

THE WOMEN OF THE CÆSARS

I

WOMAN AND MARRIAGE IN ANCIENT ROME

MANY things that among the Greeks are considered improper and unfitting," wrote Cornelius Nepos in the preface to his "Lives," "are permitted by our customs. Is there by chance a Roman who is ashamed to take his wife to a dinner away from home? Does it happen that the mistress of the house in any family does not enter the anterooms frequented by strangers and show herself among them? Not so in Greece: there the woman accepts invitations only among families to which she is related, and she remains withdrawn in that inner part of the house which is called the *gynaeceum*, where only the nearest relatives are admitted."

This passage, one of the most significant in

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all the little work of Nepos, draws in a few, clear, telling strokes one of the most marked distinctions between the Greco-Asiatic world and the Roman. Among ancient societies, the Roman was probably that in which, at least among the better classes, woman enjoyed the greatest social liberty and the greatest legal and economic autonomy. There she most nearly approached that condition of moral and civil equality with man which makes her his comrade, and not his slave—that equality in which modern civilization sees one of the supreme ends of moral progress.

The doctrine held by some philosophers and sociologists, that military peoples subordinate woman to a tyrannical régime of domestic servitude, is wholly disproved by the history of Rome. If there was ever a time when the Roman woman lived in a state of perennial tutelage, under the authority of man from birth to death—of the husband, if not of the father, or, if not of father or husband, of the guardian—that time belongs to remote antiquity.

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When Rome became the master state of the Mediterranean world, and especially during the last century of the republic, woman, aside from a few slight limitations of form rather than of substance, had already acquired legal and economic independence, the condition necessary for social and moral equality. As to marriage, the affianced pair could at that time choose between two different legal family régimes: marriage with *manus*, the older form, in which all the goods of the wife passed to the ownership of the husband, so that she could no longer possess anything in her own name; or marriage without *manus*, in which only the dower became the property of the husband, and the wife remained mistress of all her other belongings and all that she might acquire. Except in some cases, and for special reasons, in all the families of the aristocracy, by common consent, marriages, during the last centuries of the republic, were contracted in the later form; so that at that time married women directly and openly had gained economic independence.

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During the same period, indirectly, and by means of juridical evasions, this independence was also won by unmarried women, who, according to ancient laws, ought to have remained all their lives under a guardian, either selected by the father in his will or appointed by the law in default of such selection. To get around this difficulty, the fertile and subtle imagination of the jurists invented first the *tutor optivus*, permitting the father, instead of naming his daughter's guardian in his will, to leave her free to choose one general guardian or several, according to the business in hand, or even to change that official as many times as she wished.

To give the woman means to change her legitimate guardian at pleasure, if her father had provided none by will, there was invented the *tutor cessicius*, thereby allowing the transmission of a legal guardianship. However, though all restrictions imposed upon the liberty of the unmarried woman by the institution of tutelage disappeared, one limitation continued in force—she could not make a will.



Engraving by Anstie Costantini

A ROMAN MARRIAGE CUSTOM

The picture shows the bride entering her new home in the arms of the bridegroom

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Yet even this was provided for, either by fictitious marriage or by the invention of the *tutor fiduciarius*. The woman, without contracting matrimony, gave herself by *coemptio* (purchase) into the *manus* of a person of her trust, on the agreement that the *coemptionator* would free her: he became her guardian in the eyes of the law.

There was, then, at the close of the republic little disparity in legal condition between the man and the woman. As is natural, to this almost complete legal equality there was united an analogous moral and social equality. The Romans never had the idea that between the *mundus muliebris* (woman's world) and that of men they must raise walls, dig ditches, put up barricades, either material or moral. They never willed, for example, to divide women from men by placing between them the ditch of ignorance. To be sure, the Roman dames of high society were for a long time little instructed, but this was because, moreover, the men distrusted Greek culture. When literature, science, and Hellenic philosophy were

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admitted into the great Roman families as desired and welcome guests, neither the authority, nor the egoism, nor yet the prejudices of the men, sought to deprive women of the joy, the comfort, the light, that might come to them from these new studies. We know that many ladies in the last two centuries of the republic not only learned to dance and to sing,—common feminine studies, these,—but even learned Greek, loved literature, and dabbled in philosophy, reading its books or meeting with the famous philosophers of the Orient.

Moreover, in the home the woman was mistress, at the side of and on equality with her husband. The passage I have quoted from Nepos proves that she was not segregated, like the Greek woman: she received and enjoyed the friends of her husband, was present with them at festivals and banquets in the houses of families with whom she had friendly relations, although at such banquets she might not, like the man, recline, but must, for the sake of greater modesty, sit at table. In short, she was

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not, like the Greek woman, shut up at home, a veritable prisoner.

She might go out freely; this she did generally in a litter. She was never excluded from theaters, even though the Roman government tried as best it could for a long period to temper in its people the passion for spectacular entertainments. She could frequent public places and have recourse directly to the magistrates. We have record of the assembling and of demonstrations made by the richest women of Rome in the Forum and other public places, to obtain laws and other provisions from the magistrates, like that famous demonstration of women that Livy describes as having occurred in the year 195 B.C., to secure the abolition of the Oppian Law against luxury.

What more? We have good reason for holding that already under the republic there existed at Rome a kind of woman's club, which called itself *conventus matronarum* and gathered together the dames of the great families. Finally, it is certain that many times in critical

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moments the government turned directly and officially to the great ladies of Rome for help to overcome the dangers that menaced public affairs, by collecting money, or imploring with solemn religious ceremonies the favor of the gods.

One understands then, how at all times there were at Rome women much interested in public affairs. The fortunes of the powerful families, their glory, their dominance, their wealth, depended on the vicissitudes of politics and of war. The heads of these families were all statesmen, diplomats, warriors; the more intelligent and cultivated the wife, and the fonder she was of her husband, the intenser the absorption with which she must have followed the fortunes of politics, domestic and foreign; for with these were bound up many family interests, and often even the life of her husband.

Was the Roman family, then, the reader will demand at this point, in everything like the family of contemporary civilization? Have



From the statue found at Pompeii. Now in the Museo Nazionale, Naples.

EUMACHIA, A PUBLIC PRIESTESS OF ANCIENT ROME

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we returned upon the long trail to the point reached by our far-away forebears?

No. If there are resemblances between the modern family and the Roman, there are also crucial differences. Although the Roman was disposed to allow woman judicial and economic independence, a refined culture, and that freedom without which it is impossible to enjoy life in dignified and noble fashion, he was never ready to recognize in the way modern civilization does more or less openly, as ultimate end and reason for marriage, either the personal happiness of the contracting parties or their common personal moral development in the unifying of their characters and aspirations. The individualistic conception of matrimony and of the family attained by our civilization was alien to the Roman mind, which conceived of these from an essentially political and social point of view. The purpose of marriage was, so to speak, exterior to the pair. As untouched by any spark of the metaphysical spirit as he was unyielding—at least in action—to every suggestion of the philo-

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sophic; preoccupied only in enlarging and consolidating the state of which he was master, the Roman aristocrat never regarded matrimony and the family, just as he never regarded religion and law, as other than instruments for political domination, as means for increasing and establishing the power of every great family, and by family affiliations to strengthen the association of the aristocracy, already bound together by political interest.

For this reason, although the Roman conceded many privileges and recognized many rights among women, he never went so far as to think that a woman of great family could aspire to the right of choosing her own husband. Custom, indeed, much restricted the young man also, at least in a first marriage. The choice rested with the fathers, who were accustomed to affiance their sons early, indeed when mere boys. The heads of two friendly families would find themselves daily together in the struggle of the Forum and the Comitia, or in the deliberations of the Senate. Did the idea occur to both that their chil-

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dren, if affianced then, at seven or eight years of age, might cement more closely the union of the two families, then straightway the matter was definitely arranged. The little girl was brought up with the idea that some day, as soon as might be, she should marry that boy, just as for two centuries in the famous houses of Catholic countries many of the daughters were brought up in the expectation that one day they should take the veil.

Every one held this Roman practice as reasonable, useful, equitable; to no one did the idea occur that by it violence was done to the most intimate sentiment of liberty and independence that a human being can know. On the contrary, according to the common judgment, the well-governing of the state was being wisely provided for, and these alliances were destroying the seeds of discord that spontaneously germinate in aristocracy and little by little destroy it, like those plants sown by no man's hand, which thrive upon old walls and become their ruin.

This is why one knows of every famous

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Roman personage how many wives he had and of what family they were. The marriage of a Roman noble was a political act, and noteworthy; because a youth, or even a mature man, connecting himself with certain families, came to assume more or less fully the political responsibilities in which, for one cause or another, they were involved. This was particularly true in the last centuries of the republic,—that is, beginning from the Gracchi,—when for the various reasons which I have set forth in my "Greatness and Decline of Rome," the Roman aristocracy divided into two inimical parties, one of which attempted to rouse against the other the interests, the ambitions, and the cupidity, of the middle and lower classes. The two parties then sought to reinforce themselves by matrimonial alliances, and these followed the ups and downs of the political struggle that covered Rome with blood. Of this fact the story of Julius Cæsar is a most curious proof.

The prime reason for Julius Cæsar's becoming the chief of the popular party is to be found

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neither in his ambitions nor in his temperament, and even less in his political opinions, but in his relationship to Marius. An aunt of Cæsar had married Caius Marius, the modest bankrupt farmer of revenues, who, having entered politics, had become the first general of his time, had been elected consul six times, and had conquered Jugurtha, the Cimbri, and the Teutons. The self-made man had become famous and rich, and in the face of an aristocracy proud of its ancestors, had tried to ennoble his obscure origin by taking his wife from an ancient and most noble, albeit impoverished and decayed, patrician family.

But when there broke out the revolution in which Marius placed himself at the head of the popular party, and the revolution was overcome by Sulla, the old aristocracy, which had conquered with Sulla, did not forgive the patrician family of the Julii for having connected itself with that bitter foe, who had made so much mischief. Consequently, during the period of the reaction, all its members were looked upon askance, and were suspected and

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persecuted, among them young Cæsar, who was in no way responsible for the deeds of his uncle, since he was only a lad during the war between Sulla and Marius.

This explains how it was that the first wife of Cæsar, Cossutia, was the daughter of a knight; that is, of a financier and revenue-farmer. For a young man belonging to a family of ancient senatorial nobility, this marriage was little short of a *mésalliance*; but Cæsar had been engaged to this girl when still a very young man, at the time when, the alliance between Marius and the knights being still firm and strong, the marriage of a rich knight's daughter would mean to the nephew of Marius, not only a considerable fortune, but also the support of the social class which at that moment was predominant. For reasons unknown to us, Cæsar soon repudiated Cossutia, and before the downfall of the democratic party he was married to Cornelia, who was the daughter of Cinna, the democratic consul and a most distinguished member of the party of Marius. This second marriage, the causes of which

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must be sought for in the political status of Cæsar's family, was the cause of his first political reverses. For Sulla tried to force Cæsar to repudiate Cornelia, and in consequence of his refusal, he came to be considered an enemy by Sulla and his party and was treated accordingly.

It is known that Cornelia died when still very young, after only a few years of married life, and that Cæsar's third marriage in the year 68 B.C., was quite different from his first and second, since the third wife, Pompeia, belonged to one of the noblest families of the conservative aristocracy—was, in fact, a niece of Sulla. How could the nephew of Marius, who had escaped as by miracle the proscriptions of Sulla, ever have married the latter's niece? Because in the dozen years intervening between 80 and 68, the political situation had gradually grown calmer, and a new air of conciliation had begun to blow through the city, troubled by so much confusion, burying in oblivion the bloodiest records of the civil war, calling into fresh life admiration for Marius, that hero who

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had conquered the Cimbri and the Teutons. In that moment, to be a nephew of Marius was no longer a crime among any of the great families; for some, on the contrary, it was coming to be the beginning of glory. But that situation was short-lived. After a brief truce, the two parties again took up a bitter war, and for his fourth wife Cæsar chose Calpurnia, the daughter of Lucius Calpurnius Piso, consul in 58, and a most influential senator of the popular party.

Whoever studies the history of the influential personages of Cæsar's time, will find that their marriages follow the fortunes of the political situation. Where a purely political reason was wanting, there was the economic. A woman could aid powerfully a political career in two ways: by ably administering the household and by contributing to its expenses her dower or her personal fortune. Although the Romans gave their daughters an education relatively advanced, they never forgot to inculcate in them the idea that it was the duty of a woman, especially if she was nobly born, to know all

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the arts of good housewifery, and especially, as most important, spinning and weaving. The reason for this lay in the fact that for the aristocratic families, who were in possession of vast lands and many flocks, it was easy to provide themselves from their own estates with the wool necessary to clothe all their household, from masters to the numerous retinue of slaves. If the *materfamilias* knew sufficiently well the arts of spinning and weaving to be able to organize in the home a small "factory" of slaves engaged in such tasks, and knew how to direct and survey them, to make them work with zeal and without theft, she could provide the clothing for the whole household, thus saving the heavy expense of buying the stuffs from a merchant—notable economy in times when money was scarce and every family tried to make as little use of it as possible. The *materfamilias* held, then, in every home, a prime industrial office, that of clothing the entire household, and in proportion to her usefulness in this office was she able to aid or injure the family.

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More important still were the woman's dower and her personal fortune. The Romans not only considered it perfectly honorable, sagacious, and praiseworthy for a member of the political aristocracy to marry a rich woman for her wealth, the better to maintain the luster of his rank, or the more easily to fulfil his particular political and social duties, but they also believed there could be no better luck or greater honor for a rich woman than for this reason to marry a prominent man. They exacted only that she be of respectable habits, and even in this regard it appears that, during certain tumultuous periods, they sometimes shut one eye.

Tradition says, for example, that Sulla, born of a noble family, quite in ruin, owed his money to the bequest of a Greek woman whose wealth had the most impure origin that the possessions of a woman can possibly have. Is this tradition only the invention of the enemies of the terrible dictator? In any event, how people of good standing felt in this matter in normal times is shown by the life of Cicero.

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Cicero was born at Arpino, of a knightly family, highly respectable, and well educated, but not rich. That he was able to pursue his brilliant forensic and political career, was chiefly due to his marriage to Terentia, who, although not very rich, had more than he, and by her fortune enabled him to live at Rome. But it is well known that after long living together happily enough, as far as can be judged, Cicero and Terentia, already old, fell into discord and in 46 B.C. ended by being divorced. The reasons for the divorce are not exactly clear, but from Cicero's letters it appears that financial motives and disputes were not wanting. It seems that during the civil wars Terentia refused to help Cicero with her money to the extent he desired; that is to say, at some tremendous moment of those turbulent years she was unwilling to risk all her patrimony on the uncertain political fortune of her husband.

Cicero's divorce, obliging him to return the dower, reduced him to the gravest straits, from which he emerged through another marriage.

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He was the guardian of an exceedingly rich young woman, named Publilia, and one fine day, at the age of sixty-three, he joined hands with this seventeen-year-old girl, whose possessions were to rehabilitate the great writer.

THIS conception of matrimony and of the family may seem unromantic, prosaic, materialistic; but we must not suppose that because of it the Romans failed to experience the tenderest and sweetest affections of the human heart. The letters of Cicero himself show how tenderly even Romans could love wife and children. Although they distrusted and combated as dangerous to the prosperity and well-being of the state those dearest and gentlest personal affections that in our times literature, music, religion, philosophy, and custom have educated, encouraged, and exalted, as one of the supreme fountains of civil life, should we therefore reckon them barbarians? We must not forget the great diversity between our times and theirs. The confidence which modern men repose in love as a principle, in its

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ultimate wisdom, in its beneficial influence on the affairs of the world; in the idea that every man has the right to choose for himself the person of the opposite sex toward whom the liveliest and strongest personal attraction impels him—these are the supreme blossoms of modern individualism, the roots of which have been able to fasten only in the rich soil of modern civilization.

The great ease of living that we now enjoy, the lofty intellectual development of our day, permit us to relax the severe discipline that poorer times and peoples, constrained to lead a harder life, had to impose upon themselves. Although the habit may seem hard and barbarous, certainly almost all the great peoples of the past, and the majority of those contemporary who live outside our civilization, have conceived and practised matrimony not as a right of sentiment, but as a duty of reason. To fulfil it, the young have turned to the sagacity of the aged, and these have endeavored to promote the success of marriage not merely to the satisfaction of a single passion, usually as brief

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as it is ardent, but according to a calculated equilibrium of qualities, tendencies, and material means.

The principles regulating Roman marriage may seem to us at variance with human nature, but they are the principles to which all peoples wishing to trust the establishment of the family not to passion as mobile as the sea, but to reason, have had recourse in times when the family was an organism far more essential than it is to-day, because it held within itself many functions, educational, industrial, and political, now performed by other institutions. But reason itself is not perfect. Like passion, it has its weakness, and marriage so conceived by Rome produced grave inconveniences, which one must know in order to understand the story, in many respects tragic, of the women of the Cæsars.

The first difficulty was the early age at which marriages took place among the aristocracy. The boys were almost always married at from eighteen to twenty; the girls, at from thirteen to fifteen. This disadvantage is to be found

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in all society in which marriage is arranged by the parents, because it would be next to impossible to induce young people to yield to the will of their elders in an affair in which the passions are readily aroused if they were allowed to reach the age when the passions are strongest and the will has become independent. Hardly out of childhood, the man and the woman are naturally more tractable. On the other hand, it is easy to see how many dangers threatened such youthful marriages in a society where matrimony gave to the woman wide liberty, placing her in contact with other men, opening to her the doors of theaters and public resorts, leading her into the midst of all the temptations and illusions of life.

The other serious disadvantage was the facility of divorce. For the very reason that matrimony was for the nobility a political act, the Romans were never willing to allow that it could be indissoluble; indeed, even when the woman was in no sense culpable, they reserved to the man the right of undoing it at any time he wished, solely because that particular mar-

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riage did not suit his political interests. And the marriage could be dissolved by the most expeditious means, without formality—by a mere letter! Nor was that enough. Fearing that love might outweigh reason and calculation in the young, the law granted to the father the right to give notice of divorce to the daughter-in-law, instead of leaving it to the son; so that the father was able to make and unmake the marriages of his sons, as he thought useful and fitting, without taking their will into account.

The woman, therefore, although in the home she was of sovereign equality with the man and enjoyed a position full of honor, was, notwithstanding, never sure of the future. Neither the affection of her husband nor the stainlessness of her life could insure that she should close her days in the house whither she had come in her youth as a bride. At any hour the fatalities of politics could, I will not say, drive her forth, but gently invite her exit from the house where her children were born. An ordinary letter was enough to annul a marriage.

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So it was that, particularly in the age of Cæsar, when politics were much perturbed and shifting, there were not a few women of the aristocracy who had changed husbands three or four times, and that not for lightness or caprice or inconstancy of tastes, but because their fathers, their brothers, sometimes their sons, had at a certain moment besought or constrained them to contract some particular marriage that should serve their own political ends.

It is easy to comprehend how this precariousness discouraged woman from austere and rigorous virtues, the very foundation of the family; how it was a continuous incitement to frivolity of character, to dissipation, to infidelity. Consequently, the liberty the Romans allowed her must have been much more dangerous than the greater freedom she enjoys to-day, since it lacked its modern checks and balances, such as personal choice in marriage, the relatively mature age at which marriages are nowadays made, the indissolubility of the matrimonial contract, or, rather, the many and diverse restrictions placed upon divorce, by

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which it is no longer left to the arbitrary will or the mere fancy of the man.

In brief, there was in the constitution of the Roman family a contradiction, which must be well apprehended if one would understand the history of the great ladies of the imperial era. Rome desired woman in marriage to be the pliable instrument of the interests of the family and the state, but did not place her under the despotism of customs, of law, and of the will of man in the way done by all other states that have exacted from her complete self-abnegation. Instead, it accorded to her almost wholly that liberty, granted with little danger by civilizations like ours, in which she may live not only for the family, for the state, for the race, but also for herself. Rome was unwilling to treat her as did the Greek and Asiatic world, but it did not on this account give up requiring of her the same total self-abnegation for the public weal, the utter obliviousness to her own aspirations and passions, in behalf of the race.

This contradiction explains to us one of the fundamental phenomena of the history of

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Rome—the deep, tenacious, age-long puritanism of high Roman society. Puritanism was the chief expedient by which Rome attempted to solve the contradiction. That coercion which the Oriental world had tried to exercise upon woman by segregating her, keeping her ignorant, terrorizing her with threats and punishments, Rome sought to secure by training. It inculcated in every way by means of education, religion, and opinion the idea that she should be pious, chaste, faithful, devoted alone to her husband and children; that luxury, prodigality, dissoluteness, were horrible vices, the infamy of which hopelessly degraded all that was best and purest in woman. It tried to protect the minds of both men and women from all those influences of art, literature, and religion which might tend to arouse the personal instinct and the longing for love; and for a long time it distrusted, withstood, and almost sought to disguise the mythology, the arts, and the literature of Greece, as well as many of the Asiatic religions, imbued as they were with an erotic spirit of subtle enticement.

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Puritanism is essentially an intense effort to rouse in the mind the liveliest repulsion for certain vices and pleasures, and a violent dread of them; and Rome made use of it to check and counterbalance the liberty of woman, to impede and render more difficult the abuses of such liberty, particularly prodigality and dissoluteness.

It is therefore easy to understand how this puritanism was a thing serious, weighty, and terrible, in Roman life; and how from it could be born the tragedies we have to recount. It was the chief means of solving one of the gravest problems that has perplexed all civilizations—the problem of woman and her freedom, a problem earnest, difficult, and complex which springs up everywhere out of the unobstructed anarchy and the tremendous material prosperity of the modern world. And the difficulty of the problem consists, above all, in this: that, although it is a hard, cruel, plainly iniquitous thing to deprive a woman of liberty and subject her to a régime of tyranny in order to constrain her to live for the race and not for

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herself, yet when liberty is granted her to live for herself, to satisfy her personal desires, she abuses that liberty more readily than a man does, and more than a man forgets her duties toward the race.

She abuses it more readily for two reasons: because she exercises a greater power over man than he over her; and because, in the wealthier classes, she is freer from the political and economic responsibilities that bind the man. However unbridled the freedom that man enjoys, however vast his egoism, he is always constrained in a certain measure to check his selfish instincts by the need of conserving, enlarging, and defending against rivals his social, economic, and political situation.

But the woman? If she is freed from family cares, if she is authorized to live for her own gratification and for her beauty; if the opinion that imposes upon her, on pain of infamy, habits pure and honest, weakens; if, instead of infamy, dissoluteness brings her glory, riches, homage, what trammel can still restrain in her

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the selfish instincts latent in every human being? She runs the mighty danger of changing into an irresponsible being who will be the more admired and courted and possessed of power—at least as long as her beauty lasts—the more she ignores every duty, subordinating all good sense to her own pleasure.

This is the reason why woman, in periods commanded by strong social discipline, is the most beneficent and tenacious among the cohesive forces of a nation; and why, in times when social discipline is relaxed, she is, instead, through ruinous luxury, dissipation, and voluntary sterility, the most terrible force for dissolution.

One of the greatest problems of every epoch and all civilizations is to find a balance between the natural aspiration for freedom that is none other than the need of personal felicity—a need as lively and profound in the heart of woman as of man—and the supreme necessity for a discipline without which the race, the state, and the family run the gravest danger. Yet this problem to-day, in the unmeasured

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exhilaration with which riches and power intoxicate the European-American civilization, is considered with the superficial frivolity and the voluble dilettantism that despoil or confuse all the great problems of esthetics, philosophy, statesmanship, and morality. We live in the midst of what might be called the Saturnalia of the world's history; and in the midst of the swift and easy labor, the inebriety of our continual festivities, we feel no more the tragic in life. This short history of the women of the Cæsars will set before the eyes of this pleasure-loving contemporary age tragedies among whose ruins our ancestors lived from birth to death, and by which they tempered their minds.