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"Whitewash Morally Considered" by May Travis, First UND Commencement: June 13, 1889

May Travis

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“Miss May Travis in the opening of her essay on ‘Whitewash Morally Considered,’ described in a bewitching manner the little whitewashed village in Pennsylvania valley. She told how one found much more to attract and to please in these lowly, whitewashed cottages, surrounded by beautiful flower gardens, than in all the stately, magnificent, and purchased grandeur of the wealthy. Continuing, she said:

‘Was it not the duty of those villagers to whitewash and so appear as beautiful as possible? Certainly. By so doing they became in a small way the benefactors of mankind. The purpose of whitewash is to make a show to make objects look pure and good. It need not deceive anybody; for the person is very dull who cannot detect the coating when he sees it. Good taste applauds when fashion in dress artificially conceals a physical deformity or enhances the charm of natural beauty. Much more, should not sound morality approve when whitewash is so skillfully applied as to cover the defects in character that would make the world only appear more repulsive than it is? It is a solemn dictate of the law of whitewash to keep the best side out. Conceal all you can of your evil nature for the happiness of others. This is politeness. It may be called good common sense. No says the cynic. It is all hypocrisy. It is all wrong. Away with your whitewash! Let people appear as they are. If men are bad at heart let them appear to all men to be bad. If they are coarse and gruff at home, indulging in unkind words and resentful acts, as husband or wife, as father or mother, as son or daughter, as brother or sister, let them show out the same spirit in society, that we may all know them and avoid them. Now, Mr. Cynic, it is the object of this essay to defend whitewash as something commendable, at least; and in some of its aspects partaking of the nature of virtue. If a man is not good, it is something to be conscious of the fact, and as the means of gratifying others, it is his privilege to appear to others as good as he can, for their sake as well as his own. But do you condemn hypocrisy and denounce the hypocrite? Most certainly, hypocrisy is whitewashed malice. But even malice appears better in society when whitewashed than in its natural ‘hideous milieu.’ Malice in itself is hateful to God and man. Mr. Cynic knows not that his desire to have every man appear to be what he is, can spring from no love of virtue. It is rather his desire to feed his depraved mind upon the faults, the misfortunes, the shortcomings and the vices of others. All sensible, virtuous, and noble minds look upon innocent whitewash as the best phase that most people can present, and they must admire it rather than despise it. It shows that they cheerfully put on their best appearances to please others. It is usually those who have most to conceal that are most suspicious of others. ‘Charity covers a multitude of sins.’ Does that mean that it whitewashes them?

But is a coat of whitewash the best show that a mortal can present? This essay entertains no such thought. Our claim is most happily expressed by Goldsmith in these lines:

‘They please, are pleased, they give to get esteem,
Till seeming blest, they grow to what they seem.’”

Grand Forks Daily Herald (evening edition), 13 June 1889, page 4