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***THE BUSINESS  
OF BEING  
A WOMAN***

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# **The Business of Being a Woman**

EAN 8596547380733

DigiCat, 2022

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# **TO**

## **E.I.T. AND C.C.T.**

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## **INTRODUCTION**

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The object of this little volume is to call attention to a certain distrust, which the author feels in the modern woman, of the significance and dignity of the work laid upon her by Nature and by society. Its ideas are the result of a long, if somewhat desultory, observation of the professional, political, and domestic activities of women in this country and in France. These observations have led to certain definite opinions as to those phases of the woman question most in need of emphasis to-day.

A great problem of human life is to preserve faith in and zest for everyday activities. The universal easily becomes the vulgar and the burdensome. The highest civilization is that in which the largest number sense, and are so placed

as to realize, the dignity and the beauty of the common experiences and obligations.

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The courtesy of the publishers of the *American Magazine*, in permitting the use here of chapters which have appeared in that periodical, is gratefully acknowledged.

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# **THE BUSINESS OF BEING A WOMAN**

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## **CHAPTER IToC**

### **The Uneasy Woman**

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The most conspicuous occupation of the American woman of to-day, dressing herself aside, is self-discussion. It is a disquieting phenomenon. Chronic self-discussion argues chronic ferment of mind, and ferment of mind is a serious handicap to both happiness and efficiency. Nor is self-discussion the only exhibit of restlessness the American woman gives. To an unaccustomed observer she seems

always to be running about on the face of things with no other purpose than to put in her time. He points to the triviality of the things in which she can immerse herself—her fantastic and ever-changing raiment, the welter of lectures and other culture schemes which she supports, the eagerness with which she transports herself to the ends of the earth—as marks of a spirit not at home with itself, and certainly not convinced that it is going in any particular direction or that it is committed to any particular worthwhile task.

Perhaps the most disturbing side of the phenomenon is that it is coincident with the emancipation of woman. At a time when she is freer than at any other period of the world's history—save perhaps at one period in ancient Egypt—she is apparently more uneasy.

Those who do not like the exhibit are inclined to treat her as if she were a new historical type. The reassuring fact is, that ferment of mind is no newer thing in woman than in man. It is a human ailment. Its attacks, however, have always been unwelcome. Society distrusts uneasiness in sacred quarters; that is, in her established and privileged works. They are the best mankind has to show for itself. At least they are the things for which the race has slaved longest and which so far have best resisted attack. We would like to pride ourselves that they were permanent, that we had settled some things. And hence society resents a restless woman. And this is logical enough.

Embroidered as man is in an eternal effort to conquer, understand, and reduce to order both nature and his fellows, it is imperative that he have some secure spot

where his head is not in danger, his heart is not harassed. Woman, by virtue of the business nature assigns her, has always been theoretically the maker and keeper of this necessary place of peace. But she has rarely made it and kept it with full content. Eve was a revoltée, so was Medea. In every century they have appeared, restless Amazons, protesting and remolding. Out of their uneasy souls have come the varying changes in the woman's world which distinguish the ages.

Society has not liked it—was there to be no quiet anywhere? It is poor understanding that does not appreciate John Adams' parry of his wife Abigail's list of grievances, which she declared the Continental Congress must relieve if it would avoid a woman's rebellion. Under the stress of the Revolution children, apprentices, schools, colleges, Indians, and negroes had all become insolent and turbulent, he told her. What was to become of the country if women, "the most numerous and powerful tribe in the world," grew discontented?

Now this world-old restlessness of the women has a sound and a tragic cause. Nature lays a compelling hand on her. Unless she obeys freely and fully she must pay in unrest and vagaries. For the normal woman the fulfillment of life is the making of the thing we best describe as a home—which means a mate, children, friends, with all the radiating obligations, joys, burdens, these relations imply.

This is nature's plan for her; but the home has got to be founded inside the imperfect thing we call society. And these two, nature and society, are continually getting into each other's way, wrecking each other's plans, frustrating

each other's schemes. The woman almost never is able to adjust her life so as fully to satisfy both. She is between two fires. Euripides understood this when he put into Medea's mouth a cry as modern as any that Ibsen has conceived:—

Of all things upon earth that grow,  
A herb most bruised is woman. We must pay  
Our store of gold, hoarded for that one day,  
To buy us some man's love; and lo, they bring  
A master of our flesh! There comes the sting  
Of the whole shame. And then the jeopardy,  
For good or ill, what shall that master be;  
'Tis magic she must have or prophecy—  
Home never taught her that—how best to  
guide  
Toward peace this thing that sleepeth at her  
side.  
And she who, laboring long, shall find some  
way  
Whereby her lord may bear with her, nor fray  
His yoke too fiercely, blessed is the breath  
That woman draws!

Medea's difficulty was that which is oftenest in the way of a woman carrying her business in life to a satisfactory completion—false mating. It is not a difficulty peculiar to woman. Man knows it as often. It is the heaviest curse society brings on human beings—the most fertile cause of apathy, agony, and failure. If the woman's cry is more poignant under it than the man's, it is because the machine which holds them both allows him a wider sweep, more



interests outside of their immediate alliance. "A man, when he is vexed at home," complains Medea, "can go out and find relief among his friends or acquaintances, but we women have none to look at but him."

And when it is impossible longer to "look" at him, what shall she do! Tell her woe to the world, seek a soporific, repudiate the scheme of things, or from the vantage point of her failure turn to the untried relations of her life, call upon her unused powers?

From the beginning of time she has tried each and all of these methods of meeting her purely human woe. At times the women of whole peoples have sunk into apathy, their business reduced to its dullest, grossest forms. Again, whole groups have taken themselves out of the partnership which both Nature and Society have ordered. The Amazons refused to recognize man as an equal and mated simply that they might rear more women like themselves. Here the tables were turned and the boy baby turned out—not to the wolves, but to man! The convent has always been a favorite way of escape.

It has never been a majority of women who for a great length of time have shirked this problem by any one of these methods. By individuals and by groups woman has always been seeking to develop the business of life to such proportions, to so diversify, refine, and broaden it that no half failure or utter failure of its fundamental relations would swamp her, leave her comfortless, or prevent her working out that family which she knew to be her part in the scheme of things. It is from her conscious attempt to make the best of things when they are proved bad, that there has come

the uneasiness which trails along her path from Eve to Mrs. Pankhurst.

When great changes have come in the social system, her quest has responded to them, taken its color and direction from them. The peculiar forms of uneasiness in the American woman of to-day come naturally enough from the Revolution of 1776. That movement upset theoretically everything which had been expected of her before. Theoretically, it broke down the division fences which had kept her in sets and groups. She was no longer to be a woman of class; she was a woman of the people. This was striking at the very underpinning of femininity, as the world knew it. Theoretically, too, her ears were no longer to be closed to all ideas save those of her church or party,—a new thing, freedom of speech, was abroad,—her lips were opened with man's. Moreover, her business of family building was modified, as well as her attitude towards life. The necessity of all women educating themselves that they might be able to educate their children was an obligation on the face of the new undertaking. Another revolutionary duty put upon her was—*paying her way*. There can be no real democracy where there is parasitism. She must achieve conscious independence whether in or out of the family. Unquestionably there came with the Revolution a vision of a new woman—a woman from whom all of the willfulness and frivolity and helplessness of the "Lady" of the old régime should be stripped, while all her qualities of gentleness and charm should be preserved. The old-world lady was to be merged into a woman strong, capable, severely beautiful, a

creature who had all of the virtues and none of the follies of femininity.

It was strong yeast they put into the pot in '76.

A fresh leaven in a people can never be distributed evenly. Moreover, the mass to which it is applied is never homogeneous. There are spots so hard no yeast can move them; there are others so light the yeast burns them out. Taken as a whole, the change is labored and painful. So our new notions worked on women. There were groups which resented and refused them, became reactionary at the stating of them. There were those which grew grave and troubled under them, shrinking from the portentous upheaval they felt in their touch, yet sensing that they must be accepted. There were still others where the notion frothed and foamed, turning up unexpected ideas, revealing depths of dissatisfaction, of desire, of unsuspected powers in woman that startled the staid old world. It was in these quarters that there was produced the uneasy woman typical of the day.

Her ferment went to the bottom of things this time. Not since the age of the Amazon had a body of women broken more utterly with things as they are. And like the Amazon, the revolt was against man and his pretensions.

It was no unorganized revolt. It was deliberate. It presented her case in a carefully prepared List of Grievances, and an eloquent Declaration of Sentiments<sup>[1]</sup> both adopted in a strictly parliamentary way, and made the basis of an organized revolt, which has gone on systematically ever since. The essence of her complaint, as embodied in the above expression, is that man is a

conscious tyrant holding woman an unwilling captive—cutting her off from the things in life which really matter: education, freedom of speech, the ballot; that she can never be his equal until she does the same things her tyrant does, studies the book he studies, practices the trades and professions he practices, works with him in government.

The inference from all this is that the Business of Being a Woman, as it has been conducted heretofore by society, is of less importance than the Business of Being a Man, and that the time has come to enter his world and prove her equality.

There are certain assumptions in her program which will bear examination. Is man the calculating tyrant the modern uneasy woman charges? Are her fetters due only to his unfair domination? Or is she suffering from the generally bungling way things go in the world? And is not man a victim as well as she—caught in the same trap? Moreover, is woman never a tyrant? One of the first answers to her original revolt came from the most eminent woman of the day, Harriet Beecher Stowe, and it was called "*Pink and White Tyranny!*" "I have seen a collection of medieval English poems," says Chesterton, "in which the section headed 'Poems of Domestic Life' consisted entirely (literally entirely) of the complaints of husbands bullied by their wives."

Again, will doing the same things a man does work as well in stifling her unrest as she fancies it has in man's case? If a woman's temperamental and intellectual operations were identical with a man's, there would be hope of success,—but they are not. She is a different being.

Whether she is better or worse, stronger or weaker, primary or secondary, is not the question. She is different.

And she tries to ease a world-old human curse by imitating the occupations, points of views, and methods of a radically different being. Can she realize her quest in this way? Generally speaking, nothing is more wasteful in human operations than following a course which is not native and spontaneous, not according to the law of the being.

If she demonstrates her points, successfully copies man's activities, can she impress her program on any great body of women? The mass of women believe in their task. Its importance is not capable of argument in their minds. Nor do they see themselves dwarfed by their business. They know instinctively that under no other circumstances can such ripeness and such wisdom be developed, that nowhere else is the full nature called upon, nowhere else are there such intricate, delicate, and intimate forces in play, calling and testing them.

To bear and to rear, to feel the dependence of man and child—the necessity for themselves—to know that upon them depend the health, the character, the happiness, the future of certain human beings—to see themselves laying and preserving the foundations of so imposing a thing as a family—to build so that this family shall become a strong stone in the state—to feel themselves through this family perpetuating and perfecting church, society, republic,—this is their destiny,—this is worth while. They may not be able to state it, but all their instincts and experiences convince them of the supreme and eternal value of their place in the