

***ELLA WHEELER
WILCOX***



***THREE
WOMEN***

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Three Women

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I.

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A dull little station, a man with the eye
Of a dreamer; a bevy of girls moving by;
A swift moving train and a hot Summer sun,
The curtain goes up, and our play is begun.
The drama of passion, of sorrow, of strife,
Which always is billed for the theatre Life.
It runs on forever, from year unto year,
With scarcely a change when new actors appear.
It is old as the world is—far older in truth,
For the world is a crude little planet of youth.
And back in the eras before it was formed,
The passions of hearts through the Universe stormed.

Maurice Somerville passed the cluster of girls
Who twisted their ribbons and fluttered their curls
In vain to attract him; his mind it was plain
Was wholly intent on the incoming train.
That great one eyed monster puffed out its black
breath,
Shrieked, snorted and hissed, like a thing bent on
death,
Paused scarcely a moment, and then sped away,
And two actors more now enliven our play.

A graceful young woman with eyes like the morn,
With hair like the tassels which hang from the corn,
And a face that might serve as a model for Peace,

Moved lightly along, smiled and bowed to Maurice,
Then was lost in the circle of friends waiting near.
A discord of shrill nasal tones smote the ear,
As they greeted their comrade and bore her from
sight.

(The ear oft is pained while the eye feels delight
In the presence of women throughout our fair land:
God gave them the graces which win and command,
But the devil, who always in mischief rejoices,
Slipped into their teachers and ruined their voices.)

There had stepped from the train just behind Mabel
Lee

A man whose deportment bespoke him to be
A child of good fortune. His mien and his air
Were those of one all unaccustomed to care.
His brow was not vexed with the gold seeker's worry,
His manner was free from the national hurry.
Repose marked his movements. Yet gaze in his eye,
And you saw that this calm outer man was a lie;
And you knew that deep down in the depths of his
breast

There dwelt the unmerciful imp of unrest.

He held out his hand; it was clasped with a will
In both the firm palms of Maurice Somerville.
"Well, Reese, my old Comrade;" "Ha, Roger, my boy,"
They cried in a breath, and their eyes gemmed with
joy

(Which but for their sex had been set in a tear),
As they walked arm in arm to the trap waiting near,

And drove down the shining shell roadway which
wound
Through forest and meadow, in search of the Sound.

Roger:

I smell the salt water—that perfume which starts
The blood from hot brains back to world withered
hearts;
You may talk of the fragrance of flower filled fields,
You may sing of the odors the Orient yields,
You may tell of the health laden scent of the pine,
But give me the subtle salt breath of the brine.
Already I feel lost emotions of youth
Steal back to my soul in their sweetness and truth;
Small wonder the years leave no marks on your face,
Time's scythe gathers rust in this idyllic place.
You must feel like a child on the Great Mother's
breast,
With the Sound like a nurse watching over your rest?

Maurice:

There is beauty and truth in your quaint simile,
I love the Sound more than the broad open sea.
The ocean seems always stern, masculine, bold,
The Sound is a woman, now warm, and now cold.
It rises in fury and threatens to smite,
Then falls at your feet with a coo of delight;
Capricious, seductive, first frowning, then smiling,
And always, whatever its mood is, beguiling.
Look, now you can see it, bright beautiful blue,

And far in the distance there loom into view
The banks of Long Island, full thirty miles off;
A sign of wet weather to-morrow. Don't scoff!
We people who chum with the waves and the wind
Know more than all wise signal bureaus combined.

But come, let us talk of yourself—for of me
There is little to tell which your eyes may not see.
Since we finished at College (eight years, is it not?)
I simply have dreamed away life in this spot.
With my dogs and my horses, a book and a pen,
And a week spent in town as a change now and then.
Fatigue for the body, disease for the mind,
Are all that the city can give me, I find.
Yet once in a while there is wisdom I hold
In leaving the things that are dearer than gold,—
Loved people and places—if only to learn
The exquisite rapture it is to return.
But you, I remember, craved motion and change;
You hated the usual, worshiped the strange.
Adventure and travel I know were your theme:
Well, how did the real compare with the dream?
You have compassed the earth since we parted at
Yale,
Has life grown the richer, or only grown stale?

Roger:

Stale, stale, my dear boy! that's the story in short,
I am weary of travel, adventure and sport;
At home and abroad, in all climates and lands,

I have had what life gives when a full purse
commands,
I have chased after Pleasure, that phantom faced elf,
And lost the best part of my youth and myself.
And now, barely thirty, I'm heart sick and blue;
Life seems like a farce scarcely worth sitting through.
I dread its long stretch of dissatisfied years;
Ah! wealth is not always the boon it appears.
And poverty lights not such ruinous fires
As gratified appetites, tastes and desires.
Fate curses, when letting us do as we please—
It stunts a man's soul to be cradled in ease.

Maurice:

You are right in a measure; the devil I hold
Is oftener found in full coffers of gold
Than in bare, empty larders. The soul, it is plain,
Needs the conflicts of earth, needs the stress and the
strain
Of misfortune, to bring out its strength in this life—
The Soul's calisthenics are sorrow and strife.
But, Roger, what folly to stand in youth's prime
And talk like a man who could father old Time.
You have life all before you; the past,—let it sleep;
Its lessons alone are the things you should keep.
There is virtue sometimes in our follies and sinnings;
Right lives very often have faulty beginnings.
Results, and not causes, are what we should
measure.

You have learned precious truths in your search after
pleasure.

You have learned that a glow worm is never a star,
You have learned that Peace builds not her temples
afar.

And now, dispossessed of the spirit to roam,
You are finely equipped to establish a home.
That's the one thing you need to lend savor to life,
A home, and the love of a sweet hearted wife,
And children to gladden the path to old age.

Roger:

Alas! from life's book I have torn out that page;
I have loved many times and in many a fashion,
Which means I know nothing at all of the passion.
I have scattered my heart, here and there, bit by bit,
'Til now there is nothing worth while left of it;
And, worse than all else, I have ceased to believe
In the virtue and truth of the daughters of Eve.
There's tragedy for you—when man's early trust
In woman, experience hurls to the dust!

Maurice:

Then you doubt your own mother?

Roger:

She passed heavenward
Before I remember; a saint, I have heard,

While she lived; there are scores of good women to-day,

Temptation has chanced not to wander their way.

The devil has more than his lordship can do,
He can't make the rounds, so some women keep true.

Maurice:

You think then each woman, if tempted, must fall?

Roger:

Yes, if tempted her way—not one way suits them all—
They have tastes in their sins as they have in their clothes,

The tempter, of course, has to first study those.

One needs to be flattered, another is bought;

One yields to caresses, by frowns one is caught.

One wants a bold master, another a slave,

With one you must jest, with another be grave.

But swear you're a sinner whom she has reformed

And the average feminine fortress is stormed.

In rescuing men from abysses of sin

She loses her head—and herself tumbles in.

The mind of a woman was shaped for a saint,

But deep in her heart lies the devil's own taint.

With plans for salvation her busy brain teems,

While her heart longs in secret to know how sin seems.

And if with this question unanswered she dies,

Temptation came not in the right sort of guise.

There's my estimate, Reese, of the beautiful sex;
I see by your face that my words wound and vex,
But remember, my boy, I'm a man of the world.

Maurice:

Thank God, in the vortex I have not been hurled.
If experience breeds such a mental disease,
I am glad I have lived with the birds and the bees,
And the winds and the waves, and let people alone
So far in my life but good women I've known.
My mother, my sister, a few valued friends—
A teacher, a schoolmate, and there the list ends.
But to know one true woman in sunshine and gloom,
From the zenith of life to the door of the tomb,
To know her, as I knew that mother of mine,
Is to know the whole sex and to kneel at the shrine.

Roger:

Then you think saint and woman synonymous terms?

Maurice:

Oh, no! we are all, men and women, poor worms
Crawling up from the dampness and darkness of clay
To bask in the sunlight and warmth of the day.
Some climb to a leaf and reflect its bright sheen,
Some toil through the grass, and are crushed there
unseen.
Some sting if you touch them, and some evolve
wings;

Yet God dwells in each of the poor, groping things.
They came from the Source—to the Source they go
back;

The sinners are those who have missed the true
track.

We can not judge women or men as a class,
Each soul has its own distinct place in the mass.

There is no sex in sin; it were folly to swear
All women are angels, but worse to declare
All are devils as you do. You're morbid, my boy,
In what you thought gold you have found much alloy
And now you are doubting there is the true ore.

But wait till you study my sweet simple store
Of pure sterling treasures; just wait till you've been
A few restful weeks, or a season, within
The charmed circle of home life; then, Roger, you'll
find

These malarial mists clearing out of your mind.
As a ship cuts the fog and is caught by the breeze,
And swept through the sunlight to fair, open seas,
So your heart will be caught and swept out to the
ocean

Of youth and youth's birthright of happy emotion.
I'll wager my hat (it was new yesterday)
That you'll fall in love, too, in a serious way.
Our girls at Bay Bend are bewitching and fair,
And Cupid lurks ever in salt Summer air.

Roger: