

# THE LADY IN FICTION

BY RUTH SHEPARD PHELPS

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THE Lady, according to Mrs. Putnam's definition in the fascinating volume which wears her name, is to be distinguished from other women by the number of things she may not do. This we must understand to be the hierarchic lady of the social order, born and bred upon a certain social stratum, unable through the accident of her birth to be anything else, but enabled to forfeit certain of her privileges if she transgress society's rules for her. Society, that is, makes her and can unmake her. Those things she may not do are things society will not let her do. Her opposite, we suppose, is the woman born upon the lowest terrace of the walled garden which is society, or rather on no terrace at all, a weed sprung up without gardening outside the walls. It is she who has rung the street bell in so many a novel and play, of whom so many a perfect English servant has said, in answer to his mistress' query, "It's not a lady, Madam. It's a person."

As for the lady, we would not disparage her. At her best she is a precious thing. She is elegance, she is grace; she is rarity and costliness; she is ornament, decoration, sometimes even she is beauty; and when we see her pictured at her fairest, as in Lady Barbara in *The Patrician*, we find her such a masterpiece that she seems worth all she may have cost to anybody. We would not disparage her, we would not destroy her—but we should like to rename her. She is the Great Lady, and her opposite is the Person.

The true lady resembles the great lady in being distinguished by the things she may not do; the difference is in her sanction. Those are things she will not let herself do, her inhibition comes from within—the other's from without. She blooms upon every level, in every parterre, she and her opposite, and we may often find them the children of one

mother. Though she is one, her opposite is various, and for the latter it is harder to find a name than to use one of the ready-made classifications which will content society. Sometimes she is what Tristram of Blent was probably the first to call one of her sex—a curmudgeon. Sometimes she is a martyr, sometimes she is a cat. Sometimes she is not really the opposite, only the embryo of a lady. But in every case we shall find her, I presume to think, describable by the new word coined for another use by Mr. Sydnor Harrison—an “egoette,” her ego as intrusive as the head of Charles the First, though she continually seeks to keep it down by a system of studied deprecation, by which in part she may be known.

We can best understand many things by looking first at what they are not; and the lady is not a martyr, nor an “egoette,” nor a curmudgeon, nor a cat. She never makes scenes, and her feelings are never hurt; she never sets you right, never condescends to score, never puts you in the wrong, but quietly creeps into the wrong herself; she is unselfish, but willing, with a superhuman touch of unselfishness, not to appear so; she can give over woman’s most cherished attitude, forego the martyr’s crown, and seem to be always doing what she likes. She is able and willing, in short, to do entirely without credit and to be paid with an uncomprehending love—willing to be misunderstood! Indeed her virtues are for the most part so difficult and uncongenial to unregenerate feminine nature, that we can only wonder and admire on reflecting how many women have succeeded in being ladies at all. For the different forms of failure to be such, we may borrow a distinction which the moral judgment has had to invent for a more sophisticated moral order. We used to do very well with only the moral and the immoral, but subtler distinctions have taught us to consider also the non-moral. Likewise, beside the ladylike, we have to recognize not only the unladylike (whose failures might be called technical), but also the non-ladylike. Such, for example, was Undine, Undine of Apex, who stood as much outside the realm where such values are discerned and can govern action, as the pagan outside that of Christian morality, a phenomenon not to be weighed in such scales. Such might also be some great lady, some Duchess of Wrex, standing like the Pope not outside judgment but above it, to whom the delicate problems of ladyhood would, like principle in a

politician, interfere with her calling. Finally there is discernible what the convenient and inexpensive language of commerce is teaching us to call the "near" ladylike, and the distinction between this and true ladyhood is the most useful, the most interesting, and the most difficult of all.

In such personal questions as these a world of enlightenment comes from a little analytical gossip, and fortunately we have a vast acquaintance in common, who will not be offended or hurt though we talk them over never so freely, not even if we say of one of them now and then that she is no lady. There is Charlotte, for example. She was no lady, though she believed herself one, and it was an article of creed with her. But if we are to arrive at some understanding of these subtle matters it is precisely from among those women who assume themselves and are generally assumed to be *hors concours*, that we must draw our warnings. Otherwise we are no better off than British society with its stiff classifications of ladies and persons. With them a woman is either a lady or a person, and there you are; but in a democracy one must dig a little deeper. Charlotte was an Englishwoman who, according to Mr. E. M. Forster, sojourned for a period in "A Room with a View" in an agreeable pension on the Florentine Lungarno. Her nearest female relatives were undoubted ladies, but Charlotte was not one. Not that Charlotte was ever unladylike, but she was a martyr and a curmudgeon and an "egoette," and once, at least, when she told what she had seen among the violets on the hillside, she was a cat. She was always doing what you desired, never what she liked herself; she never allowed you to do her a kindness without protesting until you no longer desired to do it; she never failed to show herself aware of your responsibility for a slip in the least important of enterprises, and while never cross, she always, subtly, made you feel to blame. Yet her failure is really more intellectual than moral; inability to analyze and lack of humor keep the Charlottes from ever really seeing themselves.

It has sometimes seemed to me that there have not been in American fiction a great number of these choice creatures we are trying to analyze, though Mr. Howells has given us a good many—provincial ladies, rustic often, but authentic. Yet fiction needs the lady almost as much as it needs character; she is as much its natural material. It is perhaps, for instance, her protracted absence from the pages of Mr. H. G.

Wells that keeps his novels from being as interesting as we are always expecting they will be. His heroines have no inhibitions except their moods and dislikes; there is no struggle, consequently no story, merely the history of a series of inclinations and the practical consequences of giving way to them. Yet too much emphasis must not be laid on this point. Hardy and Meredith are both there to dispose at once of the theory that fiction cannot do without the lady. Only, we must have something quite as definite and typical in her stead. So Hardy gives us women, while Meredith deals for the most part in goddesses.

At any rate this lamentable rarity of the lady's appearances between the covers of American fiction may be the reason for a defect that Mr. Garnett has recently with much acuteness attributed to it, a kind of "standardization," which permits of no very individual or temperamental kinds of action. The standardized is the common, by its nature, and the lady by her nature is not common. She must be individual and inventive in her behavior, for she is constantly faced, like all the world, with situations that are not a bit standardized, and her manner of dealing with them affirms her ladyhood. A comment of Mr. Garnett's on the novels of Mrs. Wharton and Miss Anne Douglas Sedgwick, who have provided a small gallery of ladies of quality for our study, is a little cruel in its intention and appears a little unjust in its upshot. Mr. Garnett says that the manners and morals of the characters in "the admirable novels" of these two authors are, one almost feels, "like tightly cut clothes in which people cannot be quite at ease." Taken at its worst, this would seem to say that the finest ladies in these romances are a little vulgar, and at its best suggest that they seem to find their ladyhood difficult at times. But why shouldn't they? Is it supposed that the *moral* life is easy? Surely the constant revision that the lady gives to her behavior, her frequent renunciations and mute acceptances of misinterpretation, are not more so. Her manners are easy, but it is not easy to have good manners. Those it would be easy to have, the first that come to hand, worn not as tight clothes but as the loosest and comfortablest of *négligés*, would be precisely those of an Isabel Rivers or an Ann Veronica. Or does Mr. Garnett mean that her manners do not *seem* easy, and are therefore not quite good, the lady not quite a lady at best? In this case, for the novels of Miss Sedgwick especial-

Iy, should we not have to disagree with Mr. Garnett? Surely her finest ladies have the smoothest, most anonymous of manners, and make their renunciations of whatever dimensions without a sign. They and their renunciations, at any rate, are what most preoccupy Miss Sedgwick as a novelist.

For Mrs. Wharton, certainly, the distinction is as important, but she is perhaps a shade too explicit. There are pages in *The Custom of the Country* that remind us of the outworn literary mode of "conduct books." The differences in social standard between Apex and aristocratic New York are emphasized until the reader has a pained suspicion that not all of this enlightenment is intended for Undine; some of it seems directed to his own address, for the general betterment of American manners. His suspicion nears certainty at the point where not only Ralph explains to Undine, but the author fairly explains to her reader, that to have the old family jewel which has been her engagement ring reset in the current mode, is a breach of taste as well as of sentiment.

Miss Sedgwick seems more disinterested. Her slow analysis of the lady, aspect by aspect, in book after book, seems as much for her own enlightenment as for ours. Assuming that both she and we can recognize the genus when we meet it, her interest lies in getting at what constitutes its infallibly recognizable marks.

In her novels we seldom have the lady "given" without her opposite, or at least her clearly differentiated imperfect copy. In *A Fountain Sealed*, for example, Miss Sedgwick uses for the first time a rather deceitful device which she repeats with success in the following two novels; she presents first to our view, amid the admiring plaudits of all her little circle, what is apparently the heroine, and leaves it to our cleverness to discover it when she is quite eclipsed by some one whose entrance is accomplished later with less heraldry. So we are introduced in this book first to Imogen, among her lovers of both sexes, and find her so beautiful, so full of a "beautiful wisdom," that it is several chapters before we realize that she is a monument of selfishness, conceit and sententiousness.

Whereas it is her mother, whom Imogen looks upon with some disdain, both intellectual and moral, and whom, when we first see her alighting from a steamer with her little dog, her maid, and her matchless elegance, we are inclined to

judge with Imogen's eyes as being dangerously frivolous and European,—it is she who compels our final admiration. For Imogen captures her mother's nice English lover, who is evidently about to become her fiancé, and the mother does not lift a finger to hold him, unwilling to join the ladies' ignoble battle over man.

Knowing her child for the monster she is, realizing that even yet Sir Basil could easily be made to recognize his love for herself, she sacrifices both him and herself to her ideal of ladyhood. It would have been impossible for her to act otherwise, and we hardly wish she had, even though we see her choice made at a cost which the author leaves us no excuse to minimize. To her unselfishness, moreover, she must add the artistic touch of generosity, and when Sir Basil, good blundering gentleman that he is, comes to her in some anguish of spirit lest he be dealing shabbily by her, she contrives to make him believe she does not care and never has. To have stirred to recover him, she would have lost something more precious than himself, and it is hard to detect in her smiling negligent gesture of relinquishment any lack of freedom and grace, which might betray that her Parisian garments anywhere constrict her.

In *Franklin Winslow Kane*, that remarkable book in which the characters exchange relationships like the changing partners in a formal dance,—where, like a decorator seeking “color combinations,” the author tries the effect, as it were, of either man with each woman and of either woman with each man,—we again begin with a woman who is a center of adulation in her little circle. Althea is a refined and cultivated woman living in a Boston suburb, and held as “wonderful” by all her friends and neighbors. She is pretty, in a neat, not very effective manner, pretty but not graceful, and, we conclude, without style; and a certain lack of fluidity in her bodily mould repeats itself in her nature. It has no flexibility, but is full of small stiffnesses and inhibitions which make simplicity difficult to her. She is self-conscious, yet her self-consciousness has as it were to be built up from the outside; one feels that if it were not supported by the sense in a great many minds that she was “wonderful,” she would somehow, like the man in *The Private Life* not altogether succeed in being there at all. Among her admirers is the hero of the tale, her humble and persistent wooer, whom she has never fancied she quite wished to



marry, but whose steady inexhaustible devotion helps largely to constitute her element. To see herself in his eyes enables her to continue existent, and it is in his faithful heart that takes place the drama of dispossession in favor of a later comer. This is Helen, the English girl, whose freedom from alloy in the pure flawlessness of ladyhood reveals little by little by her mere existence to Franklin's bewildered loyalty, that his Althea's perfections are paste. Helen is an aristocrat, one born, like Towneley in *The Way of All Flesh*, knowing all the things that are really worth knowing, all the little points of beautiful behavior which have most to do with the ordinary kinds of happiness of dull daily life, which enable one "to make on the whole a family happier for his presence." Negligent of her appearance, we are told, we do not precisely know what Helen looked like, but we conceive that any room was prettier as well as pleasanter if she were in it. If Althea's manners were of the sort that makes easy things hard, Helen's could make the most difficult ones easy. And by comparing these two we seem to make out, as a further quality of the lady, integrity, the ability to exist alone by her own standards, an absence of reference, some degree of self-knowledge.

From these various examples we can draw some material for judging what are to be the signs of the woman who has or has not the graces of the exquisite and elusive creature we seek to celebrate.

Essentially, the principle of ladyhood seems to reveal itself as that of the Christian—self-renouncement, but carried over, whenever necessary, from the realm of moral values into the minutiae of social intercourse. The perfect gentleman according to Samuel Butler would be the perfect saint; why may not the perfect lady be the perfect Christian? Her relinquishments are sometimes, as in the case of Mrs. Upton, as difficult as the human soul can make. Butler himself, we may be sure, if he could not have had both, would have chosen the lady. He would make loveableness and good breeding the tests of civilization, and condemn all ill-mannered, ill-conditioned folk to perish from the earth.

The perfect lady is not the perfect Christian, because her inner light is rather aesthetic than moral, and she acts more from pride than love. Behavior that seems to her "ugly" she cannot bear, and to illustrate it would be beneath her pride, to behold herself acting in such ways would be worse

than any loss. She is more artist than saint. Roderick Hudson, we remember, saw himself in an intolerable moment of enlightenment as hideous, and died. But we feel no note of penitence in him. He suffered as artist, not as sinner. And so her standard of conduct is taste, not principle, though here, as elsewhere, "there is simply no limit to the misfortune of being tasteless"; for while Christian conduct may win esteem, admiration, respect, make one to be relied on and trusted in, yet performed without taste, without grace, it rarely achieves the priceless gift of personal love.

So we are not asking a new version of an old question—The Lady or the Christian?—for either without the other is a lame and imperfect being. The lady may in her softness be facile, and fail at some crisis for lack of iron in her. The Christian, on the other hand, who is imperfectly a lady, is capable of keeping for her nearest and dearest a self so un-beautiful that not one person of her acquaintance would recognize it as a portrait of her. So we must have them both; and this is not one of life's true dilemmas, for we can have them. The Christian must provide the motive, in love of someone or something other than herself; while it is the lady who must see that the sacrifice is performed in a way to make no one uncomfortable. She must suffer as a Christian, but smile as a lady; to smile as a Christian would make her a martyr and spoil the picture. She will be essentially unselfish, but she will never utter the word. The Christian makes the sacrifice, the lady disallows the credit for it, and she can well afford to "take the cash and let the credit go," for the cash she keeps is the general appreciation of her "niceness."

Throughout the world of Henry James we see women who unite the two gifts of ladyhood and moral principle. The gift of renunciation is evidently for him the hall-mark of the lady. If other authors seem interested in showing us women like Charlotte and Althea, who have the moral sense but lack charm, James on the other hand has given us minute and fairly appalling studies of women of exquisite finish and a social grace raised to the level of genius, who quite lack the moral sense. There are Mme. Merle and Kate Croy and Charlotte Stant, beautiful predatory creatures who snatch the prizes of life from the others. But it is clearly to the others that Mr. James yields the palm, and to whom, were he interested in such explicit categories as the one we are



using at present, he would have accorded the name of lady. If among the appealing group of cheated hearts—his Isabel, his Milly, Fleda Vetch, and Maggie—only the latter is permitted to retain both the substance and the spirit, those who have but the spirit we may never dare wholly to pity. Being is always more than having. And to be so true to ideals of fineness as little Princess Maggie in *The Golden Bowl* would be enough in life, in her creator's belief, even had she finally lost her prince.

We discern in her all the qualities we have been analyzing one at a time, as she seeks to save her step-mother's attitude for her in that momentous interview on the moonlit terrace. She cannot be satisfied merely to forgive Charlotte Stant, on the eve of her departure, for her ambiguous relations with the Prince; she must add the touch of artistic generosity and imply that she has not seen the ambiguity, has, in fact, nothing to forgive. It is not enough for her to be at last rid of Charlotte; she must let the departure seem not only Charlotte's choice, but a triumph over herself. The Christian can abdicate a great triumph; only the lady can forego a small one. The Christian might have forgiven; only the lady could have lied.

Yet it need not be feared that the grace of such actions will conceal the moral power that makes them possible, or that the disclaimer of credit will prevent its being seen that credit is due. Character cannot be hidden. Maggie's is clearly seen not only by the reader who is in her confidence, but by the Prince her husband who has been but the sometimes puzzled spectator. In so far as life is art, character is the medium, and manners, as their name implies, the form; and why may we not reserve that term which we can only somewhat vainly hope we have not cheapened with our repetitions, to her who practices this art, this "continent art of living well," to her who shapes a fine character with her fine manners? To her who governs her life in accordance with taste by means of pride, we may apply a slightly different label, and call her the woman of charm. Thus we arrive at the very last moment at a definition. The lady, as we seem finally to descry her lineaments, we may define as the woman of charm "doubled" with the woman of principle.

RUTH SHEPARD PHELPS.

# THE CZAR'S SOLILOQUY<sup>1</sup>

BY MARK TWAIN

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*After the Czar's morning bath it is his habit to meditate an hour before dressing himself.—London Times Correspondence.*

(*Viewing himself in the pier-glass.*) Naked, what am I? A lank, skinny, spider-legged libel on the image of God! Look at the waxwork head—the face, with the expression of a melon—the projecting ears—the knotted elbows—the dished breast—the knife-edged shins—and then the feet, all beads and joints and bone-sprays, an imitation X-ray photograph! There is nothing imperial about this, nothing imposing, impressive, nothing to evoke awe and reverence. Is it this that a hundred and forty million Russians kiss the dust before and worship? Manifestly not! No one could worship this spectacle, which is Me. Then who is it, what is it, that they worship? Privately, none knows better than I: it is my clothes. Without my clothes I should be as destitute of authority as any other naked person. Nobody could tell me from a parson, a barber, a dude. Then who is the real Emperor of Russia? My clothes. There is no other.

As Teufelsdröckh suggested, what would man be—what would *any* man be—without his clothes? As soon as one stops and thinks over that proposition, one realizes that without his clothes a man could be nothing at all; that the clothes do not merely make the man, the clothes *are* the man; that without them he is a cipher, a vacancy, a nobody, a nothing.

Titles—another artificiality—are a part of his clothing. They and the dry-goods conceal the wearer's inferiority and make him seem great and a wonder, when at bottom there is nothing remarkable about him. They can move a nation to

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