DENATURED DRUDGERY, A WISE STUDY OF HOUSE WORK: BY ELIZABETH A. WARD

An Anglo-American woman, a journalist by profession, was revisiting her native land. Steeped in the traditions of her adopted country, she found her sensibilities uncomfortably jarred by certain conditions she met with in the home life of her one-time school friends, and the result was an article in a leading magazine exploiting the deplorable conditions among the "educated drudges" of the United States. It is significant of the temper and ideals of our country that the very women whom she visited as well as numerous others of the class she was commiserating denounced the article as unwarranted, un-American and deserving of sound censure from every thoughtful, high-minded American woman.

It is probably a fact that the majority of our educated women in America who marry do not step into homes of affluence; they may marry not only poor men but men of less educational advantages than themselves, and it seemed to be from these premises that the visitor deduced her sweeping conclusions of the resulting dreary waste of household drudgery, unremitting, irredeemable.

In every household, it is true, there is the hard, plain fact of routine work always to be done and never completed, and very frequently only the mistress to do it all. But the fact of glorifying love in it all and of that sacred institution, home, otherwise impossible to so many of our educated women, two vital factors in the problem, are too often left wholly out of the account by those who would criticise or pity.

Nor is mechanical labor the only requirement in conducting a household; for the almost infinite details, endlessly diversified, of a well-regulated household yield only to a competent hand directed by a trained mind. There is a crying need for more intelligent housekeeping and homemaking, and it is in recognition of this that Domestic Science departments have been so widely created in various institutions of learning. In the performance of the home's humblest tasks a woman may find not a sordid hampering of her higher aspirations, but scope for applying the training already acquired and opportunity for broadening and deepening it.

One very important purpose of the higher education is to train the mind to apply itself with productive energy to subjects not in themselves attractive to it, and it is a failure only if it has failed to develop latent resourcefulness for any emergencies in life. And yet how often expression is given to the very prevalent idea that, as applied to housekeeping, a college education is almost worse than thrown away. Only a short time ago the following bit of conversa-
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“The Seamstress,” painted by Frank W. Benson.

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tion floated to me between jolts from the car seat in front of me: “You
know her father was poor but he gave her the very best education he
could, even sent her to college. Then she came home and married a
man that drank himself to death and now she’s got half a dozen chil-
dren to support, and what good has all her fine education done her!”

Fools and blind of heart! Without her education her life must
have been little more than a colorless level. With it, many glimpses
of shining heights must have come blessedly as reliefs to the oppres-
sive shadows of the daily round. And the children; have they gained
nothing from the richer life of the mother? Let us refrain our lips
when we are tempted to say carelessly, “She went through college
and then did nothing but get married.” It is the noblest sentiment
of the age that exalts home-making as a woman’s most sacred calling
in life. Then let her come to it with the most thorough equipment
the times afford, and if circumstances make the so-called drudgery
a part of her work, her true womanhood will lend dignity to her
performance of it. While she has her health and strength she will
unfeignedly rejoice that she may contribute so large a share toward
the comfort of her home.

O
ur Anglo-American friend comments thus upon the American
woman: “There is about her a certain primitiveness, a hark-
ing back to Puritan ancestors that makes it difficult for her
to learn that even a married woman may, under certain circumstances,
have some higher duties than the ‘seeing to’ her husband’s dinner or
the suckling of her child.” May the day never come when the
mothers of our land shall learn of any higher duties than the comfort
of the home and the care of their children.

In many instances the mother prefers to have her young daughters
rather than a servant assist in the care of the home, that they may
learn the art of good homekeeping under her careful supervision.
“Where did you take cooking lessons?” was asked in wonderment by
a maid of her accomplished mistress. “I don’t think I ever learned; I
grew into it at home,” the young housewife answered simply. Who
can estimate the chapters of domestic woe that would never be
written if more mothers allowed their daughters to “grow into”
housekeeping naturally!

There can be no question but that in a large majority of cases
the American woman has too much work for an ideal home life, and
her soul may thirst for deeper draughts of intellectual stimulant than
her scant leisure will permit, but whether or not she is a drudge depends
upon herself. Drudgery can never be anything but a subjective
condition, and to call a happy, contented woman of culture and
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education a drudge is an unwarranted paradox. To even a keen-minded college woman the most ordinary kitchen duties may be a blessing if done with whole hearted zest because they are done for her home.

In many instances the young married woman must choose between the luxury of books, pictures and travel and the luxury of a servant, and the chances are, other things being equal, that she will choose the former. This may be largely due to the servant question as it is now before us, high wages and poor service in the greater number of cases, and sometimes no service available at any price. Perhaps when careful, conscientious manual labor is accorded the dignity it should receive, by example as well as precept, the present difficulties in the problem will assume mere vague outlines preparatory to vanishing, and none can better set an example of this high-mindedness than our educated women.

It chanced that I was discussing this question with an elderly friend who had been obliged on account of ill health in her family to leave the dear New England home with its comforts and luxuries and go to far California, where a more primitive life made efficient domestic service quite impossible. "I think I must breathe a confession to you," she said. "I can see now how foolish I was, but at the time I rebelled inwardly very often at having to use my time and strength in work which the rawest Irish maid might have done as well. I have learned to look at it differently since, and to realize the value of experience in housework."

Shortly after this conversation I was visiting a college friend who was cozily keeping house in a city flat, having one small son to fill up much of her time aside from housework. To her I broached the subject of homemaking versus drudgery. "Well, there's a lot of truth in it," she said with a laugh that belied her words, "but I find that if a woman really thirsts to keep up her reading and music she can find time for a lot of it."

Another college friend went to live in the far West after her marriage. She wrote that she was not very homesick because her various duties kept her mind healthfully occupied to the exclusion of more dangerous subjects. "I've been reading a good deal, too," she added, "for there isn't so very much work keeping house for just Robert and me." A servant would obviously have been so much extra lumber in the home, and if she had postponed her marriage until her husband had become firmly established in his profession and was able to take her into a spacious home with its retinue of servants and its troop of social obligations, who can estimate the loss in companionship during those years of waiting?
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THE wife of the country minister, especially in the West, has become proverbial for her deft versatility in meeting the many demands made upon her, but the appellation “drudge” surely does not belong to her. I have in mind now a college woman who, after several years of graduate study, became the wife of a clergyman, whose first charge was a small village parish. It was her particular pride to do her own housework and to do it carefully, and yet to so plan it that there should be time for her modest but numerous social duties and leisure for reading and conversation, to keep the rust out of her brain, as she put it. She was too wise to worry over a fleck of dust on the piano when other more important duties had taken her time, and I think this is the usual attitude of the sensible college woman toward excessive concern in minor details. Otherwise her college education has failed to give her the proper perspective and balance between essentials and non-essentials.

The burdens and pleasures of these homes fall upon husband and wife alike for each is purposed to be a helpmate to the other as they face life together. A man with his own way to make, unaided by inherited property, must count upon years of work and waiting even after his necessarily long preparation has been completed before he can fully equip a home. But if he asks a woman to share his modest income, and if she, with her eyes open, willingly and even gladly goes with him and with her own hands does the work of the home, and if, after years of toil, she still grows radiant when talking of it, why should she be thought of as a strangely undegenerate but forlorn example of an educated American woman? Manual labor scorned because it is manual labor is an artificial standard unworthy of an American.

If America’s educated women choose to be happy in their simple cultured life, free from cumbersome Old World conventions and traditions, who shall pity them? Who shall force upon them the unwarranted title of drudge?