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<CHARMING WOMEN.>

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There are certain women who are invariably spoken of as charming. We

never hear any other epithet applied to them. They are not said to be

pretty, nor amiable, nor clever, though they may be all three, but

simply charming; which we may take as a kind of verbal amalgam ~~ the

concentration and concretion of all praise. The main feature about

these charming women is their intense feminality. There is no blurring

of the outlines here; no confusion of qualities admirable enough in

themselves but slightly out of place considering the sex; no Amazonian

virtues which leave one in doubt as to whether we have not before us

Achilles in petticoats rather than a true Pyrrha or a more tender

Deidamia.

A charming woman is woman all over ~~ one who places her glory in being

a woman and has no desire to be anything else. She is a woman rather

than a human being, and a lady rather than a woman. One of her

characteristics is the exquisite grace of her manner which so sweetly

represents the tender nature within. She has not an angle anywhere. If

she were to be expressed geometrically, Hogarth's Line of Beauty

is the sole figure that could be used for her. She is flowing,

graceful, bending in mind as in body; she is neither self-asserting

nor aggressive, neither rigid nor narrow; she is a creature who glides

gracefully through life, and adjusts herself to her company and her

circumstances in a manner little less than marvellous; working her own

way without tumult or sharpness; creeping round the obstacles she

cannot overthrow, and quietly wearing down more friable opposition

with that gentle persistency which does so much more than turmoil and

disturbance.

Even if enthusiastic ~~ which she is for art, either as music, as

painting, or yet as poetry ~~ she is enthusiastic in such a sweet and

graceful way that <reg orig=”no one”> no-one </reg> can be offended by a fire which shines and

does not burn. There is no touch of scorn about her and no assumption

of superior knowledge. She speaks to you, poor ignorant Philistine,

with the most flattering conviction that you follow her in all her

flights; and when she comes out, quite naturally, with her pretty

little bits of recondite lore or professional technicalities, you

cannot be so boorish as to ask for an explanation of these trite

matters which she makes so sure you must understand. Are you not an

educated person with a soul to be saved? can you then be ignorant of

things with which <reg orig=”every one”> everyone </reg> of culture is familiar? She discourses

confidentially of musicians and painters unknown to fame, and speaks

as if she knew the secret doings of the Conservatoire and the R. A.

council-chamber alike. The models and the methods, the loves and

the hates, of the artistic world are to her things of every-day life,

and you cannot tell her that she is shooting her delicate shafts wide

of the mark, and that you know no more of what she means than if she

were talking in the choicest Arabic.

If she has been abroad ~~ and she generally has been more or less ~~ she

will pour out her tender little rhapsodies about palazzi and musei of

which you have never heard, but every room of which she assumes you

know by heart; and she will speak of out-of-the-way churches, and grim

old castles perched upon vine-clad mounts, as if you were as well

acquainted with them as with your native hamlet. She will bring into

her discourse all manner of Italian technicalities, as if you

understood the subject as well as she herself understands it; though

your learning is limited to a knowledge of how much has been done in

jute and tallow this last half year, or how many pockets of hops went

off in the market last week. If she has a liking for high life and

titles ~~ and what charming woman has not? ~~ she will mention the names

of all manner of counts and dukes and monsignori unknown to English

society, as though they were her brothers; but if you were to

interrupt the gentle ripple of her speech with such rude breakwaters

as 'who?' and 'what?' the charming woman would think you a horrid

bore ~~ and no man would willingly face that humiliation. One may be a

rhinoceros in one's own haunts, but, as the fable tells us, even

rhinoceroses are ashamed of their parentage when among gazelles.

Never self-asserting, never contradictory, only sweetly and tenderly

putting you right when you blunder, the charming woman nevertheless

always makes you feel her superiority. True, she lays herself as it

were at your feet and gives you a thousand delicate flatteries ~~ indeed

among her specialities is that of being able to set you on good terms

with yourself by her art of subtle flattery; but despite her own

self-abasement and your exaltation you cannot but feel her

superiority; and, although she is too charming to acknowledge what

would wound your pride, you know that she feels it too, and tries to

hide it. All of which has the effect of making you admire her still

more for her grace and tact.

The charming woman is generally notoriously in love with her husband,

who is almost always inferior to her in birth, acquirements, manner,

appearance. This Titania-like affection of hers only shows her

feminine qualities of sacrifice and wifely devotion to greater

advantage, and makes other men envy more ferociously the lucky fellow

who has drawn such a prize. The husband of a charming woman is indeed

lucky in the world's esteem; no man more so. Though he may be one of

the most ordinary, perhaps unpleasant, fellows you know, with a sour

face, an underbred air, and by no means famous in his special sphere,

his wife speaks of him enthusiastically as so good, so clever, so

delightful! <reg orig=”No one”> No-one </reg> knows how good he is, she says; though of

course he has his little peculiarities of temper and the rest of it,

and perhaps <reg orig=”every one”> everyone </reg> would not bear with them as she does. But then

she knows him, and knows his wonderful worth and value! If they are

not seen much together, that comes from causes over which they have no

control, not from anything like disinclination to each other's

society. Certainly, for so happy a marriage, it is a little surprising

how very seldom they are together; and how all her friends are hers

only and not his, and how much she goes into society without him. On

the whole, counting hours, they live very much more apart than united;

but that is the misfortune of his career, of his health, or of hers ~~ a

misfortune due to any cause but that of diversity of tastes,

inharmoniousness of pursuits, or lack of love.

Full of home affection and the tenderest sentiment as she is, the

charming woman does sometimes the oddest-looking things, which a rough

little domestic creature without graceful pretensions would not dream

of doing. Her child is lying dangerously ill, perhaps dying, and she

appears at the grand ball of the season, subdued certainly ~~ how well

that sweet melancholy becomes her! ~~ but always graceful, always

thoughtful for others, and attentive to the minutest detail of her

social duties. And though indeed, she will tell you, she does not know

how she got dressed at all, because of the state of cruel anxiety in

which she is, yet she is undeniably the best dressed woman in the room

and the most carefully appointed. It is against her own will that

she is there, you may be sure; but she has been forced to sacrifice

herself, and tear herself away for an hour. The exigencies of society

are so merciless! ~~ the world is such a terrible Juggernaut! she says,

raising her eyes with plaintive earnestness to yours in the

breathing-times of the waltz.

She has another trial if her husband is ordered out to Canada or the

West Indies. Dearly as she loves him, and though she is heart-broken

at the idea of the separation, yet her health cannot stand the

climate; and she must obey her doctor's orders. She is so delicate,

you know ~~ all charming women are delicate ~~ and the doctor tells her

she could not live six months either in Toronto or Port Royal. If her

lord and master had to go on diplomatic service to St. Petersburg or

Madrid, she might be able to stand the climate then; but that is

different. A dull station, without any of her favourite pleasures,

would be more than she could bear; so she remains behind, goes out

into society, and writes her husband tender and amusing letters once a

month.

The charming woman is the gentlest of her sex. She would not do a

cruel thing nor say an unkind word for the world. When she tells you

the unpleasant things which ill-natured people have said of your

friends or hers, she tells them in the sweetest and dearest way

imaginable. She is so sure there is not a syllable of truth in it all;

and what a shame it is that people should be so ill-natured! In the

gentle tone of sympathy and deprecation peculiar to her, she

gives you all the ugly and uncomfortable reports which have come to

her, and of which you have never heard a breath until this moment. Yet

it is you who are stupid, not she who is initiative, for she tells

them to you as if they were of patent notoriety to the whole world;

only she does not believe them, remember! She takes the most

scrupulous care to deny and defend as she retails, and you cannot

class her with the tribe of the ill-natured whom she censures,

setting, as she does, the whole strength of her gentle words and

generous disbelief in opposition to these ugly rumours. Yet you wish

she had not told you. Her disclaimers spring so evidently from the

affectionate amiability of her own mind, which cannot bear to think

evil, that they have not much effect upon you. The excuse dies away

from your memory, but the ill-savoured report roots; and you feel that

you have lost your respect for your former friends for ever; or, if

they were only hers, then, that nothing should tempt you to know them.

There is no smoke without some fire, you think; and the charming woman

cannot possibly have kindled the flame herself out of sticks and

leaves and rubbish of her own collecting. But how sweet and charitable

she was when she told you! how much you love her for her tenderness of

nature! what a guileless and delightful creature she is!

The charming woman is kind and graceful, but she does not command the

stronger virtues. She flatters sweetly, but, it must be

confessed, she fibs as sweetly. She sometimes owns to this, but only

to fibs that do more good than harm ~~ fibs into the utterance of which

she is forced for the sake of peace and to avoid mischief. It is a

feminine privilege, she says; and men agree with her. Truth at all

times ~~ bold, uncompromising, stern-faced truth ~~ is coarse and

indelicate she says; a masculine quality as little fitted for women as

courage or great bodily strength. Her husband knows that she fibs; her

friends at times find her out too; but though the women throw it at

her as an accusation, the men accept it as a quality without which she

would be less the charming woman that she is; and not only forgive it,

but like her the better for the grace and tact and suppleness she

displays in the process of manufacture. Hers are not the severer

virtues, but the gentler, the more insinuating; and absolute

truth ~~ truth at any price and on all occasions ~~ does not come into the

list.

Charming women, with their plastic manners and non-aggressive force,

always have their own way in the end. They are the women who influence

by unseen methods and who shrink from any open display of power. They

know that their <hi> metier </hi> is to soothe men, to put them on good terms

with themselves, and so to get the benefit of the good humour they

induce; and they dread nothing so much as a contest of wills. They

coax and flatter for their rights, and consequently they are given

privileges in excess of their rights; whereas the women who take

their rights, as things to which they are entitled without favour,

lose them and their privileges together. This art of self-abasement

for future exaltation is one which it is given only to few to carry to

perfection, but no woman is really charming without it. In fact it is

part of her power; and she knows it. Though charming women are

decidedly the favourites with men, they are careful to keep on good

terms with their own sex; and in society you may often see them almost

ostentatiously surrounded by women only, whom they take pains to

please or exert themselves to amuse, but whom they throw into the

shade in the most astonishing way.

Whatever these really charming women are, or do, or wear, is exactly

the right thing; and every other woman fails in proportion to the

distance she is removed from this model. When a charming woman is

dressed richly, the simpler costumes of her friends look poor and

mean; when she is <hi> à la bergère </hi>, the Court dresses about her are

vulgar; when she is gay, quietness is dullness; when she is quiet,

laughter is coarse. And there is no use in trying to imitate her. She

is the very Will-o'-the-wisp of her circle, and no sooner shows her

light here than she flits away there; she has no sooner set one

fashion, which her admiring friends have adopted with infinite pains

and trouble, than she has struck out a new one which renders all the

previous labour in vain. This is part of her very essence; and the

originality which is simply perfection that cannot be repeated, and

not eccentricity that <reg orig=”no one”> no-one </reg> will imitate, comes in as one of the

finest and most potent of her charms. When she lends her patterns to

her friends, or tells them this or that little secret, she laughs in

her heart, knowing that she has shown them a path they cannot possibly

follow and raised up a standard to which they cannot attain. And even

should they do either, then she knows that, by the time they have

begun to get up to her, she will be miles away, and that no art

whatever can approximate them to her as she is. What she was she

tosses among them as a worn-out garment; what she is they cannot be.

She remains still the unapproachable, the inimitable, the charming

woman <hi> par excellence </hi> of her set, whom none can rival.