in behalf of my sex that, if women are to blame for the unhappiness of marriage, men also have their share of that unpleasant responsibility. But this is not the question of the moment; it is simply a *caveat*; and to be true to the facts in the case it must be allowed that women are often seriously and recklessly in fault when the marriage relation is not only unhappy, but disgraceful.

For, *first*, women often marry from wrong and inexcusable motives, and this first step in a mistaken direction leads them all astray and always downward; nor is the descent easy or agreeable. I do not hold to the sentimental and romantic notion that women should marry only from love, for that capricious passion may fasten itself, as too often it does, on an utterly unworthy person, and when the brief illusion is over, the gay blossoms of imagination and the fire-lights of passion all faded, there is left to the disgusted and disappointed woman only a perpetual and ghastly skeleton, not always in the closet. But I do not believe that a woman should marry without love: the degradation of body and soul implied in such a relation not only makes the bond a galling chain, but alienates from the wife any respect or admiration that a husband should feel for her, and rapidly degrades her character in its integral nature.

When a woman marries for money, she puts herself at once on a level with the class of women who are the lowest order of humanity. That her sale of herself is legalized does not alter its real *morale*. She is actually one of the outcasts of her sex in