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978-1-108-07624-1 - Practical Hints to Young Females: On the Duties of a Wife,
a Mother, and a Mistress of a Family

Ann Taylor

Excerpt

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PRACTICAL HINTS,

&c.



No. I.

INTRODUCTION.

THERE was a time when females of rank and affluence were not thought degraded by dressing the fatted calf, and baking cakes upon the hearth; when, with their pitcher on their shoulder, they went to the well to draw water for their flocks; and when even royalty knew how to appreciate the virtues of her who sought wool and flax, and wrought willingly with her hands; who laid her hands to the spindle and to the distaff; who made fine linen and sold

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it, and delivered girdles to the merchant; who looked well to the ways of her household, and ate not the bread of idleness. But time has wrought a change in the circumstances and habits of females of the present age, though there are many of all ranks who are not less usefully employed than were the matrons of ancient times; many to whom it may be said, ‘Give them of the fruit of their doings, and let their own works praise them in the gate.’ Happy the female in whom education has united with natural talent to form so important a character as that of the *mistress of a family*; and unhappy she, who, possessing neither of these advantages, has the temerity to undertake a task to which she is altogether incompetent. Notwithstanding that *old wives*, or *young wives*, may furnish the witling with themes for ridicule, a closer observation would convince him, that the *mistress* and *mother* of a family occupies one of the most important stations in the community; of which he would be feelingly convinced, were so large a portion of it to suspend its services for ever so short a period.

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We are, however, obliged to acknowledge, that the deficiencies of many have afforded but too just occasion for the sarcasms to which we allude. Nothing less than a more judicious education can remedy this vital evil; an evil which pervades all classes in some degree, but which is peculiarly injurious to those of the middle ranks. Many a female, because she has been educated at a boarding-school, returns home, not to assist her mother, but to support her pretensions to gentility by idleness, dress, and dissipation. She conceives herself degraded by domestic occupation, and expects to lose her credit if she is known to be industrious; while the fond parents too frequently aid the delusion, and in due time transfer her to a husband, to *curse* him with a fortune of a few hundreds; a sum which she supposes inexhaustible; accordingly she takes care to remind him, on every occasion, of the handsome fortune she brought him, as well as of the gentility of her *boarding-school* education. With what pity do we anticipate the sequel; and how many, who might have been formed to inestimable characters, have been

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thus rendered worse than useless to society! To afford a hint to such, as well as to those who, from various other causes, may be incompetent to the duties of this important station, is the object of the following pages: and it is hoped that some of the observations introduced may be found suitable to their circumstances, and deserving their attention.

Many, when they enter the married life, assume a consequence to which their characters by no means entitle them. To be a wife, and to be a *good wife*, which is from the Lord, are two very distinct things: and if you, my dear reader, have no just claim to the latter title, that of the former will soon dwindle into insignificance. The situation in which you are placed is of vast, of vital importance; support the dignity of it by your conduct, and add not to the number by which it is brought into disrepute and contempt. The mothers of those who have decided the fate of empires were once young wives, such as you are; and, perhaps, the happiness or misery of thousands then unborn originated in their conduct. But,

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should the influence of your posterity never extend beyond the limits of private life, the effects of your conduct will yet be sufficiently important to warrant an earnest expostulation. Indeed your own respectability and happiness so immediately depend upon those of your family, that in neglecting the latter, the former are unavoidably undermined. Some there are who contrive to plod through life, without any failings prominent enough to incur the censure of their acquaintance, and pass in the crowd for mighty good sort of women: though it does not invariably happen that their families possess even these negative advantages: such have probably sunk into insipidity of character, from want of a timely stimulus and proper direction; and talents, which either lie dormant, or are wasted in trivial pursuits, might have been rendered, by early assistance, extensively useful. Many others, who, from their conduct in life, but too justly incur the censures of society, might equally with these have merited its applause, had some friendly hand been stretched out at the commencement of their journey, to guide them in the difficult

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and dubious way. To ensure so happy a result, let it be your ambition, my dear reader, to form a sterling character; and, while you contemplate women who command your esteem, endeavour to become estimable yourself: while others act desultorily, without design, and from mere impulse, do you proceed on principle; or, while their aim is fashion, let yours be steadiness.

There are two extremes into which young people are apt to fall, perhaps equally inimical to respectability of conduct: the one is *confidence*, the other *timidity*. The former, without doubt, is the most decided enemy to improvement; it renders the character ridiculous, and deprives it of a thousand advantages, by which the humble and teachable are benefited: but, where the latter predominates, the result is nearly the same; want of courage is mistaken for inability; and, from fear of making an effort, no effort is made.

Where, however, as in the majority of instances, there is no material deficiency in the

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intellectual powers, much may be effected by well-timed advice, encouragement, or admonition; and those whose age and experience qualify them for the service, ought conscientiously to avail themselves of proper occasions upon which to render it.—Some years ago, a lady, who went with a party to the British Museum, expressed contempt and dissatisfaction at every thing she saw; protested it was loss of time to continue, and urged the company to hasten their departure. At length they politely thanked the gentleman in attendance, and were about to withdraw, when he detained them by the following address to their fastidious companion: ‘When I first saw you, madam, I was struck with your beauty and interesting appearance; but you soon gave me occasion to alter my opinion: I pity the man that marries you, if any one ever will; certainly I would not; and I fear for you, unless some alteration takes place in your taste, manners, and habits.—Madam, I wish you a good morning.’ Many years after, the same gentleman waited upon another com-

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pany at the Museum : when they took their leave, and thanked him for his polite attentions, a lady stepped forward, and expressed her gratitude in a manner more lively than the occasion seemed to require. The gentleman, rather surprised, professed himself happy in having contributed to her amusement. ‘ Sir,’ said she, ‘ my obligations to you far exceed those which you have conferred this morning.’ She then recalled to his memory the above circumstance ; and added, ‘ I am that lady ; and to you I am indebted, next to this gentleman, who is my husband, for the happiest influence on my life and character ; arising from the very pointed, but salutary, reproof which you then administered.’

It is no wonder if the traveller, who is unacquainted with the road, should sometimes turn wrong, or be so entangled in intricate windings as to be unable to retrace his steps ; nor is it too great a stretch of candour to believe, that many of the actions, which afford copious matter for the tongue of calumny, or

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just ground for reproof, are the result not so much of ill-intention, as of inconsideration or mistake. But mistakes, which may involve families in ruin, or render them miserable, it becomes of the utmost importance to rectify; especially if we take into the account the influence which they have ultimately on the general weal. One of the most prominent, and fatal in its consequences, is the propensity to assume, by external appearance, a rank in society to which the finances are inadequate. This, indeed, is a conduct which rarely succeeds; for, till one rank can assume the manners and habits of those above them, it is in vain that they ape their dress and equipage; they will generally remain stationary in the eyes of all who know them, and even of all who do not; as the servant girl, who, taking the pattern of her mistress's cap, remains a servant girl still, and exposes herself to ridicule for her presumption. As nothing is more common than this destructive ambition, though so little is really gained by it, some of

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the subsequent pages shall be devoted to
the consideration of this, and the opposite
line of conduct: but previously we shall
treat of more important matters.
