Chapter III

NOTE--The word "Androcentric" we owe to Prof. Lester F. Ward. In his book, "Pure Sociology," Chap. 14, he describes the Androcentric Theory of life, hitherto universally accepted; and introduces his own "Gyneacocentric Theory." All who are interested in the deeper scientific aspects of this question are urged to read that chapter. Prof. Ward's theory is to my mind the most important that has been offered the world since the Theory of Evolution; and without exception the most important that has ever been put forward concerning women.

Among the many paradoxes which we find in human life is our low average standard of health and beauty, compared with our power and knowledge. All creatures suffer from conflict with the elements; from enemies without and within--the prowling devourers of the forest, and "the terror that walketh in darkness" and attacks the body from inside, in hidden millions.

Among wild animals generally, there is a certain standard of excellence; if you shoot a bear or a bird, it is a fair sample of the species; you do not say, "O what an ugly one!" or "This must have been an invalid!"

Where we have domesticated any animal, and interfered with its natural habits, illness has followed; the dog is said to have the most diseases second to man; the horse comes next; but the wild ones put us to shame by their superior health and the beauty that belongs to right development.

In our long ages of blind infancy we assume that sickness was a visitation frown the gods; some still believe this, holding it to be a special prerogative of divinity to afflict us in this way. We speak of "the ills that flesh is heir to" as if the inheritance was entailed and inalienable. Only of late years, after much study and long struggle with this old belief which made us submit to sickness as a blow from the hand of God, we are beginning to learn something of the many causes of our many diseases, and how to remove some of them.

It is still true, however, that almost every one of us is to some degree abnormal; the features asymmetrical, the vision defective, the digestion unreliable, the nervous system erratic--we are but a job lot even in what we call "good health"; and are subject to a burden of pain and premature death that would make life hideous if it were not so ridiculously unnecessary.

As to beauty--we do not think of expecting it save in the rarely exceptional case. Look at the faces--the figures--in any crowd you meet; compare the average man or the average woman with the normal type of human beauty as given us in picture and statue; and consider if there is not some general cause for so general a condition of ugliness.
Moreover, leaving our defective bodies concealed by garments; what are those garments, as conducive to health and beauty? Is the practical ugliness of our men's attire, and the impractical absurdity of our women's, any contribution to human beauty? Look at our houses--are they beautiful? Even the houses of the rich?

We do not even know that we ought to live in a world of overflowing loveliness; and that our contribution to it should be the loveliest of all. We are so sodden in the dull ugliness of our interiors, so used to calling a tame weary low-toned color scheme "good taste," that only children dare frankly yearn for Beauty--and they are speedily educated out of it.

The reasons specially given for our low standards of health and beauty are ignorance, poverty, and the evil effects of special trades. The Man with the Hoe becomes brother to the ox because of over-much hoeing; the housepainter is lead-poisoned because of his painting; books have been written to show the injurious influence of nearly all our industries upon workers.

These causes are sound as far as they go; but do not cover the whole ground.

The farmer may be muscle-bound and stooping from his labor; but that does not account for his dyspepsia or his rheumatism.

Then we allege poverty as covering all. Poverty does cover a good deal. But when we find even a half-fed savage better developed than a well paid cashier; and a poor peasant woman a more vigorous mother than the idle wife of a rich man, poverty is not enough.

Then we say ignorance explains it. But there are most learned professors who are ugly and asthmatic; there are even doctors who can boast no beauty and but moderate health; there are some of the petted children of the wealthy, upon whom every care is lavished from birth, and who still are ill to look at and worse to marry.

All these special causes are admitted, given their due share in lowering our standards, but there is another far more universal in its application and its effects. Let us look back on our little ancestors the beasts, and see what keeps them so true to type.

The type itself set by that balance of conditions and forces we call "natural selection." As the environment changes they must be adapted to it, if they cannot so adapt themselves they die. Those who live are, by living, proven capable of maintaining themselves. Every creature which has remained on earth, while so many less effective kinds died out, remains as a conqueror. The speed of the deer--the constant use of speed--is what keeps it alive and makes it healthy and beautiful. The varied activities of the life of a leopard are what have developed the sinuous gracile strength we so admire. It is what the creature does for its living, its daily life-long exercise which makes it what it is.

But there is another great natural force which works steadily to keep all animals up to the race standard; that is sexual selection. Throughout nature the male is the variant, as we have already noted. His energy finds vent not only in that profuse output of decorative appendages Ward defines as "masculine efflorescence" but in variations not decorative, not useful or desirable at all.

The female, on the other hand, varies much less, remaining nearer the race type; and her function is to select among these varying males the specimens most valuable to the race. In the intense masculine competition the victor must necessarily be stronger than his fellows; he is first proven equal to his environment by having lived to grow up, then more than equal to his fellows by overcoming them. This higher grade of selection also develops not only the characteristics necessary to make a living; but secondary ones, often of a purely aesthetic nature, which make much of what we call beauty. Between the two, all who live must be up to a certain grade, and those who become parents must be above it; a masterly arrangement surely!

Here is where, during the period of our human history, we in our newborn consciousness and imperfect knowledge, have grievously interfered with the laws of nature. The ancient proprietary family, treating the woman as a slave, keeping her a prisoner and subject to the will of her master, cut her off at once from the exercise of those activities
which alone develop and maintain the race type.

Take the one simple quality of speed. We are a creature built for speed, a free swift graceful animal; and among savages this is still seen—the capacity for running, mile after mile, hour after hour. Running is as natural a gait for _genus homo as for _genus cervus. Now suppose among deer, the doe was prohibited from running; the stag continuing free on the mountain; the doe living in caves and pens, unequal to any exercise. The effect on the species would be, inevitably, to reduce its speed.

In this way, by keeping women to one small range of duties, and in most cases housebound, we have interfered with natural selection and its resultant health and beauty. It can easily be seen what the effect on the race would have been if all men had been veiled and swathed, hidden in harems, kept to the tent or house, and confined to the activities of a house-servant. Our stalwart laborers, our proud soldiers, our athletes, would never have appeared under such circumstances. The confinement to the house alone, cutting women off from sunshine and air, is by itself an injury; and the range of occupation allowed them is not such as to develop a high standard of either health or beauty. Thus we have cut off half the race from the strengthening influence of natural selection, and so lowered our race-standards in large degree.

This alone, however, would not have hid such mischievous effects but for our further blunder in completely reversing nature's order of sexual selection. It is quite possible that even under confinement and restriction women could have kept up the race level, passably, through this great function of selection; but here is the great fundamental error of the Androcentric Culture. Assuming to be the possessor of women, their owner and master, able at will to give, buy and sell, or do with as he pleases, man became the selector.

It seems a simple change; and in those early days, wholly ignorant of natural laws, there was no suspicion that any mischief would result. In the light of modern knowledge, however, the case is clear. The woman was deprived of the beneficent action of natural selection, and the man was then, by his own act, freed from the stern but elevating effect of sexual selection. Nothing was required of the woman by natural selection save such capacity as should please her master; nothing was required of the man by sexual selection save power to take by force, or buy, a woman.

It does not take a very high standard of feminine intelligence, strength, skill, health, or beauty to be a houseservant, or even a housekeeper; witness the average.

It does not take a very high standard of masculine, intelligence, strength, skill, health or beauty to maintain a woman in that capacity—witness average.

Here at the very root of our physiological process, at the beginning of life, we have perverted the order of nature, and are suffering the consequences.

It has been held by some that man as the selector has developed beauty, more beauty than we had before; and we point to the charms of our women as compared with those of the squaw. The answer to this is that the squaw belongs to a decadent race; that she too is subject to the man, that the comparison to have weight should be made between our women and the women of the matriarchate—an obvious impossibility. We have not on earth women in a state of normal freedom and full development; but we have enough difference in their placing to learn that human strength and beauty grows with woman's freedom and activity.

The second answer is that much of what man calls beauty in woman is not human beauty at all, but gross overdevelopment of certain points which appeal to him as a male. The excessive fatness, previously referred to, is a case in point; that being considered beauty in a woman which is in reality an element of weakness, inefficiency and ill-health. The relatively small size of women, deliberately preferred, steadfastly chosen, and so built into the race, is a blow at real human progress in every particular. In our upward journey we should and do grow larger, leaving far behind us our dwarfish progenitors. Yet the male, in his unnatural position as selector, preferring for reasons both practical and sentimental, to have "his woman" smaller than himself, has deliberately striven to lower the standard of size in the race. We used to read in the novels of the last generation, "He was a magnificent specimen of manhood"—
"Her golden head reached scarcely to his shoulder"--"She was a fairy creature--the tiniest of her sex." Thus we have mated, and yet expected that by some hocus pocus the boys would all "take after their father," and the girls, their mother. In his efforts to improve the breed of other animals, man has never tried to deliberately cross the large and small and expect to keep up the standard of size.

As a male he is appealed to by the ultra-feminine, and has given small thought to effects on the race. He was not designed to do the selecting. Under his fostering care we have bred a race of women who are physically weak enough to be handed about like invalids; or mentally weak enough to pretend they are--and to like it. We have made women who respond so perfectly to the force which made them, that they attach all their idea of beauty to those characteristics which attract men; sometimes humanly ugly without even knowing it.

For instance, our long restriction to house-limits, the heavy limitations of our clothing, and the heavier ones of traditional decorum, have made women disproportionately short-legged. This is a particularly undignified and injurious characteristic, bred in women and inherited by men, most seen among those races which keep their women most closely. Yet when one woman escapes the tendency and appears with a normal length of femur and tibia, a normal height of hip and shoulder, she is criticized and called awkward by her squatty sisters!

The most convenient proof of the inferiority of women in human beauty is shown by those composite statues prepared by Mr. Sargent for the World's Fair of '93. These were made from gymnasion measurements of thousands of young collegians of both sexes all over America. The statue of the girl has a pretty face, small hands and feet, rather nice arms, though weak; but the legs are too thick and short; the chest and shoulders poor; and the trunk is quite pitiful in its weakness. The figure of the man is much better proportioned.

Thus the effect on human beauty of masculine selection.

Beyond this positive deteriorative effect on women through man's arbitrary choice comes the negative effect of woman's lack of choice. Bought or stolen or given by her father, she was deprived of the innately feminine right and duty of choosing. "Who giveth this woman?" we still inquire in our archaic marriage service, and one man steps forward and gives her to another man.

Free, the female chose the victor, and the vanquished went unmated--and without progeny. Dependent, having to be fed and cared for by some man, the victors take their pick perhaps, but the vanquished take what is left; and the poor women, "marrying for a home," take anything. As a consequence the inferior male is as free to transmit his inferiority as the superior to give better qualities, and does so--beyond computation. In modern days, women are freer, in some countries freer than in others; here in modern America freest of all; and the result is seen in our improving standards of health and beauty.

Still there remains the field of inter-masculine competition, does there not? Do not the males still struggle together? Is not that as of old, a source of race advantage?

To some degree it is. When life was simple and our activities consisted mainly in fighting and hard work; the male who could vanquish the others was bigger and stronger. But inter-masculine competition ceases to be of such advantage when we enter the field of social service. What is required in organized society is the specialization of the individual, the development of special talents, not always of immediate benefit to the man himself, but of ultimate benefit to society. The best social servant, progressive, meeting future needs, is almost always at a disadvantage besides the well-established lower types. We need, for social service, qualities quite different from the simple masculine characteristics--desire, combat, self-expression.

By keeping what we call "the outside world" so wholly male, we keep up masculine standards at the expense of human ones. This may be broadly seen in the slow and painful development of industry and science as compared to the easy dominance of warfare throughout all history until our own times.

The effect of all this ultra masculine competition upon health and beauty is but too plainly to be seen. Among men the
male idea of what is good looking is accentuated beyond reason. Read about any "hero" you please; or study the products of the illustrator and note the broad shoulders, the rugged features, the strong, square, determined jaw. That jaw is in evidence if everything else fails. He may be cross-eyed, wide-eared, thick-necked, bandy-legged--what you please; but he must have a more or less prognathous jaw.

Meanwhile any anthropologist will show you that the line of human development is away from that feature of the bulldog and the alligator, and toward the measured dignity of the Greek type. The possessor of that kind of jaw may enable male to conquer male, but does not make him of any more service to society; of any better health or higher beauty.

Further, in the external decoration of our bodies, what is the influence here of masculine dominance.

We have before spoken of the peculiar position of our race in that the woman is the only female creature who carries the burden of sex ornament. This amazing reversal of the order of nature results at its mildest in a perversion of the natural feminine instincts of love and service, and an appearance of the masculine instincts of self-expression and display. Alone among all female things do women decorate and preen themselves and exhibit their borrowed plumage (literally!) to attract the favor of the male. This ignominy is forced upon them by their position of economic dependence; and their general helplessness. As all broader life is made to depend, for them, on whom they marry, indeed as even the necessities of life so often depend on their marrying someone, they have been driven into this form of competition, so alien to the true female attitude.

The result is enough to make angels weep--and laugh. Perhaps no step in the evolution of beauty went farther than our human power of making a continuous fabric; soft and mobile, showing any color and texture desired. The beauty of the human body is supreme, and when we add to it the flow of color, the ripple of fluent motion, that comes of a soft, light garment over free limbs--it is a new field of loveliness and delight. Naturally this should have filled the whole world with a new pleasure. Our garments, first under right natural selection developing perfect use, under right sex selection developing beauty; and further, as our human aesthetic sense progresses, showing a noble symbolism, would have been an added strength and glory, a ceaseless joy.

What is the case?

Men, under a too strictly inter-masculine environment, have evolved the mainly useful but beautiless costume common to-day; and women--?

Women wear beautiful garments when they happen to be the fashion; and ugly garments when they are the fashion, and show no signs of knowing the difference. They show no added pride in the beautiful, no hint of mortification in the hideous, and are not even sensitive under criticism, or open to any persuasion or argument. Why should they be?

Their condition, physical and mental, is largely abnormal, their whole passionate absorption in dress and decoration is abnormal, and they have never looked, from a frankly human standpoint, at their position and its peculiarities, until the present age.

In the effect of our wrong relation on the world's health, we have spoken of the check to vigor and growth due to the housebound state of women and their burdensome clothes. There follow other influences, similar in origin, even more evil in result. To roughly and briefly classify we may distinguish the diseases due to bad air, to bad food, and that field of cruel mischief we are only now beginning to discuss--the diseases directly due to the erroneous relation between men and women.

We are the only race where the female depends on the male for a livelihood. We are the only race that practices prostitution. From the first harmless-looking but abnormal general relation follows the well recognized evil of the second, so long called "a social necessity," and from it, in deadly sequence, comes the "wages of sin;" death not only of the guilty, but of the innocent. It is no light part of our criticism of the Androcentric Culture that a society based on masculine desires alone, has willingly sacrificed such an army of women; and has repaid the sacrifice by the heaviest
That the unfortunate woman should sicken and die was held to be her just punishment; that man too should bear part penalty was found unavoidable, though much legislation and medical effort has been spent to shield him; but to the further consequences society is but now waking up.

By Charlotte Perkins Gilman