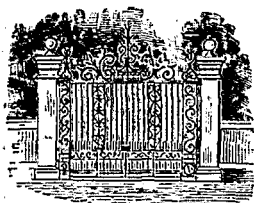


Outside the Gates.

ARISTOPHANES AND WOMEN.

HOW WOMEN CAN SECURE WHAT THEY WISH.



We are often pointed back to the culture of ancient Greece as ideal, and then reminded that, after a certain amount of physical and mental training in youth, women were accustomed to marry, and live thereafter in domestic seclusion (at least, the respectable ones). It is true that they were not expected to earn, their husbands found the money; they were not expected to do hard work, their slaves did that; but they were expected to content themselves entirely in looking after the comforts of the house, husband, and children. They did not go out with their husbands to hear every "new thing" in literature, philosophy, or gossip (only women *déclassées* could do that), and when their husbands came home to them, doubtless they found their stay-at-home partners dull, and felt for them very much what the middle-class Englishmen of fifty years ago felt for their womenkind.

Among the dramatists who reflected the life of this period was the witty satirist, Aristophanes, whose comedies give the nearest approach to *Punch* of the period. He looked at everything in its ludicrous aspect, and found vices and foibles in his greatest contemporaries. So it was not to be expected that he would let women escape, who have always been considered the natural butt of men's raillery. But what he says about women then is worth being considered by women of today.

Aristophanes was honest, bold, and manly. He risked ridicule himself that he might do what he thought good for his great city of Athens, and he was working for peace, when he wrote his group of three plays, "The Acharnians," "The Peace," and "Lysistrata." The Peloponnesian War had lasted for 21 years, when the last play was performed. The poet wanted to show that if women could only combine they could do *anything*. His plot is original. The women of Athens have grown hopeless of any termination of hostilities, so long as the management of affairs is left entirely in the hands of men, who, they say, had little tact, and a bad habit of spending the public money lavishly. They, therefore, under a leader, Lysistrata, whose name signifies "dissolver of armies," unite to consult together for some method of securing peace. They appeal to the women of Corinth, of Boeotia, of Sparta itself, with which their husbands were at war, to unite with them in attempts at pacification. By a stretch of poetic imagination, the women of the other cities manage to meet them very early in the morning, when the men were asleep. They all take an oath to separate themselves from their husbands until terms of peace are arranged. Some of the women are at first reluctant to do

this, "preferring their private ease to the public good," but their hesitation is at last overcome by the enthusiasm of a Spartan lady. It was agreed that the elder women should go and surprise the Acropolis early in the morning. There the public treasury was kept, and they knew well that money was the sinews of war. When the discovery of their success is made, a body of the elder men of Athens ascend the steep incline, laden with wood and fire, intending to smoke the women out. This ruse, however, had been foreseen. The women are provided with buckets of water which they souse on the heads of their assailants and on their fire. The old men have to retire, but call to their help the police, who are also repulsed. Then the Chief Magistrate comes to parley, and a dialogue takes place between him and Lysistrata. He asks why they have taken possession of the citadel. She replies that "they had resolved henceforth to manage the public revenue themselves, so that it might no longer be spent on carrying on this ruinous war."

"But women neither understand revenue nor war!" "Why no. Wives have for long had the management of the private purses of their husbands, to the great advantage of both. Women have made up their mind to have their voice ignored no longer in questions of peace and war. Their remonstrances have hitherto been met with the taunt that war is the business of men, and spinning the business of women. They have always had wit enough to unravel the tangled threads in their work, and they have no doubt they could also smooth out the difficulties of international disputes, if they only had a chance. Men make peace difficult by their overbearing manners, *they* would make it *possible* for an enemy to yield."

"What concern can you women have with war, who contribute nothing to its dangers and hardships?"

"Contribute? We contribute the sons who carry it on."

The women dress the Magistrate in their garments, and bid him go home and card wool, because they have resolved that the proverb shall be reversed, and that henceforth war shall be the business of women, and they shall stay where they are, to make this possible. The Magistrate retires in confusion, and the old men raise the doleful chorus, "The women will set up tyranny."

Meanwhile, under various pretexts, some of Lysistrata's female supporters are trying to steal away home. They know how miserable their husbands must be without them, with no one to cook or to clean. One poor Benedict brings his baby to the foot of the walls, hoping his wife may be persuaded to come home and dress it and feed it.

The strain was becoming severe on both sides, in the Acropolis of Athens, when, just in the nick of time, there enters an embassy from Sparta. The general strike of wives had been too much even for Spartan endurance. They found they could agree with the Athenians on *one* point, that however difficult it was to live with their wives,

[previous page](#)

[next page](#)