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**In this Number—Four Serials—Five Stories—Six Special Features**


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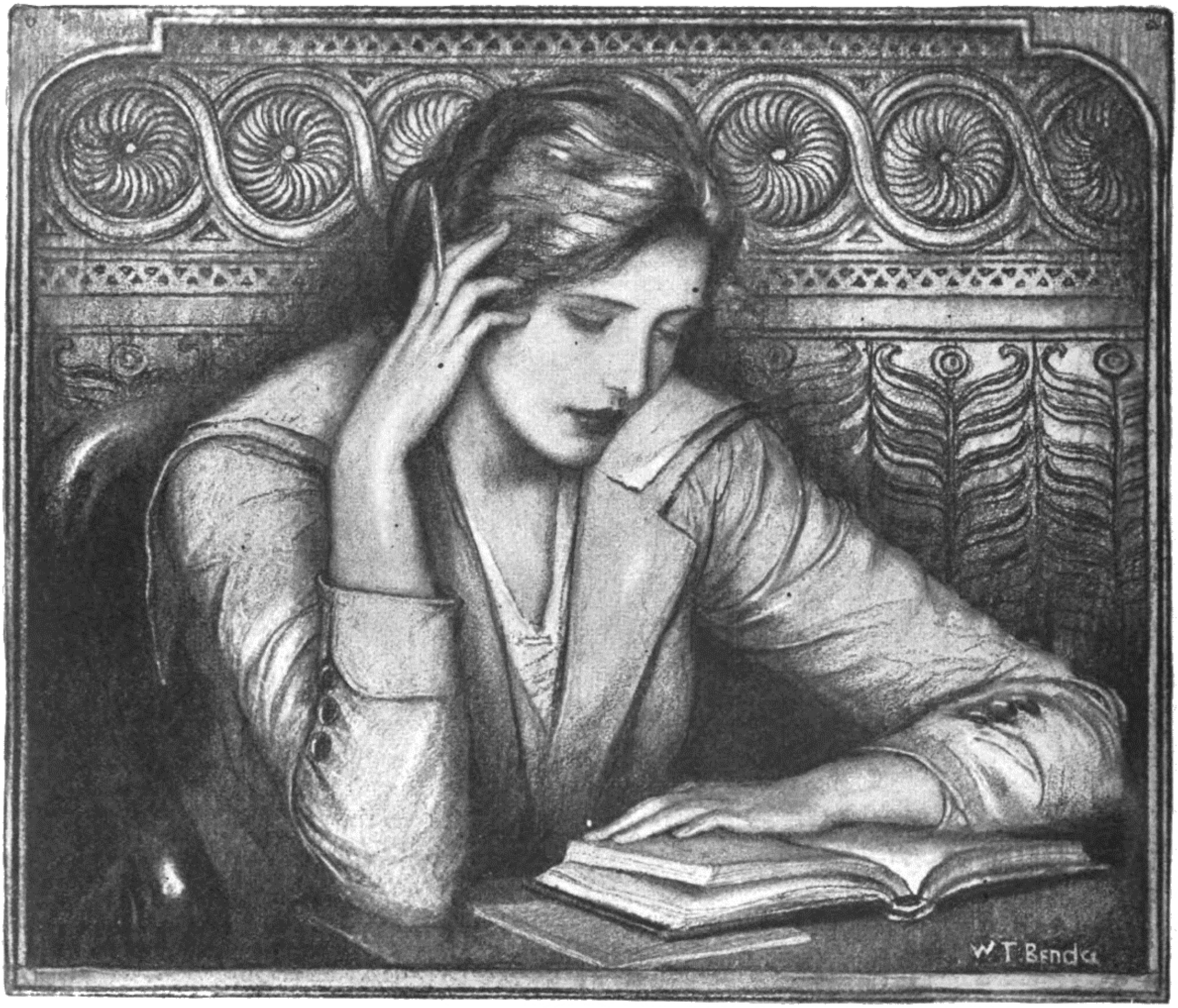



# *The* Importance *of*

## *A Discussion of the Modern*

By H. G.

Decoration by

WOMEN, Oswald Sydenham had come to hold, were egotists without personality, intensely egotists; beside theirs, the egotism of the more individualized, more preoccupied man is a feeble note. Women dressed themselves, surrounded themselves like caddis-fly larvæ, made up an effect. They achieved personality by accretion. They got about them husbands, lovers, households, devotional religions. By a natural necessity, they had to focus about themselves. Attention is a woman's supreme need; neglect her bitterest wrong. His aunt Phœbe, with her suffrage fanaticism, and his cousin, Lady Charlotte Sydenham, with her violent toryism, were indeed sisters under their skins; both women released, terribly at large. In them, one saw the truth about womanhood displayed. They dressed their parts and wore their opinions and were intolerant and overemphatic, because really there was nothing to them at all except their supreme, hungry need to be something. No man was ever so consumed by self-importance as Lady Charlotte; the feminism of aunt Phœbe was just self-assertion in general terms. Every woman is the priestess of her own shrine. Literature is full of Sternes and Heines and Chestertons. No woman has ever laughed at herself.

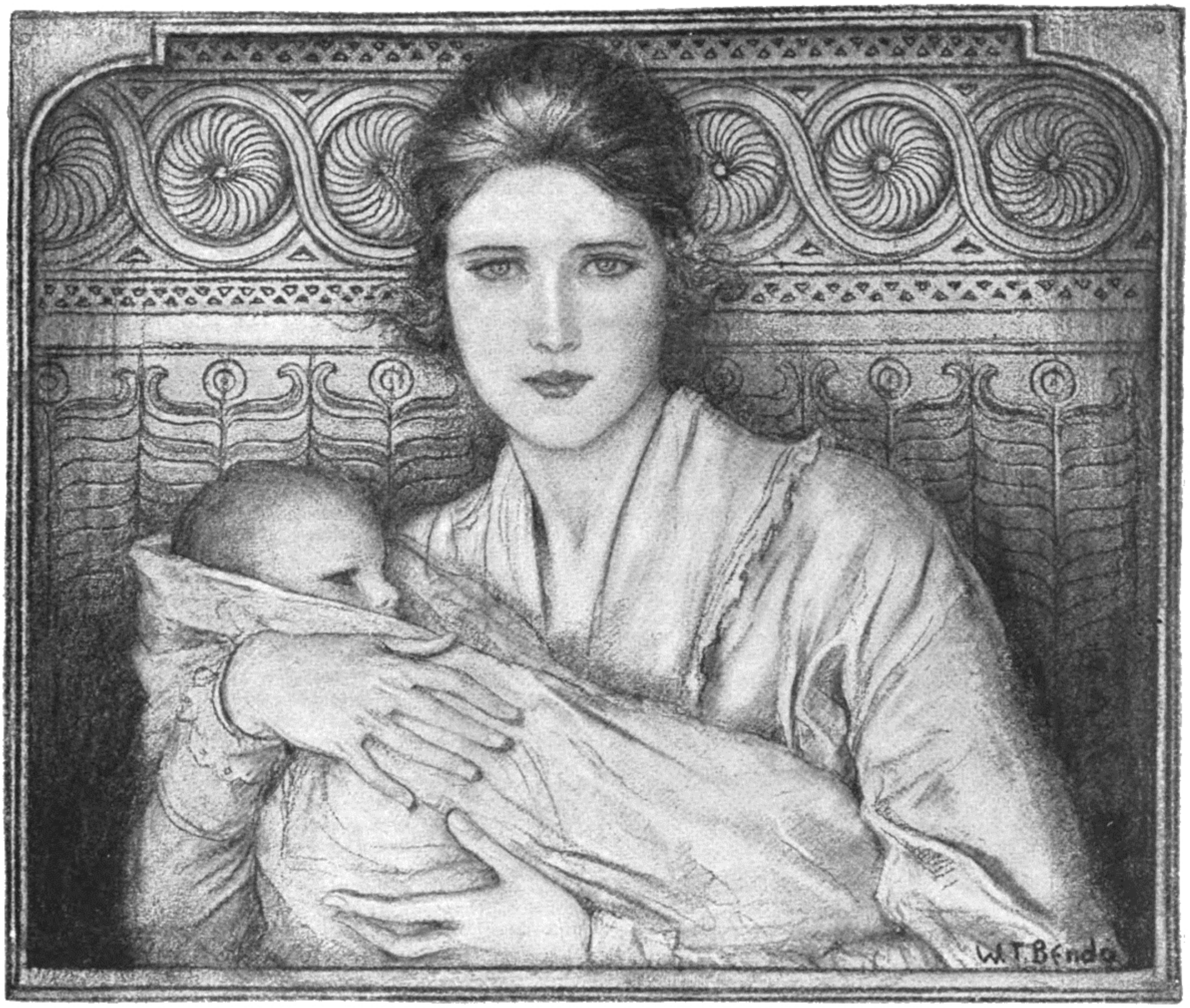
So Oswald's thoughts about women ran along the borderline between his conscious and his unconscious judgments. So far, he had never brought them up into the foreground to examine them. If he had been carefully interrogated, he would probably have been brought to the confession that the proper treatment of women is the native way in Central Africa, and that the Woman Question was civilization's worst failure. In Central Africa, there are no adult virgins, and you buy your women with cows and powder; you keep them busy, and, except in moments of humorous entertainment or uxorious appreciation, you do not attend to anything they have to say. If these were not Oswald's definite thoughts, they were, at least, drifting about near the surface of the silences with which he received aunt Phœbe's dissertations on life, on education, and the great part that the woman-soul was now about to play in human affairs.

"The Woman's soul leadeth us
Upward and on,"

said Aunt Phœbe, quoting Goethe.

"Oh, naturally," said Oswald, without joy.

It was his aunt Phyllis who gave Oswald's mind its first twist toward a better estimate of her sex. At first, she had impressed him as being only a sober and inaggressive version of aunt Phœbe. But she had what aunt Phœbe called "squaw-traits." The home grew brighter at her presence;




# Being *a* Woman

*Woman's Place in the World*

## Wells

W. T. Benda

the garden was visibly relieved and inspired by her; the two children looked to her. And once or twice it dawned upon Oswald that she was—as people were beginning to express it—pulling her sister's leg. One day, when he was talking to her about some small matter, he had a curious feeling—a suspicion, almost—as though his own leg was being pulled. After that, he noted what she was saying a little more carefully.

It was with aunt Phyllis that he discussed the general arrangements he was making for his two wards—a boy and a girl—and for himself, now that he was to settle in England for good. He purposed finding a little house for himself after he had found a school for Peter.

"I want to be near that boy," he said; "I want to see a lot of him."

"And about Joan?" asked aunt Phyllis, looking out of the window.

"Oh, we'll find a school somewhere handy for Joan."

"Any old school will do for Joan?"

"Well"—he regarded her warily—"it isn't so important, is it?"

"Because she's just a girl?"

Oswald had already had a serious bout with aunt Phœbe that day—a vast, silly argument. Probably he was in for another. But he made no effort to shirk the question.

"Well, the education of a girl isn't so important as a boy's," he said; "is it?"

Aunt Phyllis was visibly agitated.

"You hate arguing with women, Oswald," she said, and then, with a flash of unwonted disloyalty to her sister: "I think I understand why. We argue badly. We're a sloppy lot. I've got no illusions. But I think you're wrong about that. I think the education of a girl is just as important. Even more so."

Oswald exercised patience with her.

"After all," he said, "for the next generation or so, even if you get the vote, a part, possibly even the larger part of the work of the world—administration, research, and so on—will still have to be done by men."

"We drive you to irony," said aunt Phyllis. "But it isn't that. I *am* trying to be reasonable."

"Then, frankly, considering the part that men have to play and the part that women—most women—have to play, I don't think, as I said before, I don't think the education of women is so important as the education of men."

Aunt Phyllis was pink with mental excitement.

"I don't think that exhausts it," she said. "I've been thinking— She glanced over her shoulder, as if to reassure herself that aunt Phœbe was not at hand. "Oswald," she said, "women are imitative; they are (*Continued on page 121*)

# The Importance of Being a Woman

(*Continued from page 75*)

not original. They believe what they are taught. They need guides and prophets. Men have more initiative, more independence of mind."

"I didn't know you thought that."

"Don't *you?*"

"I think that what you say is, generally speaking, true."

"Exactly. And so it is more important that women should be well educated—educated, I mean, into the right ideas and right ways of thinking—than men. Even if you educate men wrong, some will find a right way, somehow. They explore. But girls and women stay where you put them."

"So that they are like the man who buried his talent. Why give it them?"

Aunt Phyllis looked perplexed and declined the analogy.

"Because the object of feminine education isn't the same as the object of a man's education, it doesn't follow that a woman shouldn't be educated. You educate a man to give him the best point of departure. You educate a woman to give her the best standpoint. You ought, I suppose, to give men methods and women results. Isn't that so? It is the women who will take care of the results of the men's initiatives—if you let them. Women are the conservative element in life. They keep homes together; they keep social usage going; they fag for men as sisters and wives and secretaries; they nurse and teach. They will keep to the old ways unless they are put into the new ways. It's their nature. If you don't teach them, then the habits and customs of the world will. What is the good of making the Peters fine and vigorous if the Joans are left to just pick up what they can? The Peters will have to live in a world of Joans."

She had the effect of delivering a long-considered discourse.

"You don't believe in this woman-soul that is going to do such wonderful things in the world as soon as it gets the vote?" said Oswald.

The manner of aunt Phyllis became furtive and confidential.

"Not a bit," she answered, in a stage whisper.

"Nor in the vote?"

"Yes," she said; "I do. That's why I'm convinced you are not taking Joan seriously. You're not seeing the vote business in the right light. You've got to take women as seriously as men. Not because they are wonderful, but because they are ordinary. All their importance lies in their ordinariness." Aunt Phyllis, in the search for self-expression, suddenly achieved a metaphor. "To educate men without educating women is like fishing for salmon without a gaff or a landing-net. You'll have lots of sport but no fish in the creel. You'll get any amount of discoveries, but you'll fix nothing. That's the point of it all."

This was a new point of view for Oswald. He intimated as much. He was beginning to think aunt Phyllis rather an exception among women.

"There is no tradition now on which a girl can grow up," said aunt Phyllis. "A hundred years ago, a woman knew her place as well as a man did. She had the same religion and habits and standards. The women knew the tradition better than the men. That's the woman's function. She hands on the traditions that keep a society together. That's been the case—oh, everywhere—" She paused, as if for confirmation.

"I think that's true of most of Africa as I've known it," said Oswald.

"You see, this clash that is coming on now is a strange thing in the world. It isn't to be treated lightly. Modern ideas—that is to say, modern men—are breaking up tradition. All the family ideas, all the old ideas of duty, all the old ways of

domestic economy and industry are being smashed up by men and men's inventions and organizations. And the girls grow up with the old instinct for cuddling into some ready-made shape of life, and for minding some one or something and for doing their work loyally. They look for the shape of life; they believe they are going to be given the shape of life, and the old shape of life—the tradition—isn't there. You think this revolt of women is a sort of fashion of silliness. You think it's absurd for women to think of being free. But, really, they are free already. They're worse than free; they're homeless. They're dutyless. Everything's gone but the sex side of them. They haven't a place in the world any more. They are trying to get a new one. Have you asked yourself what is to become of this Joan of ours?"

"I haven't," Oswald admitted.

"You've got ideas of what you mean Peter to be. What do you mean Joan to be?"

"But won't she marry?" said Oswald. "And we can't tell beforehand who she'll marry and what she'll have to do. If we train her as an explorer's wife, she'll probably marry a bank-clerk."

"No," said aunt Phyllis; "she'll probably marry an explorer. But, as a matter of fact, all these girls about us are being trained to be nothing at all. At the colleges, there's a sort of imitation male education. A hundred years ago, a girl's mother and her aunts and all her world, and all the books she was allowed to read, and the parson and her school-teachers and everything about her conspired to tell her definitely what she was, what was expected of her, what she had to do, what she wasn't to do on any account, and all the rest of it. She took rather more of the dead weight of life on her shoulders than the men did. That sort of thing suits the feminine mind. But who is going to tell Joan what she is, what is expected of her, and all the rest of it? She's going to be a very pretty girl. She's hot-tempered; she's subtle-minded, and she's got a streak of devil in her. She's going to grow up without anyone troubling to give her an idea of what she ought to do or be. Peter will go on learning until he's five and twenty; nothing can disturb that very seriously—he can go on working and learning all his life. But before Joan is fifteen, beauty and romance will take hold of her, and before she is eighteen, sex will be flooding her life. That's merely the springtime and blossom of life. It goes. What is to happen to her afterward?"

"I suppose it is rather indefinite," said Oswald, and added helpfully, "She'll have an income."

"We aren't educating girls for life," said aunt Phyllis, disregarding this consideration. "We're letting them loose. Even savages initiate."

Oswald nodded. He knew about that.

"Probably," aunt Phyllis went on, "she'll catch some young man. Some Peter. And, you know, you haven't given it much thought so far—*some Joan will capture your Peter.* She'll mean an awful lot to him."

"Um," said Oswald, reflecting on the experiences of his own youth.

"She will have no sense of duty to him, and neither of them will have much sense of duty to things in general. Sex will be the link between them. Sex and amusements. The only links. She won't be trained to do her own work side by side with his. She won't have any work of her own to do. The more important his work and mind are to the world, the more irrelevant she'll be. The more in his way. She'll have no idea of any purpose in life except herself as a purpose, that is to say, adornment, entertainment, his attention—or, at least, some man's attention. And if she misses her catch, can you blame her if at thirty-five she becomes rather a queer and cranky figure, racked by the jangling of disappointed instincts, trying to find her place in life by talking mysteriously about the woman-soul and the vote?" Aunt Phyllis had done. "You see?" she said rather lamely.

He saw.

"These are ideas," he said; "certainly they are ideas." He got up and walked to the window and stood looking out into the garden. "Of course it is true—education, seen properly, is the world of men or the state or the community—say the community—explaining itself to the young. Education states what your place is, equips you for it, or, rather, not place—no; say *possibilities.* Education should be initiation. Initiation—your point of view is a new one to me, and it attracts me. And it certainly establishes a case for attending to Joan's education. I see the point of that now. No doubt women are much less original than men. No doubt of it. They are bound to take a color. They haven't color ingrain. And so it's most important

to see they get the right color, rich and good. Simply because of their lack of initiative."

Aunt Phyllis nodded her head assentingly. Her expression was that of a small nervous mother who has just administered a powder to a large healthy child, and isn't quite sure whether it will stay down.

"Of course," said Oswald abruptly, "this means just doubling my job. As it is"—he turned on aunt Phyllis almost as if she was to blame—"I haven't yet found the shadow of a decent school for Peter."