

**COLONIAL DAMES
AND GOOD WIVES.
[1896]**

Published @ 2017 Trieste Publishing Pty Ltd

ISBN 9780649552214

Colonial Dames and Good Wives. [1896] by Alice Morse Earle

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Edited by Trieste Publishing Pty Ltd.
Cover @ 2017

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BOSTON AND NEW YORK
HOUGHTON, MIFFLIN & COMPANY
THE RIVERSIDE PRESS CAMBRIDGE
M DCCC XCVI

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CHAPTER I.

CONSORTS AND RELICTS.

IN the early days of the colony of Massachusetts Bay, careful lists were sent back to old England by the magistrates, telling what "to provide to send to New England" in order to ensure the successful planting and tender nourishing of the new settlement. The earliest list includes such homely items as "benes and pese," tame turkeys, copper kettles, all kinds of useful apparel and wholesome food; but the list is headed with a most significant, a typically Puritan item, *Ministers*. The list sent to the Emigration Society by the Virginian colonists might equally well have been headed, to show their most crying need, with the word *Wives*.

The

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The settlement of Virginia bore an entirely different aspect from that of New England. It was a community of men who planted Jamestown. There were few women among the early Virginians. In 1608 one Mistress Forrest came over with a maid, Anne Burrows, who speedily married John Laydon, the first marriage of English folk in the new world. But wives were few, save squaw-wives, therefore the colony did not thrive. Sir Edwin Sandys, at a meeting of the Emigration Society in London, in November, 1619, said that "though the colonists are seated there in their persons some four years, they are not settled in their minds to make it their place of rest and continuance." They all longed to gather gold and to return to England as speedily as possible, to leave that state of "solitary uncouthness," as one planter called it. Sandys and that delightful gentleman, the friend and patron of Shakespeare, the Earl of Southampton, planned, as an anchor in the new land, to send out a cargo of wives for these planters, that the plantation might "grow in generations and not be pieced out from without." In 1620 the Jonathan and the London Merchant

chant brought ninety maids to Virginia on a venture, and a most successful venture it proved.

There are some scenes in colonial life which stand out of the past with much clearness of outline, which seem, though no details survive, to present to us a vivid picture. One is this landing of ninety possible wives — ninety homesick, seasick but timidly inquisitive English girls — on Jamestown beach, where pressed forward, eagerly and amorously waiting, about four hundred lonely emigrant bachelors — bronzed, sturdy men, in leather doublets and breeches and cavalier hats, with glittering swords and bandoleers and fowling-pieces, without doubt in their finest holiday array, to choose and secure one of these fair maids as a wife. Oh, what a glorious and all-abounding courting, a mating-time, was straightway begun on the Virginian shore on that happy day in May. A man needed a quick eye, a ready tongue, a manly presence, if he were to succeed against such odds in supply and demand, and obtain a fair one, or indeed any one, from this bridal array. But whosoever he won was indeed a prize, for all were asserted

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asserted to be "young, handsome, honestly educated maids, of honest life and carriage" — what more could any man desire? Gladly did the husband pay to the Emigration Company the one hundred and twenty pounds of leaf tobacco, which formed, in one sense, the purchase money for the wife. This was then valued at about eighty dollars: certainly a man in that matrimonial market got his money's worth; and the complaining colonial chronicler who asserted that ministers and milk were the only cheap things in New England, might have added — and wives the only cheap things in Virginia.

It was said by old writers that some of these maids were seized by fraud, were trappanned in England, that unprincipled spirits "took up rich yeomans' daughters to serve his Majesty as breeders in Virginia unless they paid money for their release." This trappanning was one of the crying abuses of the day, but in this case it seems scarcely present. For the girls appear to have been given a perfectly fair showing in all this barter. They were allowed to marry no irresponsible men, to go nowhere as servants,

vants, and, indeed, were not pressed to marry at all if against their wills. They were to be "housed lodged and provided for of diet" until they decided to accept a husband. Naturally nearly all did marry, and from the unions with these young, handsome and godly-carriaged maids sprang many of our respected Virginian families.

No coquetry was allowed in this mating. A girl could not promise to marry two men, under pain of fine or punishment; and at least one presumptuous and grasping man was whipped for promising marriage to two girls at the same time — as he deserved to be when wives were so scarce.

Other ship-loads of maids followed, and with the establishment of these Virginian families was dealt, as is everywhere else that the family exists, a fatal blow at a community of property and interests, but the colony flourished, and the civilization of the new world was begun. For the unit of society may be the individual, but the molecule of civilization is the family. When men had wives and homes and children they "sett down satysfied" and no longer sighed for England. Others followed quickly and eagerly;

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eagerly ; in three years thirty-five hundred emigrants had gone from England to Virginia, a marked contrast to the previous years of uncertainty and dissatisfaction.

Virginia was not the only colony to import wives for its colonists. In 1706 His Majesty Louis XIV. sent a company of twenty young girls to the Governor of Louisiana, *Sieur de Bienville*, in order to consolidate his colony. They were to be given good homes, and to be well married, and it was thought they would soon teach the Indian squaws many useful domestic employments. These young girls were of unspotted reputation, and upright lives, but they did not love their new homes ; a dispatch of the Governor says :—

The men in the colony begin through habit to use corn as an article of food, but the women, who are mostly Parisians, have for this kind of food a dogged aversion which has not been subdued. Hence they inveigh bitterly against his Grace the Bishop of Quebec who they say has enticed them away from home under pretext of sending them to enjoy the milk and honey of the land of promise.

I don't know how this venture succeeded, but I cannot fancy anything more like the
personification