The Goddesses in Our Midst

By R. Le Clerc Phillips

Is the young girl whom America, of all civilized nations, has deified, worthy of the high place accorded her at the expense of maturer women?

Why, certainly, there are goddesses among us here in America, although I know of none elsewhere. Their cult is firmly established and is even growing. Every visiting European has noted it, and many of them have publicly commented on it, never failing to express astonishment at the extent to which the cult has obtained.

Native Americans, too, have from time to time made observations of a slightly disparaging nature; nevertheless, the goddesses step more proudly than ever, and their cult continues to flourish.

Of course, I allude to the young unmarried girls of this country and the strange, entirely American attitude towards them — girls so immature mentally that sensible conversation with them is altogether out of the question; girls so ignorant of reality that they actually believe their life will be a fairy story; girls so egotistic in their pride of youth that even the egotism of young men pales when confronted with it.

Girls have some value everywhere, even in such regions as Papua and Patagonia. But among civilized races it is only in the United States that they are prized for what they are more than for the promise of what they will become when time has matured the rawness of extreme youth.

I have said that visiting foreigners have commented on the phenomenon with astonishment. Who has not read these comments in the endless stream of books that relate Europeans' impressions of this country? I do not say that they are always severely critical of the young American girl, but I do say that they invariably express surprise at the immense amount of attention she receives. Take, for instance, the case of the late W. L. George, who was considered an authority on women — whatever that may be. In his *Hail, Columbia* he does not hesitate to say some rather candid things about the American girl, whom, it is plain, he did not much admire, notwithstanding that he was extremely genial and friendly in his attitude toward this country as a whole.

"One of the most interesting features of the American woman

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question," he writes, "is the supremacy of the girl. In Europe the girl hardly counts at all. . . . It is a remarkable thing in an American summer hotel to see the owners of automobiles filling their cars with young girls, while the young matrons are left behind. Yet the young married woman is far more attractive, far more amusing than the bread-and-butter miss. Except in rather fast circles, she seems in America to be almost entirely ignored. Everything goes to the girl — money for college, for training, for social consideration; she is encouraged to waywardness, as if men took a delight in her freshness, her mischievousness, and enjoyed her youthful petulance. It is rather regrettable in a way, for it leads to the conclusion that the American woman's good time is rather short. . . . I do believe that a certain hardness must afflict the American girl, owing to excess of good things which she enjoys very early and very easily. . . . I confess that I don't like her as well as the American married woman, who has been reduced by work and difficulties to a state devoid of petulance."

THE late Professor Hugo Münsterberg was less outspoken but possibly a good deal more uneasy than the English novelist.

"The foreigner," he wrote, "cannot see these charming American girls without a constant feeling that there is something unhealthy in their nervous make-up, an over-irritation, a pathological tension not desirable for the woman who is preparing herself to be the mother of healthy children. . . . The American system (of female education) has the tendency to feminize the whole higher culture, and thus to injure the national civilization itself."

But for real, outspoken severity, we must turn to Max Nordau, whose book *Degeneration* created a great stir in its day. (I quote Nordau, whose comments were made a good many years back, to indicate that the phenomenon I am discussing is not just a thing of today, but is apparently a permanent aspect of American life.)

"THE excessive love of her own person," wrote Nordau, "is cultivated systematically. The American man has raised her to the rank of mistress and sovereign absolute in whose service he spends himself with docility and joy. He has built temples and altars for her and has placed her, like a goddess, on a pedestal. But one must be a real goddess to stand incense, genuflexions, idolatry, for if not vanity becomes monstrously inflated. The American woman is a mortal and she pays the price of her deification. Her feelings vanish and her soul becomes impoverished in proportion as her jewel case increases in value. . . . It is comprehensible why the European novelists and dramatists have passed her over. She does not interest them and never will interest them so long as she remains what she is."

Let us analyze the assets and, daring though it may be, also the inadequacies of these modern goddesses. It is, of course, bold on my part even to suggest that goddesses have failings or shortcomings, but if I did not think so there would be

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no point in this paper. But at the same time, no one is readier than I to admit their assets. Let us, then, begin.

THE first and chief asset of our goddesses is, beyond all question, their physical freshness. This freshness is the exclusive prerogative of youth and no beauty shop in the world can duplicate it and would not pretend to if only the mass of women had a little more sense about these things. This freshness confers a smoothness of skin, a brightness of expression and, as a rule, a slenderness of body of which it would be absurd to deny the value to a woman. All men admire these things, and, as a consequence, all normal women desire to have them, whether they acknowledge it or not. Let us, then, admit at once that the physical freshness of the goddesses is no mean asset.

I have said that it is the first and the chief of their assets. What are the others? Frankly, I do not know. I have cudgelled my brains to find them, but I cannot. Unless, indeed, one chooses to count the high spirits of the goddesses as an asset. Perhaps they are; but I hesitate to do more than merely suggest them, seeing that there have been for some years past such violent outcries concerning the behavior that has resulted from their possession. Of course, no one denies that high spirits are an asset when controlled by a knowledge of life and an acquaintance with reality. But these are precisely what young girls lack, and lack in a very marked degree. What else is there, then, that young girls have and others have not?

Being unable to answer this question, I turn to a brief consideration of the inadequacies of the goddesses. Who will deny that young girls, taking them *en masse*, are really very insipid? Very young men may not find them so; but, then, very young men are none too pungent themselves. Old men, of course, find young girls piquant; but that, as every one knows, is merely because old men are old and young girls are young. And the rest of mankind? If it were not for their smooth skins, their lively expressions and their slender figures, is there any intelligent man who would go out of his way to seek the society of the goddesses? I doubt it. For, deprived of the pleasure of gazing on physical beauty, one is driven to fall back on conversation. And what do the goddesses talk about?

IN ONE of my jobs I used to amuse myself by listening to the conversation of the girl employees of the firm when they flocked to the washroom to renew their complexions and to wet their hair in order to bring out their "permanents" in full strength. I vow — I solemnly vow — that never once did I hear them discuss one single topic except hairdressing. If it was not a comparison of "permanents", then it was a lively discussion of the durability of marcels. Talk ran like this: "How long does yours stay in, Mamie?" "Ten days if the weather keeps pretty dry." "God, I'd say I was lucky if mine stayed in only five." And so on, like that, day after day, week after week, and presumably month after month until . . . the goddesses are goddesses no longer.

It may be argued that the con-

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versation of these clerks is no fair criterion of that of young girls in general. It is not. The young girls of higher social advantages speak with more refinement of accent and great correctness of grammatical expression. But does not their conversation remain essentially the same in substance?

Naturally, one cannot expect to find old heads on young shoulders, and certainly American goddesses are no worse in this respect than girls anywhere else. But their mental insipidity is surely in striking contrast to their pretenses.

IT WOULD probably come as a great surprise to the majority of them to hear that there exist some men — a minority, without question — who are so irked by the inanity of feminine youth that they do not hesitate to express a preference for what they call a woman of "sense," even though her figure is not so slender or her face so bright and lineless as those of an eighteen-year-old goddess. I suppose that the feeling of this minority is that even a man may become bored by a pretty face more quickly than by entertaining or interesting conversation. Indeed, it is the tragedy of beauty that one *does* get used to it if one is in contact with it fairly frequently, just as one becomes reconciled to a plain face if it is accompanied by a good disposition or a ready wit. Anyhow, I once heard a somewhat cantankerous middle-aged man exclaim, after having been forced to listen to an unusually terrible exhibition of conversational inanity on the part of a self-satisfied young goddess: "I know of only one living creature sillier than a girl and that is a sheep. The girl may show more sense in getting out of the way of automobiles, but from the point of view of conversation, the sheep is preferable. Its bleating is at least negative inanity."

NO DOUBT this critic of young girls was unduly harsh; but no dispassionate person of either sex will pretend that the conversation of girls is interesting except in the rarest instances. Indeed, the extreme vanity and self-complacency of the modern young girl sometimes lead her conversation to arouse in her listeners an attitude that is almost antagonistic — an attitude that is occasionally shared even by men, excluding, of course, the very young and the very old.

But what is most noteworthy about the modern goddesses is this: their vanity rests upon no accomplishment whatever. They are today probably a good deal less accomplished than their grandmothers, who could cook and sew and embroider and even keep house without uttering a single groan. True, the modern American goddess is more adept at outdoor sports; but her grandmother probably danced much more gracefully. Surely graceful dancing is a more valuable accomplishment than outdoor sports, in which women must always be defeated by men, while in grace they may, if they choose, reign supreme.

There is, indeed, something faintly ironical about this situation. It would seem that the less the girls have to boast about the more likely are they to assume the goddess attitude and to expect others to as-

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sume one of suitable humility. For, let the goddesses say what they will, good cooking and good housekeeping *are* worth while accomplishments. Anyone can smoke cigarettes; but not everyone can cook a really first-rate dinner — nor a second-rate one either, for that matter.

But there is more than irony in the situation. The inanity of the goddesses and their loss of what has hitherto always been considered as desirable in feminine accomplishment constitute social and intellectual failings. Moreover, in making a more or less complete assessment of our goddesses, we must not overlook the moral defects of their case. Now, the chief moral shortcoming of our deities is their gross materialism.

There is something particularly revolting about materialism in the very young. In the men of middle age and in the aging woman it does not shock so greatly. One merely feels that these have outgrown the raptures of youth and that reality has triumphed so far as their own experience of life is concerned. They want security; they want comfort; the men realize that a good dinner is a good dinner and the women that a dress from Chanel or Patou will make them look and feel better than a ready-made from a department store. They have had their dreams long ago and have awakened from them. In a word, their materialism is more or less a natural acquisition produced automatically by time.

But our deities do not dream. They are on the make from the start. They are out to exploit men. They expect men to pay, pay, pay. And the men pay, pay, pay, and do not seem to realize that they are being exploited. In Europe a well-bred girl does not dream of consistently utilizing a man to pay for meals, movies, theatre seats. If she does, it indicates that she hopes to marry him. Barefaced exploitation of men is left to the professional exploiters of men. But the American goddesses seem to think it the duty of men to pay, no matter how little they receive in return. In this respect they have usurped the prerogative of the courtesan without incurring the social stigma extended to the professional woman.

And the men submit, to such a degree has the cult of the goddesses attained. Cynically materialistic, monstrously greedy of amusements that cost money, vain and insipid in the intellectual sense to the last degree, they have yet succeeded in imposing themselves on their country in a manner inexplicable to the outsider. For they do not even assume a virtue when they have it not. They do not hide their materialism, but rather flaunt it. The other day I was lunching in a restaurant with two dowdy, respectable-looking married women sitting at the same table. In the course of conversation, the younger said to the elder in the most matter of fact tone imaginable: "Before I was married I took good care only to go with elderly men. The young ones are no good. They haven't anything to spend." And the elder woman gravely acquiesced.

An unlovely picture of modern feminine youth? Perhaps. But is it really too highly colored? If so, then why this unending stream of books,

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articles and pulpit sermons directed against the failings and offenses of the younger generation, and more particularly the feminine half of it? But even after allowing for a certain amount of prejudice against the goddesses in our midst, it still remains incomprehensible why, in modern America, very young women should play the gigantic rôle they do. It is well known that for some mysterious reason they possess a virtual monopoly of many jobs; hence the recent outcries of women over thirty deemed too old to type. But as this paper deals with the social and not with the economic aspect of the phenomenon, it is not necessary to do more than mention the fact.

WHAT is the explanation of the phenomenon? How is it that the American girl of today has succeeded in selling herself to a degree undreamed of by the girls of any other country? Why are very young American girls allowed to elbow older women out of places which properly belong to them? Why do they attract so much more social attention than married women?

To understand the full import of these questions, it is necessary to glance for a moment at the position of young girls in Europe. To Europeans, as I have already said, the absolute social predominance of young American girls has long been a source of wonder. The Frenchman, in particular — a highly sophisticated creature if ever there was one — has never found young girls very interesting. The married woman has captured his attention both in real life and in literature to an infinitely greater degree than the *jeune fille*, whom he finds insipid and intellectually uninspiring. In England, the young girl has more leeway and more admiration than in France. Nevertheless, to the American girl the English girl must always seem a poor, repressed, somewhat downtrodden creature, just as to the English girl, her American contemporary must seem an over-bold young person who needs to be taken down a peg or two. As for the rest of Europe, in no part of it does the young girl attain to anything approaching the position she holds in America. Her importance in society is infinitesimal in comparison with that of the older woman; and the European frankly finds incomprehensible a social order which gives débutantes more limelight and attention than it gives to married women.

Why are pages in American Sunday newspapers filled with the photographs of young girls of no particular beauty or social importance? Why are girls' luncheon parties chronicled? (As if they were worth any notice whatever!) How is the American girl's position to be explained?

I DO not know enough American social history to answer my own questions with any degree of certainty. I suspect, however, that the supremacy of young girls in this country is in some manner connected with the fact that this is a pioneer country, and there has always been a tendency to make much of women in pioneer countries. And yet this does not by any means explain the matter completely, for in pioneer countries all women are valued, and not only very young unmarried

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women. I do not say for a moment that older women have a poor position in the United States. Far from it, indeed. But I do say that, compared with that of young girls, it is distinctly inferior.

At any rate, even if inexplicable, the supremacy of the goddesses is a fact today. But what of their future? Time does not stand still even for goddesses, and in a few short years they will find that they are either married or faded. In either case, they will be goddesses no longer. As to what they will be, it is better not to hazard an opinion. For with their youth gone, what will be left? Nerve, I suspect, but what beside? They have not deigned to cultivate the old-fashioned accomplishments of their grandmothers. Their intellectual interests have been a little meagre, to put the case politely. They will have no resources within themselves, and none of the adulation upon which they have flourished. I fear that many of the carefree young women of this age will in later years become the most discontented old women our race has ever known.

Gray Night

By Bernice Kenyon

All night, intrepid, tireless and serene,
I walk the earth and all the worlds beside;
All night the folded darkness opens wide
To let me pass unhurt, and step between
The balanced orbits, toward the vaguely seen
And nebulous streamings of the starry tide —
Discovering the unknown, and the allied
Unknowable, and all that may have been.

All night, closed in and gratified by sleep,
My body waits, and cares not to restrain
Its wayward being off upon the deep
And timeless glimmerings where space runs out —
Content to wait till day, and once again
Dim my discoveries in the light of doubt.

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