

FICTION

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A Positive Romance



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A PUBLIC DOMAIN BOOK

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A POSITIVE ROMANCE

By Edward Bellamy

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My friend Hammond is a bachelor, and lives in chambers in New York. Whenever we meet on my occasional visits to the city, he insists on my spending the night with him. On one of these occasions we had been at the opera during the evening, and had witnessed an ovation to a beautiful and famous singer. We had been stirred by the enthusiasm of the audience, and on our walk home fell to discussing a theme suggested by the scene; namely, the tendency of man to assume a worshipful attitude towards woman, and the reason for it. Was it merely a phase of the passional relation between the sexes, or had it some deeper and more mysterious significance?

When I mentioned the former idea, Hammond demanded why this tendency was not reciprocal between the sexes. As a matter of fact, while women showed endless devotion and fondness for men, their feeling was without the strain of adoration. Particular men's qualities of mind or heart might excite the enthusiastic admiration of women, but such admiration was for cause, and in no way confounded with the worshipful reverence which it was man's instinct to extend to woman as woman, with secondary reference to her qualities as a particular person. No fact in the relations of men and women, he declared, was more striking than this contrast in their mutual attitudes. It was the feminine, not the masculine, ideal which supplied the inspiration of art and the aroma of literature, which was found enshrined in the customs and common speech of mankind. To this I replied that man, being the dominant sex, had imposed his worship on the race as a conquering nation, its gods on the conquered. He, not woman, had been the creator of the art, the literature, and the language which were dedicated to her. Had woman been the dominant sex, the reverse might have happened, and man been obliged to stand upon a pedestal and be worshiped.

Hammond laughed, but declared that I was all wrong. Man's tendency to worship woman, while naturally blending with his passional attraction towards her, did not spring from the instinct of sex, but from the instinct of race,—a far deeper and generally unrecognized impulse. Even though woman should become some day the dominant sex, man need suffer no apprehension of being worshiped. His modesty would be respected.

Some time later, when we had cozily established ourselves before a sea-coal fire in Hammond's quarters, with divers creature comforts at hand for one of our usual symposiums, the subject came up again; and under conditions so favorable to discursiveness our talk took a wide range.

"By the way," said I, apropos of some remark he had made, "talking about the adoration of woman, did not that crack-brained Frenchman, Auguste Comte, propose something of the sort as a feature of his 'Religion of Humanity'?"

Hammond nodded.

"I wonder," I said, "whether that feature of his scheme was ever actually practiced by his followers. I should like to get a chance to ask a Positivist about that, if indeed there are any in America."

Hammond smoked in silence for some time, and finally said, quietly, "Possibly I might tell you something about it myself."

"Hello!" I exclaimed. "How long since you have been a Positivist?"

"About twenty-five years," was the matter-of-fact reply.

"A Positivist of twenty-five years' standing," I ejaculated, "and never told of it! Why have you hid your light under a bushel all this while?"

"I said that it was twenty-five years since I had been a Positivist," replied Hammond; "as long, in fact, as it is since I have been a sophomore. Both experiences belonged to the same year of my college course, and, perhaps you may infer, to the same stage of intellectual development. For about six months at that time I was as ardent a convert, I fancy, as the Religion of Humanity ever had."

"I thought you had told me all about yourself long ago," I said. "How is it that you have kept so mum about this experience? I should fancy it must have been a decidedly odd one."

"It was a very odd one," replied Hammond,— "the strangest passage, on the whole, I think, in my life. I have never spoken of it, because it is one of those emotional experiences which no man likes to relate unless he is sure of being understood. To tell it to most men would be casting pearls before swine. I have always meant to tell you when a suitable opportunity came up."

"You know," he said, when I had signified my eagerness to hear, "that I graduated at Leroy College. It was a little

one-horse institution, but blue as a whetstone in its orthodoxy; and with my father, who was a clergyman of a very strait sect and staid views, that fact covered a multitude of shortcomings. I was nineteen when I entered, and consequently twenty when, at the beginning of sophomore year, I came under the charge of Professor Regnier. He was a Frenchman, but spoke English with perfect ease and precision and a very slight accent. At the time I knew him, he was probably sixty. His hair was quite gray, but his mustache and imperial were still dark. It was rumored among the students that he had left his native land for political reasons, having played for too high stakes at the national game of revolution. True or not, the report naturally heightened the interest which his personality had for us.

"He made it his business to know personally all the students in his classes; and as it is not easy for a man of sixty, especially if he is also their teacher, to become really acquainted with students of twenty, the fact may be taken as evidence of his unusual tact. He was, I think, the most fascinating man I ever saw. His insight into character was like magic, his manners were charming, and his Gallic vivacity made him seem like a boy. Gradually, while still remaining to the rest of the students a genial and friendly instructor, he singled out a smaller circle of particular intimates. Of these I was one, and I believe the most trusted.

"Of course we boys were immensely flattered by the partiality of such a man; but equally of course the pursuit of his own pleasure could scarcely have been the motive which impelled him to seek our companionship. It was, in fact, a motive as unselfish as that of the missionary who leaves the comforts and refinements of civilization and exiles himself among savages that he may win them to his faith. He had been a personal friend and disciple of Auguste Comte, then but lately dead, and on coming to America had sought his present employment, not merely as a means of livelihood, but equally for the opportunity it offered for propagating the new gospel among young men. Do you know much about what Positivism is?"

I confessed that I knew next to nothing,--scarcely more than that there was such a thing.

"I shall not bore you with an account of it," resumed Hammond, "further than to say that it is a scheme for the perfection of the human race. It rejects as idle all theories of superhuman intelligences, and declares the supreme object of the individual love and devotion should be humanity. The rational demonstration of the truth of this system is sought in the course of history, which is claimed to prove Positivism the finality of social evolution. You will find anything else you want to know about it in the books. I dare say you will not be converted; but if you were nineteen instead of twice that, with Hippolyte Regnier to indoctrinate you, I fancy the result would be about what it was in my case.

"His personal influence over us, and the intoxicating flattery implied in being seriously reasoned with on themes so lofty by a man whom we so greatly admired, would have gone far, no doubt, to commend to us any form of opinions he might have taught; but there were not lacking other reasons to account for his success in converting us. As for Comte's dogmatic denial of superhuman existence, and his fanciful schemes of new society, we were too young and crude to realize how unphilosophic was the former, how impossible and undesirable was the latter. While accepting them as facts of a new creed, they meant little to us, nor did Regnier much insist upon them. What most he did insist on was the ethical side of Positivism,--the idea of the essential unity of the individual with the immortal race of man, and his obvious duty to forget self in its service. What could be better adapted to affect generous and impassioned boys than an appeal like this? The magnificent audacity of it, the assumption of man's essential nobleness, the contemptuous refusal to make any terms with selfishness, captivated our imaginations. I know now, indeed, that this enthusiasm of humanity, this passion of self-abnegation, which I thought a new religion, was the heart of the old religions. In its new-fangled disguise the truth and virtue of the doctrine were still operative, and the emotional crisis through which I passed I found was as essentially religious as it was in form unorthodox.

"At the end of sophomore year there were a half-dozen very positive young Positivists in our class. The pride of intellect which we felt in our new enlightenment was intoxicating. To be able to look down from a serene height, with compassion frequently tempered by contempt, upon the rest of the world still groping in the mists of childish superstition, was prodigiously to the taste of youths of eighteen and twenty. How, to be sure, we did turn up our noses at the homely teachings in the college chapel on Sundays! Well do I remember attending my father's church when at home on vacation, and endeavoring to assume the mental attitude of a curious traveler in a Buddhist temple. Together with the intellectual vanity which it fostered, our new faith was commended to us by its flavor of the secret, the hazardous, and the forbidden. We were delightfully conscious of being concerned in a species of conspiracy, which if it came to light would convulse the college and the community, have us expelled, and cause no end of scandal to the public.

"But the more I took my new faith in earnest and tried to make of it the religion it claimed to be, I was troubled by a lack that seemed to be inherent. Humanity, the object of our devotion, was but an abstraction, a rhetorical expression for a mass of individuals. To these individuals I might indeed render affection, service, compassion, tenderness, self-sacrifice; but their number and pettiness forbade me the glow of adoration with which service was touched in religions which offered a personified object of adoration. When, finally, I confided these troubles to Regnier, I expected to be rebuked; but on the contrary, and to my great discomfiture, he embraced me effusively after the Gallic manner. He said

that he had been waiting for the time when in the course of my development I should become conscious of the need I had confessed before explaining to me the provision made for it by Positivism.

"To start with, he put in, as a sort of special plea for Positivism, that it was not singular among religions in recognizing as the object of devotion an abstraction, the mode of the existence of which was a mystery. As a solace to their votaries and an aid to their faith, nearly all religions recognized sacred emblems; not indeed to be confounded in clear minds with the original object of devotion, but worthy of reverence in its place, as its special representative and reminder. In precisely this sense the sacred emblem of humanity was woman.

"Of course, Positivism claiming to be a creed of demonstration, not of faith, Regnier did not ask me to receive this proposition as his mere statement, but proceeded to establish its reasonableness by logic. I am going to give you what I remember of his argument, because I believe still, as I did when I heard it, that it is the only philosophical explanation of the instinctive reverence of man for woman which we have been talking about to-night. It was given to me, of course, as a doctrine peculiar to Positivism; but I don't know of any form of religious belief, inconsistent with the recognition of the sacred quality of womanhood on the grounds given by Regnier. Indeed, I am by no means sure whether the doctrine as I received it is orthodox Positivism at all. I have reason to think that Regnier was quite too original a character for a very good interpreter, and should be interested to know how far his ideas were his own and how far his master's.

"First he pointed out to me as matter of fact that there was no more striking feature of the modern and humane as compared with the ancient and barbaric world than the constantly growing tendency of the most civilized races to apotheosize womanhood. The virgin ideal had been set up by the larger part of Christendom as the object of divine honors. The age of chivalry had translated for all time the language of love into that of worship. Art had personified under the feminine form every noble and affecting ideal of the race, till now it was in the name of woman that man's better part adjured his baser in every sort of strife towards the divine. Is it alleged that it is man's passion for woman that has moved him thus in a sort to deify the sex? Passion is no teacher of reverence. Moreover, it is as the race outgrows the dominion of passion that it recognizes the worshipfulness of woman. The gross and sensual recognize in her no element of sacredness. It is the clear soul of the boy, the poet, and the seer which is most surely aware of it. Equally vain is it to seek the explanation in any general superiority of woman to man, either moral or mental. Her qualities are indeed in engaging contrast with his, but on the whole no such superiority has ever been maintained. How, then, were we to account for a phenomenon so great in its proportions that either it indicates a world-wide madness infecting the noblest nations while sparing the basest, or else must be the outcome of some profound monition of nature, which, in proportion as man's upward evolution progresses, he becomes capable of apprehending? Why this impassioned exaltation by him of his tender companion? What is the secret spring that makes her the ceaseless fountain of lofty inspiration she is to him? What is the hint of divinity in her gentle mien that brings him to his knees? Who is this goddess veiled in woman whom men instinctively reverence yet cannot name?

"The adoration of woman, which may almost be called the natural religion of the modern man, springs from his recognition, instinctive when not conscious, that she is in an express sense, as he is not, the type, the representative, and the symbol of the race from which he springs, of that immortal and mystical life in which the secret of his own is hid. She is this by virtue, not of her personal qualities, but of the mother-sex, which, overbearing in part her individuality, consecrates her to the interests of the race, and makes her the channel of those irresistible attractions by which humanity exists and men are made to serve it. As compared with woman's peculiar identification with the race, man's relation to it is an exterior one. By his constitution he is above all an individual, and that is the natural line of his development. The love of woman is the centripetal attraction which in due time brings him back from the individual tangent to blend him again with mankind. In returning to woman he returns to humanity. All that there is in man's sentiment for woman which is higher than passion and larger than personal tenderness--all, that is to say, which makes his love for her the grand passion which in noble hearts it is--is the fact that under this form his passion for the race finds expression. Mysterious ties, subtending consciousness, bind him, though seemingly separate, to the mighty life of humanity, his greater self, and these are the chords which, when 'Love took up the harp of life,'... 'passed in music out of sight.' In woman humanity is enshrined and made concrete for the homage of man. This is the mighty indwelling which causes her to suggest something more august than herself, and invests her with an impersonal majesty commanding reverence.

"You may imagine with what power such a doctrine as this, set forth by an enthusiast like Regnier, appealed to the mind of an impassioned boy of twenty, as yet pure as a girl, but long vaguely stirred by the master passion of our nature. The other tenets of the Religion of Humanity had been impressed upon me by argument, but at the mere statement of this my heart responded, *O Dea Certe!*

"Subsequently, in response to my questioning, Regnier explained to me how the master had recommended his disciples to give practical effect to the cult of womanhood. I must remember that it was nothing new and nothing peculiar to Positivism for men to adore women to the point even of idolatry. Lovers constantly were doing it. But in these cases the worshipers did not look beyond the personality of the idol. Possibly, no doubt, some dim apprehension of the true grounds of woman's worshipfulness might mingle with the lover's sentiment, but it was very far from being

the clear and distinct sense necessary to redeem his homage from the charge of extravagance. On the other hand, the spirit in which women received the homage men rendered them was usually as mistaken as that in which it was offered. Either, on the one hand, from an impulse of personal modesty they deprecated it, or, on the other hand, they accepted it as a gratification to their personal vanity. In either case, they equally misapprehended their true and valid title to worship, which, while personal qualities might enhance or partially obscure it, was itself in root more than personal, and consisted in the martyr and mother sex which so peculiarly sacrificed and consecrated them to the interests of humanity as to draw to them the homage and loyalty of all men who loved their race. It had been the counsel of his master, Regnier said, that, while his disciples should hold all women in exalted reverence, they should peculiarly address this general sentiment to some particular woman, who, being of the same faith, should be able to accept it worthily and without self-exaltation, in the spirit in which it was offered.

"Of course the reflection was obvious that in the existing conditions of the Positivist propaganda in America it would be impossible to find a woman capable of understanding, much less of accepting, such a relation, and, therefore, that to me the cult which I had been taught must remain entirely theoretical. Homage from men which did not insure to the titillation of the vanity would seem to women, as usually educated, equally incomprehensible and unprofitable.

"It was in recognition of this situation that Regnier ended by making a proposition which testified, more strongly than anything else could have done, both to the enthusiasm and sincerity with which he himself held the faith he preached, and to his confidence in my own equal singleness of heart. He had never before spoken of his personal history or home life. Several times I had spent the evening at his house, but on these occasions I had seen only himself. Certain womanly belongings, however, which I had noticed, and the sound of a piano once or twice, had suggested that the house might not be without a feminine presence. The professor now told me that long ago in France, for a few short, blissful years, he had been the husband of the sweetest of women. She had left behind a daughter, the sole companion of his life and the apple of his eye. She lived in complete seclusion, rarely even leaving the house. He did not desire her to make acquaintances in this country, nor indeed was she able to speak a word of any language but her own. There was no question of my making her acquaintance in the ordinary sense, or even of meeting her a second time, but if I desired to testify my new appreciation of the sacred quality of womanhood, it was possible that she might consent to receive my homage in the name of her sex. He could not be sure what she would say, but he would speak with her about it.

"The following day, a note from him requesting that I should call at his house that evening intimated that he had succeeded in carrying his point. When I called at the time set, he told me that he had found it more difficult than he had anticipated to gain his daughter's consent to see me. She had been very reluctant to assume the attitude required of her, and only her respect for his wishes and the good of the cause, and the assurance he had given her of the entire ingenuousness of my own motive, had induced her finally to yield. After some talk as to the significance of the interview before me, which I was too much agitated to comprehend, he bade me follow him.

"As may readily be supposed, my fancy, from the moment Regnier had suggested this interview, had been exceedingly busy with conjectures as to the sort of scene it would prove, and especially as to the personality of her who was to be the central figure. Except his intimation that the interview would be necessarily without interchange of speech and presumably brief, scarcely more, probably, than a confrontation, he had told me nothing.

"Of course, however, my fancies had not failed to take some form. I think I had a general expectation of finding myself in the presence of a beautiful woman, statuesquely shaped and posed. I imagine that I rather expected her to be enthroned or standing upon some sort of dais, and I am sure that I should not have been surprised had there been some artificial arrangement of lights as in a theatre to add effectiveness to the figure.

"I followed Regnier through several rooms without raising my eyes. Presently he paused and said, 'My daughter.'

"Thrilling with the premonition of a vision of imperious or melting loveliness which should compel my homage by its mere aspect, I raised my eyes to find myself facing a plain-featured, plainly dressed young woman, not ill-looking certainly, but destitute of a single trait striking enough to have won a second glance from me had I met her on the street.

"Her father need not have told me of her reluctance to assume the part his wishes had imposed upon her. For the fraction of an instant only, a pair of black eyes had met mine, and then she had bent her face as low as she could. The downcast head, the burning cheeks, the quick heaving of the breast, the pendent arms, with tensely interlacing fingers and palms turned downward, all told the story of a shy and sensitive girl submitting from a sense of duty to a painful ordeal.

"The sudden and complete wreck of all my preconceptions as to her appearance, as well as the accessories of the scene, left me for a few moments fairly dazed. Not only were my highly wrought expectations as to the present interview brought to humiliating discomfiture, but the influence of the disillusionment instantly retroacted with the effect of making the entire noble and romantic cult which had led up to this unlucky confrontation seem a mere farrago of extravagant and baseless sentiment. What on earth had Regnier been thinking of, to plan deliberately a situation calculated to turn a cherished sentiment into ridicule? If he had seriously thought his daughter capable of supporting

the role he had assigned her, had there ever been a like case of parental fatuity?

"But even as I indignantly asked myself this question, I saw a great light, and recognized that the trouble was neither with Regnier's fatuity nor with his daughter's lack of charms, but with myself, and a most unworthy misconception into which I had fallen as to the whole object and purport of this interview. What had the beauty or the lack of beauty of this girl to do with the present occasion? I was not here to render homage to her for the beauty of her sex, but for its perpetual consecration and everlasting martyrdom to my race. The revulsion of feeling which followed the recognition of the grossness of the mistake I had made had no doubt the effect of greatly intensifying my emotions. I was overcome with contrition for the unworthiness with which I had stood before this girl who had so trusted to my magnanimity, appraising her like a sensualist when I should have been on my knees before her. A reaction of compunctious loyalty made my very heartstrings ache. I saw now how well it had been for a weak-minded fool like myself that she had not chanced to be beautiful or even pretty, for then I should have cheated myself of all that distinguished this solemn meeting from the merest lover's antics. I won in that moment an impression of the tawdriness of mere beauty which I have never gotten over. It seemed to me then, and more or less has ever since, that the beauty of women is a sort of veil which hides from superficial eyes the true adorableness of womanhood.

"Unable longer to resist the magnetism of my gaze, her eyes rose slowly to mine. At their first meeting, her face became crimson; but as she did not avert her eyes, and continued to look into mine, the flush paled swiftly from her face, and with it all the other evidences of her embarrassment passed as quickly away, leaving her bearing wholly changed. It was plain that through my eyes, which in that moment must have been truly windows of my soul, she had read my inmost thoughts, and had perceived how altogether impertinent to their quality self-consciousness on her part would be. As with a gaze growing ever more serene and steadfast she continued to read my thoughts, her face changed, and from the look of a shy and timid maiden it gradually took on that of a conscious goddess. Then, as still she read on, there came another change. The soft black eyes grew softer and yet softer, and then slowly filled with tears till they were like brimming vases. She did not smile, but her brows and lips assumed a look of benignant sweetness indescribable.

"In that moment no supernatural aureole would have added sacredness to that head, or myth of heavenly origin have made that figure seem more adorable. With right good-will I sank upon my knees. She reached forth her hand to me and I pressed my lips to it. I lifted up the hem of her dress and kissed it. There was a rustle of garments. I looked up and she was gone.

"I suppose immediately after that I must have left the house. I only know that the dawn found me miles out of town, walking aimlessly about and talking to myself."

Hammond poured himself a glass of wine, drunk it slowly, and then fell into a profound reverie, apparently forgetful of my presence.

"Is that all?" I asked at last. "Did you not see her again?"

"No," he answered, "I never saw her again. Probably, as her father had intimated, he did not intend that I should. But circumstances also prevented. The very next day there was an explosion in college. There had been a Judas among my fellow-disciples, and the faculty had been informed of the Positivist propaganda going on under their noses. I was suspended for six months. When I returned to college, Regnier had disappeared. He had of course been promptly dismissed, and it was rumored that he had gone back to France. He had left no trace, and I never heard of him again or of his daughter. I don't even know the name of the woman I worshiped." of the woman I worshiped."