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## A LITTLE MORE ABOUT EVE

BY JAMES BRANCH CABELL

A SOUTHERNER is very often, and quite easily, shocked, especially in any matter which concerns chivalry. I, thus, am frequently upset to an unbelievable degree when people tell me, as they do over and over again with rather maddening unanimity, that women have not been fairly dealt with in that collection of my books which make up the Biography of Dom Manuel's perpetuated life upon earth. . . . Yet other persons, to be sure, profess that women are introduced into the Biography solely in order that men may deal fairly with them in Jurgen's personal application of this phrase. Either way, there seems a general feeling—peculiarly awkward for a Southern author to be encountering,—that, throughout my books, this half of the world's population has been neglected if not actually slandered.

After due confession that this is quite possibly true, I confess that I do not think it is true. I must point out that women, in common with all other non-human creatures such as gods and fiends and ghosts, appear in the Biography only as this one or the other of them seems to this or that human, and therefore, of course, to this or that very easily deceived, male person. I must point out that the point of view of the Biography is always masculine. I must remind you, in brief, that I have attempted no actual or complete portrait of any woman, but only a depiction of some man's notions about one or another woman.

To this rule there are but two exceptions, I believe, throughout the entire Biography,—in "Sweet Adalais" and "Porcelain Cups,"—wherein for technical reasons all is necessarily seen through a young

girl's lustrous and youth-blinded eyes. Elsewhere I have self-confessedly rendered the man's notion of the woman, whether the man's own all-tincturing nature be a medium so heavily or so slightly encoloring whatever it transmits as I have variously employed in Nicolas de Caen and in Richard Harrowby and in Gottfried Johannes Bülg and in Robert Etheridge Townsend and in Captain Francis Audaine and in the anonymous redactors of the legends of Poictesme. Everywhere I have but recorded one or another more or less individualized male's notion about an especial woman, as a notion for the correctness of which I could assume no responsibility.

I have preferred to err, where error appeared inevitable, upon the safer side. Reading any printed narrative by a woman wherein the authoress—for at this precise point all female writers become mildly quaint authoresses,—purports to render for you the interior being of any male character, then the male reader becomes, at happiest, puzzled and just vaguely perturbed. The teddied creatures are clever. They, whose empirical knowledge is complete, do understand us—almost. But, after all, nothing in the picture is really quite right. The most gifted woman writer, at her most excellent, seems but to give, in dealing with her ostensibly male characters from the inside, one of those "artistic" photographs in which not any especial feature but merely everything is slightly out of focus. I can recall no instance in which a woman writer has depicted a man even fairly credible, to any of her male readers, when once she had

reversed the intentions of nature by trying to penetrate the man's exterior.

Since, heaven knows, they understand us far better than we do them, I can but deduce that when a male writer attempts to depict a woman from within, he also, with an even heavier emphasis, does but make a fool of himself. And I refrain from at least that single form of folly as far as may be possible. I present frankly, throughout the whole Biography, all women and gods and fiends and ghosts and fabulous monsters which enter thereinto, only as they appear to some especial male, because that, after all, is the sole point of view from which I or any other man can ever regard any of these myth-enveloped beings.

## II

Which reminds me, through no instantly apparent connection, of my daily correspondence. There are, I now and then hopefully imagine, no more persons remaining anywhere in the United States of America sufficiently interested in the correct pronunciation of my surname to write and ask me about it: then the postman comes, to confute optimism, and upon the following Saturday I must type off two or three more statements that Cabell rhymes with rabble. But almost if not quite so often does the postman bring an inquiry as to what was the really fundamental explanation of one or another phenomenon witnessed by Manuel, or by Jurgen or Florian or Gerald, or by some other of my leading male Manuelides; if the symbolism were such and such; if the person encountered is to be interpreted as so and so; if one or another word should be regarded as an anagram; and, in brief—through that sempiternal assumption that all art is a branch of pedagogy,—what allegorical teaching did I intend by this or that passage? What, in the usual phrase, does this or that passage "mean?"

Then, on the following Saturday, I must type off a confession of more or less humiliating ignorance. I must explain that I

have but recorded from the point of view of one or another especial male that which he witnessed. I have told the reader, for example, what Manuel saw and heard, or I have set down all that Florian or Jurgen or Gerald ever knew about some particular matter: and concerning this same matter that is all which I myself can pretend to know. Certainly no reader has any call to know more. The reader should respect the book's point of view as zealously as does the author.

After that, I try to fold my note so as to fit it neatly into the stamped and self-addressed envelope which was thoughtfully enclosed by my correspondent, and I find that never by any chance is the achievement possible. For it appears that, through a truly remarkable coincidence, the more inquisitive of American novel readers, in common with most collectors of autographs, all deal with the same stationer, who purveys a very special sort of envelope so abbreviated lengthwise as to accommodate not any known size of writing paper.

Well, but my point is, that just so do women rank in the Biography. I can but tell you all that my protagonist, in each especial volume, ever knew about them, and as a rule that is not much.

## III

Yet it may be that there is a second reason for this gingerly handling of women, as concerns at least their unphysical aspects. It may be that I remain too much the romantic, even before the rising phantom of a fiftieth birthday, ever quite to regard women as human beings. . . . For one has the assurance of the very best-thought-of critics that "the author of 'Jurgen'"—whom I privately tend to disesteem as a semifabulous creature,—is "an embittered romantic."

He began, it seems, by writing the most philanthropic, if somewhat overblown and cloying tales, in his faraway youth: but, with advancing age, he found the world not altogether that which he had expected

it to be, and so lost his temper, and began to be dreadfully peevish about affairs in general. He seems to have been completely upset by the shock. He has never got over it. Every week the returns from the clipping bureau bring me the most authoritative information as to this embittered romantic existing in a never-lifting atmosphere of despair and frustration. . . . And one resignedly accepts the label, because, after all, every writer of some years' standing has to be classified, by those who are both younger and more certain about everything than he can ever hope to be again.

The only trouble is that this labeling does a bit complicate private life. Nobody can, with any real comfort to himself, go on being an embittered romantic twenty-four hours to the day when so many pleasant things are continually happening. It would call for more self-control than seems reasonable. Besides, if I dared to try out the rôle of an embittered romantic in the home circle, and among those surroundings in which the major part of my life is passed, everyone would be surprised and upset. The family physician would be sent for. So upon the very rare occasions that I provisionally attempt to live up to the standards of the best-thought-of critics, by behaving as becomes an embittered romantic, it has to be done when the presence of company has temporarily stilled the frankness of connubial comment.

Even so, when you first meet strangers, and particularly interviewers, the situation is now and then faintly embarrassing. You feel the weight of social obligations, you feel that these aliens at least may expect you to behave as an embittered romantic, and that they may even have some assured information, denied to you, as to how an embittered romantic does behave: and in consequence you do not at all know what to say or do. You can but desperately attempt to hide behind a look of friendly but cynical amusement, and to assume an air of thinking superior thoughts well suited to publication in the *Dial*, which you are

leaving unworded. And you feel too that you are bungling the whole affair. . . . For no embittered romantic, I repeat, can maintain the appropriate atmosphere of despair and frustration in his private and social affairs with any real comfort to himself.

—All which is a bit afield. I had meant only to say that a romantic, even when of the embittered variety, perhaps cannot ever, quite, regard women as human beings.

#### IV

Now to do this is, of course, the signal attempt of the Twentieth Century,—to regard women as human beings. I am not sure the experiment will succeed: but the outcome, after all, I take to be no concern of mine, whereas I am certain I find it drolly interesting to observe the progress of Eve's daughters. . . . For so great a while they were but conveniences, equally for housework and copulation. Then, as the more talented courtesans were evolved, women here and there began to be ranked among the luxuries and adornments of life, exactly as we of late have seen yet other bedchamber and kitchen furnishings, under the name of Early Americana, turned into prized ornaments of the drawing-room.

But the apex was reached in the medieval notion of *domnei*,—perhaps the most aspiring, and very certainly the most unpredictable, of all the inventions of romanticists,—whereby women became goddesses, or, at least, Heaven's bright and lovely symbols upon earth. Of this *domnei* I have written sufficiently in another place. Yet I must here point out that *domnei* was always a cult limited in its membership to the upper classes, and limited too, as though instinctively, in any recordance of its tenets, to the golden and pleasantly be-fogging haziness of verse. Side by side with *domnei*, as the main trend of medieval prose literature shows very plainly, persisted always the monkish notion of woman as a snare of the Devil, and the bourgeois notion of woman as a false and

lustful animal. The romanticist, that is, tended, as he still does, howsoever timidly, to be a gentleman. Domnei prevailed only among the gentry, among those who had the leisure, and the good taste, to play with what Gerald Musgrave calls a rather beautiful idea.

Well, and now—as a part perhaps of the very general discrediting of all gentle notions everywhere as a bit overflavored with fudge,—now this ends. To every side of us, the lady—a word which is so significant that to record the four letters of it here must permeate this whole page with old-fashionedness,—the lady, I observe, is triumphantly climbing down to full equality with the butler and the Congressman. I daresay—and at least I have Madame Melior de Puyange to back me,—that the pedestal upon which domnei exalted every gentlewoman had its discomforts. The lady, in any event, grows nowadays as rare as the horse; these two, who were formerly the dearest prized chattels of every wellbred male, now race neck and neck into extinction: and the progress of woman's evolution toward that day, now so clearly to be foreseen, when women will at last have become human beings, appears edifying. Yet I watch it with auctorial disinterest, for with that day my books have no concern. My books, throughout, treat of an older day when this surprising metamorphosis had hardly, if at all, begun.

I confess, in brief, that the male inheritors of Manuel's life—from whose point of

view I have written all that which makes me an embittered romantic every Thursday, when the envelope from the clipping bureau comes in,—that these Manuelides have, throughout the Biography, approached the daughters of Eve with that underlying feeling of unintimacy which one perforce harbors toward all gods and fiends and other non-human creatures. And now a third reason for this confessed fact occurs to me.

I would suggest that the inheritors of Manuel's life were perhaps the victims of heredity. For it was Manuel, as you may remember, who remarked upon Upper Morven, at the height of his love-affair with Queen Freydis: "What can I ever be to you except flesh and a voice? I know that my distrust of all living creatures—oh, even of you, dear Freydis, when I draw you closest,—must always be as a wall between us, a low, lasting, firm-set wall which we can never pull down. There is no way in which two persons may meet in this world of men: we can but exchange, from afar, despairing friendly signals in the sure knowledge they will be misinterpreted. No soul may travel upon a bridge of words."

Well, and I suspect that in this particular no one of Manuel's race has ever greatly differed from their great progenitor. For it was then that Manuel, after all, spoke the final and all-comprehending words that any man may say to or about any woman. Or, for that matter, about any other man.