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A Specimen of Present-Day Fiction.[1]

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MR. WELLS' latest novel, which purports to be a man's account of his own life written out for the possible future guidance of his son, is a thin thread of love story strung with a quite disproportionate number of digressions, more or less irrelevant, embodying the hero's views on such questions as the English rule in India, the South African War, Labour troubles, and so forth. With these digressions it is not our purpose to deal, but rather with the love story, and more particularly with the character of the woman therein chiefly concerned.

The hero, Stephen Stratton, only child of a country rectory which neighbours an Earl's park, grows up in friendly comradeship with the Earl's four children, one of them, Mary by name, a girl of his own age. When about seventeen years old, the two fall in love, or, as Mr. Wells prefers to express it, their friendship becomes "lit by a passion." After this, circumstances keep them apart for a couple of years; but the intimacy is sustained by letters, though Mary, aware that her mother would not approve, shows herself worldly-wise enough to arrange that their correspondence should remain a secret.

When once more a summer season finds them in each other's neighbourhood, Mary, in interviews stolen early in the morning and late at night, avows that in Stephen she has found the man of her heart, but by degrees he realizes that she considers marriage between them an impossibility. She takes lofty ground on the subject: "I want to belong to myself . . . I don't want to become someone's certain possession, to be just usual and familiar to anyone." When the hour of parting arrives, there is an impassioned farewell scene, but shortly afterwards he learns, from the *Times*, of her engagement to a middle-aged millionaire named Justin. Previous to the wedding a secret meeting in London is contrived, at which this very

[1] "The Passionate Friends," by H. G. Wells.

prudent and worldly young lady shows him clearly how ridiculous it is for him to expect her to wait while he makes name and fortune: "I don't want to wait. I want a great house, I want a great position, I want space and freedom—I want to have clothes." And again, yet more callously: "Why should I be just a hard-up Vestal Virgin, Stephen, in your honour?" But, by way of comfort, this young girl of nineteen can inform him without embarrassment that she has arranged with her millionaire to be his wife in name only: "I am to own myself." She expects that Stephen will remain at her beck and call whenever she has a mind to summon him, but he departs abruptly to South Africa, which, we must confess, seems to us the one and only occasion of his life when this mawkish and self-conscious hero showed a proper spirit.

Five or six years elapse, during which they neither meet nor write; then Stephen returns to England, full of great ideas for a useful career. But when on the verge of engagement with a certain Rachel More, for whom he feels a genuine, though somewhat patronizing, affection, he meets Mary again, a very bored Mary, who, in spite of her great wealth and position, seems singularly destitute of interests and activities. The old friendship is resumed, to develop rapidly into something else; for in a few weeks she has become his mistress, fearing lest otherwise she should lose him to Rachel. As she puts it: "I couldn't stand it . . . I pounced on you and took you." But with characteristic heartlessness she insists on his continuing his visits to Rachel's home, to avert suspicion from herself.

Before long, however, Justin discovers all, and in a scene with husband and lover Mary surpasses herself in her insolent assertion of her right to complete freedom of action while continuing to enjoy the material advantages of her position as Justin's wife. But eventually various considerations induce her to yield to Justin's terms, and she consents neither to see nor write to Stephen, he on his part undertaking to leave England for three years.

Time passes on: Stephen again meets Rachel, they marry on

his return to England, a son and a daughter are born to them, life seems serene, when suddenly Mary breaks the silence. She has borne her husband a son and heir, he having previously fathered a daughter who, if we mistake not the allusions, was no child of his; but she is more than ever estranged from him in feelings. She is "intolerably unhappy," and chooses to see no reason why she should not have the solace of correspondence with Stephen. And so for months she pours out her views at intervals, chiefly on sex questions, with which, as might be expected, she is morbidly preoccupied. Here, for example, is one of her assertions: "Something has to be done for women. . . . We are spoiling the whole process of progress; we are turning all the achievements of mankind to nothingness. Men invent, create, do miracles with the world, and we translate it all into shopping, into a glitter of dress and households, into an immense parade of pride and excitement." And elsewhere she states that women "by the hundred thousand" are but "sand in the bearings" of "the old social machine." Thus does this woman, because she herself through worldliness and selfishness and arrogance has played no useful part in the world, ignore or vilify the vast majority of brave and sane women who, whether as mothers, sisters, wives, or daughters, are treading the path of duty and progress in loyal comradeship with men.

The correspondence rouses Justin's suspicions, and he does not leave his wife unwatched. At last there occurs a chance meeting in Switzerland, which, though really unpremeditated, has all the appearance of guilt. Justin takes steps for immediate divorce, and Mary, when she finds she cannot a second time escape this penalty, commits suicide.

If in all this Mr. Wells were professedly giving us the picture of a worldly woman who failed to make a success of her life, there would be no fault to find with it as a character study. But his meaning appears to be far otherwise, and hence our protest. The melancholy hero, summing up his account of her, calls her "this brave and fine and beautiful being," compares her to "a sunlit lake seen among mountains"; and the message

of the book is apparently to be found in these words: "It is clear to me . . . that she, with her resentment at being in any sense property, her self-reliant thought, her independence of standard, was the very prototype of that sister-lover who must replace the seductive and abject womanhood, owned, mastered, and deceiving, who waste the world to-day." We are asked, then, to see in Mary the ideal woman of the future, and to believe that her life was rendered barren and harmful, not by her own lack of noble purpose, but by "the ancient limiting jealousies which law and custom embody." It is hard to see quite what Mr. Wells means by this last. He shows us the husband saying contritely at the end: "Stratton . . . we two—we killed her. We tore her to pieces between us;" and the lover lamenting: "I would not permit her to live except as a part of my life." But to us it seems that both husband and lover were unnaturally passive in the hands of a selfish woman; for it is obvious throughout that Stephen was pursued, and surely we are not to suppose that Mr. Wells would have had the husband connive at the intrigue?

Among the last words of the book are: "We want to emancipate our lives from this slavery and these stupidities, from dull hatreds and suspicions." But if this is to mean that here and there a woman is to have all the privileges and none of the duties, such "freedom" entailing utter disregard of the claims and happiness of men and women from whom she takes all they can give by way of benefit, then we can but close the book with the fervent hope that it may be long before the Wife disappears to make way for the Passionate Friend; and until Mr. Wells can hold up to us some ideal both more human and more divine, more suited to the strangely mingled self with which we have to reckon, we for our part are well content to cherish the old formula—homely and unassuming in sound, and yet in many lives translated into the heroic and the beautiful—that a man and a woman, "forsaking all other," shall give and take, in marriage and not outside it, that "mutual society, help, and comfort . . . both in prosperity and adversity," which our human nature craves.