

## MADEMOISELLE L'INCOMPRISE.

By LILY WATSON.



AND who is she? There is scarcely a reader who does not know her well. Nay, it is more than probable that many a reader is identical with her; for she is not French, but English—not an individual, but a type, especially abundant in the great middle-class of English society. She does not, as a rule, conceal the fact that she considers herself *incomprise*, but proclaims it on her face, in her manner, and by the confidences she is only too ready to bestow on any acquaintance who appears sympathetic. She is, in plain English, the girl who either is or thinks herself misunderstood—by parents, guardians, or, in general terms, by her nearest relations who have charge and oversight of her life.

It is useless to ignore the fact that such a type exists, even in the happiest homes, and surely it is wise to face things as they are, examining them carefully in the hope that a remedy may be suggested, or a word of help uttered which shall be useful to parents and children alike.

There is, and rightly, a strong feeling of jealousy in English hearts over the sanctity of the Home. We are proud of the word and of the beautiful reality, paralleled, we are accustomed to say and to think, in no other country in the world. The ideal picture of father and mother surrounded by a group of adoring young people whose lives are bound up in theirs, and who scarcely know a separate wish, may be very charming; but human nature is human nature, and there are a great many cases where this ideal relation is marred, often by slight causes which might easily be removed.

It is not the object of this paper to deal with those sad exceptional instances where downright unhappiness arises from the introduction of alien elements into the family, or other reasons; nor can we enter into the whole wide question of women's occupation in the present day. We can only glance into the well-to-do, leisurely home, where there is no question of the daughters going out of necessity into the world, but where, from one cause or another, in spite of mutual love, relations are a little strained; where the interval of mutual independence or partial independence is a trying one. This may not interfere with the real groundwork of affection, but it is an undesirable state of things, sometimes preparing the way for a soured old-maidhood, or, if a happy marriage comes, causing the bride to look back with bitter regret; wishing she had been different during

those few never-to-be-recalled years between school and bridal. No girl can fully understand what she owes her mother till she herself becomes a wife.

The last five and twenty years have seen a wonderful development of public opinion with regard to woman's work, woman's culture, and woman's life in general, and new ideas are still seething and fermenting in the world of thought. Few social questions in the present day are more frequently asked than, What shall women do with their lives? What are they fitted to be? In what is the tradition of the past at fault? And all this stir and unrest cannot but powerfully affect the mental condition of the growing womanhood of our time.

"Far back, through creeks and inlets making,  
Comes silent, flooding in, the main."

These questions never agitated the minds of our grandmothers. Look at the sweet tranquil countenance in the picture which symbolises the girlhood of sixty or seventy years ago.

The *Zeitgeist* has not beckoned to *her*, with its weird, compelling finger, to step out of her calm, time-honoured surroundings. The beauty of a country English home as her environment, her flowers, needlework, and her Bible indicative of her chief employments, the sunlight falling on her modest, dainty form through the flickering foliage—all tell of a happy, sheltered, satisfied life; the tender innocence of her gaze seems to say she has never dreamed of any lot beyond that which from time immemorial has formed the woman's ambition. It is a lovely picture; but

"The old order changeth, yielding place to new,  
And God fulfils Himself in many ways."

We cannot help the altered conditions of our own time, even if we would; but it befits us so to live as not to lose the old-world charm, grace, and happiness of womanhood in the higher aspirations and deeper yearnings of to-day.

"Fine phrases of that sort are very easy to make!" some reader who herself is conscious of belonging to the *incomprise* class may impatiently exclaim. "But, after all, what am I to do? I love my parents dearly, and if illness or trouble came, I would do anything to help them; but somehow I don't get on at home. I am not understood one bit. I cannot be contented with my daily life."

Perhaps there is a strain on temper and forbearance because, as an able essayist has said, you and your parents are trying to live in an exhausted receiver!\* In other words, there is not enough food for heart and brain in your home-life to nourish you all. *You* have ceased to need the tendance of a child; your parents do not as yet need your care in return for that which they lavished upon you. This may be shown by an illustration. An energetic elder daughter who has passed a happy childhood comes home from her years of boarding-school brimful of good intentions, ready to shoulder all the cares of the household upon her youthful frame, to preside at the table, take up the housekeeping, look after the younger members of the family, and give her mother virtually nothing to do. Now the said mother, if she is in good health and in the prime of life, may not be ready to acquiesce in an arrangement which relegates her to an easy-chair or sofa,

and makes her a mere spectator of all active occupation. Strange though it may seem to a girl of eighteen, her mother, perhaps on the hither side of forty, feels still young; she is not by any means prepared to be laid on the shelf, and however grateful she may be for her daughter's good intentions, she is not anxious to see that young lady take her place behind the teapot, and affectionately regard her as an elderly personage whose active duties are over—a sort of Grand Llama, or figure-head of the household. Supposing this state of things to exist—and it is by no means uncommon in a well-to-do family where the mistress is not overtaxed—one of two contingencies is apt to arise. Either the emancipated schoolgirl full of zeal is baffled and checked, finding her good impulses thwarted, and sinks back into a condition of vexed discontent, saying to herself, "I am of no use—there is nothing for me to do in life;" or else, being allowed to usurp her mother, she quickly brings about, in her lack of experience, the disorder inevitable in the "two mistresses" style of things so abhorrent to the soul of the British domestic.

In either case she is sure to feel herself aggrieved and misunderstood; she meant to do so much good, and behold! there is no place for her. She is either, perforce, idle, or her efforts do harm. And yet she wanted to be so different! Her mother, too, remembering the delight of their past relationship, is troubled and bewildered that, somehow or other, the present falls short of their anticipation. She tries to make things right by planning amusements for her daughter, failing to perceive that what the latter wants is not pleasure, but work.

This is just an instance in which the conventional idea—that a girl's duty is bounded by "helping her mother"—is beside the mark altogether. And it works considerable mischief, for there is nothing more pitiable than the disappointment of an ardent young nature anxious to serve her generation to the best of her ability. If we might step behind the scenes, and whisper a word to this *incomprise* daughter, it would be, "Find some resource. There is not enough in your home to engross the energies of two women; then devote yours to something else." If the energetic girl takes to frittering away her time in trivial occupations just because she cannot supplant her mother in the ordering of the household, she will injure herself irretrievably.

She should look round for something that really wants doing, and, with her parents' approval, take it up, if only for part of the day, as her work in life—not "hang round" as a supernumerary at home from morning to night, with no keener interest than a new gown or a tennis-party; or she should take the advice given by the late Mark Pattison to Mrs. Humphrey Ward, and "specialise" in some one direction.

She has received a good all-round education, we will say, up to a particular point; then let her take up the one subject for which she may have taste or capacity, and cultivate it vigorously. If she can rise above the amateur standard, so much the better; if she can fit herself to earn her living in case of need by any one acquirement, better still. The intensely sad spectacle of maiden ladies, forced by reverse of fortune to earn their bread, having no powers wherewith to do it, competing for nominal salaries, or no salaries at all, in return for drudging work in alien homes, should, one would think, cause parents as well as daughters to reflect.

\* *Woman's Work and Woman's Culture*, Essay VIII.

It is scarcely necessary to say that we are not arguing against a daughter's acquiring a knowledge of household work. This can rapidly and easily be done by any girl of intelligence and observation living in a well-ordered home, without devoting many hours daily to the task. Neither does what we have said apply to any but households well-to-do and leisurely. The elder daughter in a poor or crowded family has not, as a rule, much need or opportunity to become *incomprise*, or speculate about her duty. We only plead against two, three, four, it may be half a dozen women trying to divide between them the work and interest sufficient for *one*, and then marvelling or fretting because heart and brain become impoverished, and life is empty.

There is another variety of "Mademoiselle l'Incomprise"—the girl of whom Aurora Leigh in her aunt's household is the type; the girl with tastes and capacities, artistic or literary, not recognised and not encouraged.

"I could not hide  
My quickening inner life from those at watch;  
They saw a light at a window now and then  
They had not set there; who had set it there?  
My father's sister started when she caught  
My soul agaze in my eyes. She could not say  
I had no business with a sort of soul,  
But plainly she objected—and demurred  
That souls were dangerous things to carry  
straight  
Through all the spilt saltpetre of the world."

Aunts are great in the pages of fiction at not understanding their nieces, from Aunt Fortune in the *Wide Wide World* to Aunt Hannah in *David Grieve*. One likes to think that motherhood brings the magic touch of sympathy with it. And yet a mother may be tender to her child, anxious to do the best for her, and as incapable as Mrs. Tulliver of understanding her special needs and abilities.

Well, if you are an embryo genius, conscious of artistic or literary talent, chafing against the domestic limitations that keep you in, you deserve sympathy. Only, because you are in your own esteem capable of doing all these great things by-and-by in life, don't fail in the *little* things laid ready to your hand. Don't look down on your parents; don't criticise them; but remember that the fact of their relationship to you should render them sacredly exempt. If they have risen from the ranks, and proudly given you a better education than they received themselves, don't turn their own benefits against them, and let them feel the sting of humiliation by seeing that you are ashamed of them. Not the highest **culture in the world** nor the finest genius can serve as an apology for lack in filial duty. Remember this; then seek what you can do to practise in a quiet way the gift of which you are conscious, pleading for further opportunities, and you will in all probability receive them if you go the right way to work. Only do not, in Byronic gloom, meditate on your own unappreciated powers; you will become morbid and disagreeable, and will have only yourself to blame if you end by becoming very

much misunderstood indeed. Take every legitimate means to develop your own faculties—and fortunately such means are now plentiful—but do not forget the respect and affection of a daughter.

Too much introspection is not good for anyone, and especially for girls on the threshold of womanhood. Therefore cultivate a wholesome, healthy mode of life; do not disdain plenty of outdoor exercise, and go in, if you can, for tennis, boating, swimming, and whatever develops your physical powers, while cultivating the mind and heart. Shun morbid sentimental literature as you would shun poison. Remember, too, that in all probability your parents are as anxious to see you active and content as you can possibly be to exert your faculties; and even aunts are not, as a class, wholly hardened. In plain English, do not sulk, but *act*, remembering the great souls who in all ages have triumphed over congenial circumstances by force of will.

There is one other, and a more serious form, in which the sense of being *incomprise* attacks the young. It is far from being infrequent—in fact, observation shows it to be remarkably common—and it has to do with religion. A girl of an earnest ardent spirit and true Christian zeal leaves school, is settled at home, and presently becomes sensible of religious unrest. The form of faith in which her parents brought her up ceases to satisfy her. She longs after some other form of worship; wants to identify herself with some other communion. Or she longs after wider opportunities of religious work; her parents' faith seems too tame and commonplace an affair to satisfy her zeal. If she could only have lived in the early ages of the Church and died a martyr—how delightful! But as this is impossible, she would like to be a missionary, under the most trying conditions, to the most degraded and savage of tribes. She dreams all day of this ideal, and is imagining herself as an apostle of light and love to the heathen, while she cannot be patient with a troublesome child for a couple of hours, and is irritated at any failure in the exquisite cleanliness and comfort of her well-appointed home. Or she would like to enter a sisterhood, become a deaconess—anything, everything out of the familiar religious round that seems so tame and uninspired.

Ought one to blame and ridicule this unrest? By no means. It is natural enough in an earnest nature. It belongs to the period of growth, and cries aloud for sympathy and right direction. To the ardent soul, anxious to rush into some other religious communion, or to find a larger sphere of religious work, I would say, first, Do not be in a hurry. Remember Milton's line—

"They also serve, who only stand and wait."

Do not lightly break up old and sacred associations. If your purpose is really dictated by principle, there will be opportunity given you to carry it out; but beware lest it proceed from mere frivolity, selfishness, or impulse.

It is not an edifying spectacle, that of a

grey-haired parent trudging alone to his wonted place of worship, while his daughters tear off in different directions, each after her favourite clergyman. One cannot help wondering how much of the true spirit of Christ there is in such proceedings! Let the recognised duties of daughterhood take their place. You may think you know a great deal better than your parents, yet remember Who "went down with them to Nazareth and was subject unto them." When past the age of childhood, if principle orders you to uproot old associations, do it; but be sure that it is principle, and not fancy.

And in the meantime, do not pose as a blessed martyr at home. Few things are more trying to flesh and blood than an aspect of sainted endurance. Out-and-out rebellion, though not to be recommended, is really better. And do not seize upon comparative strangers, pouring out to them confidences you deny to your own parents, and trying to create the impression that you are only hindered by parental despotism from the most devoted and saintly of careers! It is easy to talk like a nineteenth-century St. Elizabeth, but not so easy to act.

In the waiting-time—*do good*. This is a sovereign specific for the religious unrest of which we speak. Work for others in some way or another. If you do not care for the stereotyped employments of Sunday-school teacher or district visitor, there are now many other forms of doing good, in which so-called "secular" talents may be brought into use. Ally yourself with the nearest association for helping your own sex; try to befriend the little orphan servant from the workhouse by giving her what she wants—*one* human heart to mother and help her, to provide her with recreation, to save her from possible harm; help the toiling shop-girl by enlivening her leisure with books, music, amusement of a pure and elevating kind; visit the hospitals; and oh! if a few more kind pretty girls would only make it their work to brighten the cheerless, hopeless, dreariness of the workhouse infirmary—that sad harbour where the poor wrecks of life lie stranded; that grim waiting-hall of death!

This is not religious work, you may say. We might differ on that score; but religion, in your sense of the word, will sooner or later enter into it, and your own perplexities will be solved in trying to help others. There is one text full of light for those who are not "settled" in regard to their mode of faith and worship. "If any man will do His will, he shall know of the doctrine."

In conclusion, do all the good you can, and you will, in time, however *incomprise*, realise that "It is more blessed to give than to receive," even in the way of religious sympathy. And always be reverent. There is a beautiful dialogue of Plato, the *Protagoras*, which describes how of old Zeus, in distributing talents here and there among men, bade Hermes give reverence to every man, because without it he was useless and helpless to fulfil his due part in life. Let every girl, then, whatever may be the difficulties in her path, remember Reverence—reverence for her parents and for God.

