

THE CRITICAL GIRL

By Ruth Ashmore

SHE is met with too often in these days—this girl, whose first inclination is to find fault rather than to approve whatever is before her. Sometimes she is the college-bred girl who comes home to find fault with the things for which she cared most at one time. The people who were once nearest and dearest to her become subjects for criticism. She finds her home life tiresome, and she indulges in continual tirades against it. The chances are that it has been more than difficult to raise the money to allow her to attend college, and the proud father and loving mother have thought so much of having her at home again. But, alas, the home-coming is all very different from what they had anticipated. Away from the farmhouse she has, by occasional visits to one of her schoolmates, learned what beauty in decoration and furniture meant, and what is called the "best room" at home has simply become an object of ridicule. She corrects her younger brothers and sisters, who wonder if there is any way in which they can please her, until her mother apologetically reminds them that their sister knows so much more than they, and that they must not blame her for not being satisfied with their simple and quiet life.

THE VICE OF CRITICISM

IF anybody mentions a book or any great invention in her hearing this girl talks, as she thinks, very learnedly, making the speaker feel as if he knew nothing, and yet, very often, her own knowledge is superficial, and her criticism nothing but words, words, words. Her one desire is to get away from home. She thinks that out in the wide, wide world she would be appreciated. Sometimes she is allowed to go. She has cultivated so strongly the vice of criticism that even in the land that seemed to her the best of all she finds fault, and never realizes that there would be fewer faults in people and in surroundings if they were not reflections from her own ugly temper. Nine times out of ten she is a failure in life. She may have to go back to the old home; worn out, dissatisfied and unhappy, she sits around and finds fault all of her days, a burden to those who are bound to her by ties of blood, for she has long ago ceased to have anybody bound to her by ties of love. She is a terror to the entire neighborhood, which fears her sarcastic criticism and dreads her inciting in some boy or some girl the desire to go away to seek something which seems better because it is far from home. This is not because she is college-bred. That has nothing at all to do with it. She would have been exactly the same fault-finding, critical girl if she had never been sent to college, but having been there her mother writes to me, complainingly, asking what she is to do, and inquiring if the college has made of her daughter this unpleasant creature, and what would I suggest in the way of reformation. Work, I think, and work right in the home; work that will have such an effect upon her that the scales will fall from her eyes and she will see life as it is, and not as it appears through the green glasses of envy and criticism.

WITH HER SWEETHEART

OCASIONALLY, the critical girl is bright, and the vindictiveness of her unpleasant habit does not show itself at once, so that what she says is counted as clever, and men and women laugh at her, even though, occasionally, they feel the sharpness of her two-edged sword. Some day there comes along Prince Charming. For a while she forgets to be the critical girl and is just an ordinary one; she thinks she loves him, and when he asks her tells him so. Perhaps she is happy, but only for a little while. Then she begins to criticize. She says, either to her intimate friend or to her own heart, "Is he as clever as I want my husband to be? Is he as dignified as I want my husband to be? Is he as handsome as I want my husband to be? Is he as much interested in books as I should like him to be? Does he dress with absolute correctness? Is he always certain to say the proper thing at the proper time?"

Gradually, as time goes on, she annoys him by little remarks concerning these things. One day it is his scarf that does not suit her; perhaps, another day, it is his opinion of Egyptian antiquities to which she objects, and another day it is because she does not think he has done all that he should have done to convince his friends how intelligent she is. She never asks, "Am I good enough for him?"

LOVE IS NOT CRITICAL

SHE never says, "Am I the sort of woman he wants? Am I the sort of woman who will be a loving wife, a wise mother and a good home maker?" No, these things never enter her mind. The critical girl never for a second loses the good opinion which she has of herself. Occasionally, after much fault-finding and wrangling, the engagement is broken, and the young man, not understanding women entirely, little knows how much he has to be thankful for. But, unfortunately, as she is good-looking she will probably marry somebody else. Imagine what that household will be—a household where the wife is not satisfied with her husband, the mother with her children, or the housekeeper with her servants—a household where friends are only looked at as medical students analyze their subjects on the dissecting-board. The children of the critical woman will never bring to her their joys and their sorrows, because they think they would be laughed at. And everybody knows what a cruel weapon laughter may become. To lay bare one's heart full of sorrow, if it only be for a broken doll, and to receive, instead of sympathetic words and kindly looks, a critical smile and some clever epigram, is hard to bear. I do not want any girl to be blind in her love, but love condones the fault and strives to develop it into a virtue, while making much of the virtue causes it to grow every day, and to make the whole character more beautiful and more lovable.

AS A COMPANION

SHE is pleasant for a little while, when her cleverness is fresh, but only for a very short time. In general society, women of any standing quickly describe her to each other, and announce that for a girl to know so much that is unpleasant is not good form. The younger women, who suffer from her desire to analyze, are not anxious to adopt her as a friend. She often wonders why it is that she is not more keenly appreciated; why it is that she is not invited to certain places and made the guest of honor; why it is that young Cræsus dances after a girl whom she condemns as pretty, but silly, and leaves her alone. Young Cræsus is not exactly a simpleton, though he has been unfortunate enough to inherit some millions of money. He realizes that the critical girl may say some clever things, but that she is hard; in a way, he thinks she is smart, but he realizes that when a man is looking for a wife he does not want to take up a case of brains versus heart. Then he is looking more for the old-fashioned virtues than the new-fangled clevernesses, and he has never fancied the critical girl since she thought it very funny one night to say that it was a good thing that some girl knew he was strong of heart for he was decidedly weak of brain. Rudeness, he called that. For his part, he likes simple virtues, especially goodness of heart; he does not like to hear people made little of.

The brother of young Cræsus, who is counted the bright one of the family, and who, once in a while, crosses swords with the critical girl, until she is convinced that he admires her very much, shocks her terribly by choosing as his companion for life a girl of whom it is said that she never speaks an unkind word of anybody. The critical girl calls her "skim milk." She forgets that there are times in one's life when one cannot stand rich cream, or even milk at its very richest, but has to take skim milk because of its delicacy.

What I most dislike in the critical girl is her conceit. She will talk to an utterly strange man as if he were an ignoramus. In one case she discovered she had been giving her opinion of England, where she had never been, to a learned English professor, and in another that she had been teaching the pronunciation of German to one of the greatest linguists in the world. She takes your ignorance and her knowledge for granted, and she patronizes you. As I have said before, she is often clever, and it seems a pity that she is not taken hold of in the beginning, and that the little weeds of disagreeableness that surround her have not been removed by pulling them out before they had time to grow into poisonous plants, making her a very deadly Upas tree.

You cannot introduce her to herself. She confesses to no faults, and she claims no virtues, as she laughs at them as only feminine weaknesses. People without brain must cultivate their hearts. But for her part—well, she counts what she calls "real culture" as of more importance—of vastly more importance, she reiterates.

IT goes without saying that the critical girl is not popular in society. The collection of people that go to make up society desire to have a pleasant time; and disagreeable words, cold, calculating criticisms, are not considered in good taste. At a luncheon, where the discussion of somebody's pretty, new dress was going on, the critical girl coldly announced her opinion of frothy gossip, and so silenced everybody around her that they felt wicked when they had been doing nothing wrong. She can imagine a society that would suit her: one where she would reign alone, where what she thought, what she said and what she did would be counted proper, and her drawing-room would be filled with her admirers. She does not confess this even to herself, but whenever she thinks of society as it should be it formulates itself in that way.

The critical girl respects neither age nor weakness. Strong of body, she is contemptuous of those who are not so fortunate as herself, and audibly remarks that she cannot understand why people who are not perfectly well do not stay at home; that, anyhow, it would be the best thing if the physicians chloroformed all such people inasmuch as they and their aches are bores to the world at large. Old age is, to her thinking, a something to be laughed at, for by the time she has allowed herself to merge into being not a pretty girl, nor a loving girl, nor an agreeable girl, but entirely a critical girl, she finds in years only a subject for guying. The beauty of age never presents itself to her, and she horrifies a well-bred girl by criticizing an old lady as "a tiresome work of the Georgian period." These things sound smart, but they are really impolite and unkind. In time the critical girl will care so little for what she says that as the years go she will grow careless in her speech, and all men will keep away from her, all women will dread her, and all children will be afraid of her. What she thinks seems to her sufficient. Her opinion should make the beautiful or the rainy weather. The book of which she disapproves should be of no value to anybody else; the picture that has her disapprobation can never sell, and the queer part of it all is that she rejoices in feeling prepared to criticize everything in life, whereas the really great critics, the men and women whose words and opinions were of value, felt, when life was all over, that they had not as yet learned to criticize even one thing thoroughly.

SOME WORDS OF ADVICE

DO not drift into the critical habit. Have an opinion, and a sensible one, about everything, but when you come to judge people remember that you see very little of what they really are, unless you winter and summer with them. Find the kindly, lovable nature of the man who knows little of books. Look for the beautiful self-sacrifice made daily by some woman who knows nothing about pictures, and teach yourself day in and day out to look for the best in everything. It is the every-day joys and sorrows, my dear girl, that go to make up life. It is not the one great sorrow, nor the one intense joy, it is the accumulation of the little ones that constitute living, so do not be critical of the little faults, and do be quick to find the little virtues and to praise them. So much that is good in people dies for want of encouragement. As I said before, have an opinion, and a well-thought-out one, about everything that comes into your life, but do not have too many opinions about people. Their hearts are not open books, and as you must be judged yourself some day, give them the kindest judgment now.

Do not be afraid to give the word of praise. Do not be afraid to utter hundreds of words of approbation to one of fault-finding, for it is fault-finding to which at last the critical girl comes. She loses her friends and she loses her faith, and I want my girls to understand that there is nothing in life so dreadful as that. Better lose everything that the world can give than lose your belief. Without it where would you be? Whom could you go to when sorrow or pain came? Who could you ask to help you when the trouble seemed almost more than you could bear? I want my girls to be happy, to be bright, to be overflowing with gladness, but to respect old age, to regard the weak with tenderness, and to search for the good qualities in everybody. If we fill our minds to overflowing with the thought of that which is bad, be certain we will sink lower and lower until the deepest pit is reached. Exaggerated? I do not think so. One of the dangers at present is the desire to be critical. If you find that you are growing so throw yourself on your knees and ask God to make a change in you, and then close your lips and keep silence rather than permit a word of unkind criticism to pass them. It is an old quotation, well known to most of you, but it is a great prayer, especially for that girl who is quick to speak: "Set a watch, oh Lord, before my mouth, to keep the door of my lips."

EDITOR'S NOTE—Miss Ashmore's answers to her correspondents, under the title of "Side-Talks with Girls," will be found on page 27 of this issue of the JOURNAL.