

OCTOBER 8, 1932



THE KING IS DEAD—LONG LIVE THE QUEEN!

A cartoon, by Rollin Kirby

Back to Ashtaroth

WOMAN: Theme and Variations. By A. CORBETT-SMITH. New York: Harrison Smith & Robert Haas. 1932. \$2.50.

Reviewed by ELMER DAVIS

MAJOR CORBETT-SMITH'S account of woman is in danger of not being appreciated as it deserves. Some of us instinctively distrust a man who writes about Woman, not women; and the distrust may be deepened by the publishers' announcement that he has been engaged in fourteen occupations and has written thirty-five books on twelve different subjects, besides nine musical compositions. With all that to keep him busy, when did he ever have time to find out about women? Yet he assures us that he knows his subject: "I shall account myself a normal man of action rather than a dispassionate observer where Woman is concerned. . . . I have ever sought and enjoyed her society to the full, whether as daughter, lover, comrade, wife, or mother." How does the Major do it? The only possible explanation is that he doesn't play bridge.

Nevertheless, he undoubtedly knows a great deal about women. Most of it, as he admits, has been said before; but usually overballasted with science or pseudo-science, or else vitiated by an eccentric viewpoint. Major Corbett-Smith combines shrewd observation and sound generalization with a thoroughly healthy emotional attitude; "understand Woman to love her better" is his slogan, and even after the Enlightenment of the past two decades his book could be read with profit by every young man who is going to get married, or not married as the case may be. It would be a better book if it were a third as long; the Major says most of what he has to say in his first two chapters and then goes right on. Also, he pauses frequently to give three hearty cheers for himself; but on the whole he deserves them.

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There is no mystery about women, he announces; a man who says that he does not understand them merely confesses that he has not had "the energy or the capacity or the time or the interest to study them sufficiently," or else he calls them incomprehensible because he is too vain to recognize their psychological superiority. But the Major, who has energy and capacity and time and interest, readily admits that he has found the key to woman's nature in humility. She is never quite sure of herself, in comparison with other women; but she is well aware of her superiority to man—a superiority due to her "perfect interplay and adjustment of mental and physical forces."

Woman (as such—plenty of women are exceptions) is the embodiment and highest product of Nature, the incarnation of the primitive life force. Man is Nature's enemy, but while he tries "to build up a working code of law, of social convention, of moral suasion, of scientific inquiry, woman remains self-contained, self-sufficing, and aloof." Of woman as of nature the three dominant characteristics are prodigality, healing power, and cruelty. She can spend herself, give herself, without reserve; but what she gives is not really herself after all. Men have risen to the heights or fallen to ruin because of the influence of women; but few women have ever taken men so seriously. Woman's gift for compartmenting her emotions enables her to combine a job with the management of a home better than man can ever do it; it also enables her to completely dissociate the sentimental and the physical in sex relations, when the situation requires it; and to pretend pity and tenderness, because stupid man expects it, when women really never feel those emotions at all.

"Woman's real conception of happiness is what misguided men would term a state of misery"—which only means that women do not like to be bored. Save them from boredom and you keep them alive; whether you call that condition happiness or unhappiness does not much matter; at least the ladies like it. But do not expect her to look at anything as a man does; conscience, like civilization, is a purely masculine invention. Woman lives by expediency; "her morality is unimpeachable—the end is held to justify the means. . . . In a broad sense Woman knows no such thing as 'illicit' love, any more than she recognizes traffic rules of the road as applying to her." Not only love but sex stories, amusing or merely indecent, are of man's life a thing apart; but "woman, the embodiment of sex, may be said to greet the obscene with a cheer."

These scattered excerpts may give you an idea of the Major's view of woman. It is not a new one; three thousand years ago nobody would ever have dreamed

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that woman in general (there were always exceptions) was anything else. The type was summed up and idealized in the lady who was known as Ashtaroth, or Ishtar, or Aphrodite Pandemos—lover and wife and mother, inexhaustibly fertile and serenely cruel, indispensable because she was life, for body and spirit too. But then came Greek androcracy, and Christian asceticism, and medieval romance, and Victorian sentimentalism, and finally early twentieth-century feminism. The true nature of modern woman has been overlaid with incrustations from all these periods, but you don't have to dig down very far to find that it is there.

What are we going to do with the modern Ashtaroth—incrustations and all? Recognize her for what she is, in the first place; but how to treat her is another matter, and even the Major does not seem to be very confident that he knows the answer. He believes in affairs—"love-friendships" he calls them—which are substantially Judge Lindsay's companionate marriages with the sensible amendment that the state has nothing to do with such relations unless there is a child. Yet marriage, in the Major's view—a true marriage, with children—must always be the highest and most satisfying relation; affairs are only a warming-up practice before the real game begins. But it is hard for a love-friendship to pass into a true marriage, for "the initial psychological outlook is vastly different" when children are not envisaged from the start. This is perfectly true, and it is a consideration commonly overlooked by the advocates of companionate marriage. But how is a young man, when he is first attracted to a woman, to know whether he wants her for three months or for a lifetime?

The Major falls back, at last, on a kind of despairing optimism; somehow, perhaps, the two divisions of the human race will learn to get along with each other. Regarding his own country he feels rather discouraged; modern England is a garden of lovely girls, and there are men enough to marry them; but the women constantly complain that the men have no enterprise. Woman has stepped into the spheres left unoccupied by decadent man, and has succeeded brilliantly in them; but that does not make her think any better of man, or much better of herself. Yet modern man may make modern woman happy if he will only understand her, and work at the job of learning to love her with the cool, scientific detachment that he would apply to any other job that was tremendously difficult and tremendously important; while woman can make man happy simply by being herself.

This seems sound enough; and a reviewer humbly conscious of his ignorance of a topic which Major Corbett-Smith

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understands so thoroughly is perhaps incompetent to offer any criticism. Still, it does seem that the incrustations should not be forgotten; the modern Ashtaroth is not quite like her ancient prototype; the pre-war feminist movement dragged the pendulum much too far backward, as anybody who was clinging to it knows; yet there was something in the ideas of those days, however the emphasis was misplaced. Women are people, even if they are women first and foremost. But the average male is not in much danger of underemphasizing the civilized and overemphasizing the primitive aspects of his private Ashtaroth, and this book might be a useful corrective. Let him first of all learn how to handle her as a woman, not as an epicene person, and all things else shall be added unto him.