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<DOVECOTS.>

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Times must be very bad indeed if a faithful few are not still left to

keep the sources of society sweet and wholesome. When corruption has

gone through the whole mass and all classes are bad alike, everything

comes to an end, and there is a general overthrow of national life;

but while some are left pure and unspotted, we are not quite undone,

and we may reasonably hope for better days in the future. In the midst

of the reign of the Girl of the Period, with her slang and her

boldness ~~ of the fashionable woman, with her denial of duty and her

madness for pleasure ~~ we come every now and then upon a group of good

girls of the real old English type; the faithful few growing up

silently among us, but none the less valuable because they are silent

and make no public display; doves who are content with life as they

have it in the dovecot, and have no desire to be either eagles

dwelling on romantic heights, or peacocks displaying their pride in

sunny courts. We find these faithful few in town and country alike;

but they are rifest in the country, where there is less temptation to

go wrong than there is in the large towns, and where life is

simpler and the moral tone undeniably higher. The leading feature of

these girls is their love of home and of their own family, and their

power of making occupation and happiness out of apparently meagre

materials. If they are the elders, they find amusement and interest in

their little brothers and sisters, whom they consider immensely funny

and to whom they are as much girl-mothers as sisters; if they are the

youngers, they idolize their baby nephews and nieces. For there is

always a baby going on somewhere about these houses ~~ babies being the

great excitement of home-life, and the antiseptic element among women

which keeps everything else pure. They are passionately attached to

papa and mamma, whom they think the very king and queen of humanity,

yet whom they do not call by even endearing slang names. It has never

occurred to them to criticize them as ordinary mortals; and as they

have not been in the way of learning the prevailing accent of

disrespect, they have not shaken off that almost religious veneration

for their parents which all young people naturally feel, if they have

been well brought up and are not corrupted.

The yoke in most middle-class country-houses is one fitting very

loosely round all necks; and as they have all the freedom they desire

or could use, the girls are not fretted by undue pressure, and are

content to live in peace under such restraints as they have. They

adore their elder brothers who are from home just beginning the great

battle of life for themselves, and confidently believe them to be

the finest fellows going, and the future great men of the day if only

they care to put out those splendid talents of theirs, and take the

trouble of plucking the prizes within their reach. They may have a

slight reservation perhaps, in favour of the brother's friend, whom

they place on a pedestal of almost equal height. But they keep their

mental architecture a profound secret from <reg orig=”every one”> everyone </reg>, and do not

suffer it to grow into too solid a structure unless it has some surer

foundation than their own fancy. For, though doves are loving, they

are by no means lovesick, and are too healthy and natural and quietly

busy for unwholesome dreams. If one of them marries, they all unite in

loving the man who comes in among them. He is adopted as one of

themselves, and leaps into a family of idolizing sisters who pet him

as their brother ~~ with just that subtle little difference in their

petting, in so much as it comes from sisters unaccustomed, and so has

the charm of novelty without the prurient excitement of naughtiness.

But this kind of thing is about the most dangerous to a man's moral

nature that can befall him. Though pretty to see and undeniably

pleasant to experience, and though perfectly innocent in every way,

still, nothing enervates him so much as this idolatrous submission of

a large family of women. In a widow's house, where there are many

daughters and no sons, and where the man who marries one marries the

whole family and is worshipped accordingly, the danger is of course

increased tenfold; but if there are brothers and a father, the

sister's husband, though affectionately cooed over, is not made quite

such a fuss with, and the association is all the less hurtful in

consequence.

These girls lead a by no means stupid life, though it is a quiet one,

and without any spasmodic events or tremendous cataclysms. They go a

great deal among the village poor, and they teach at the

Sunday-school, and attend the mothers' meetings and clothing-clubs and

the like, and learn to get interested in their humbler friends, who

after all are Christian sisters. They read their romances in real life

instead of in three-volume novels, and study human nature as it is ~~ in

the rough certainly, but perhaps in more genuine form than if they

learnt it only in what is called society. Then they have their

pleasures, though they are of an unexciting kind and what fast girls

would call awfully slow. They have their horses and their croquet

parties, their lawn tennis and their archery meetings; they have

batches of new music, and a monthly box from Mudie's ~~ and they know

the value of both; they go out to tea, and sometimes to dinner, in the

neighbourhood; and they enjoy the rare county balls with a zest

unknown to London girls who are out every night in the week. They have

their village flower-shows, which the great families patronize in a

free-and-easy kind of way, and which give occupation for weeks before

and subject for talk for weeks after; their school feasts, where the

pet parson of the district comes out with his best anecdotes, and

makes mild jokes at a long distance from Sydney Smith; their

periodical missionary meetings, where they have great guns from

London, and where they hear unctuous stories about the saintliness of

converted cannibals, and are required to believe in the power of

change of creed to produce an ethnological miracle; they have their

friends to stay with them ~~ school-girl friends ~~ with whom they

exchange deep confidences, and go back over the old days ~~ so old to

their youth! ~~ their brothers come down in the summer, and their

brothers' friends come with them, and do a little spooning in the

shrubbery. But there is more spooning done at picnics than anywhere

else; and more offers are made there under the shadow of the old ruin,

or in the quiet leafy nook by the river side, than at any other

gathering time of the country. And as we are all to a certain extent

what we are made by our environment, the doves take to these pleasures

quite kindly and gratefully, as being the only ones known to them, and

enjoy themselves in a simplicity of circumstances which would give no

pleasure at all to girls accustomed to more highly-spiced

entertainments.

Doves know very little of evil. They are not in the way of learning

it; and they do not care to learn it. The few villagers who are

supposed to lead ill lives are spoken of below the breath, and

carefully avoided without being critically studied. When the railway

is to be carried past their quiet nest, there is an immense

excitement as the report goes that a knot of strange men have been

seen scattering themselves over the fields with their little white

flags and theodolites, their measuring lines and levels. But when the

army of navvies follows after, the excitement is changed to

consternation, and a general sense of evil to come advancing

ruthlessly towards them. The clergy of the district organize special

services, and the scared doves keep religiously away from the place

where the navvies are hutted. They think them little better than the

savages about whom the Deputation tell them once or twice a year; and

they create almost as much terror as an encampment of gipsies. They

represent the lawless forces of the world and the unknown sins of

strong men; and the wildest story about them is not too wild to be

believed. The railway altogether is a great offence to the

neighbourhood, and the line is assumed to destroy the whole scenic

beauty of the place. There are lamentations over the cockneys it will

bring down; over the high prices it will create, the immorality it

will cause. Only the sons who are out in the world and have learnt how

life goes on outside the dovecot, advocate keeping pace with the

times; and a few of the stronger minded of the sisters listen to them

with a timid admiration of their breadth and boldness, and think there

may be two sides to the question after all. When the dashing captain

and his fast wife suddenly appear in the village ~~ as often happens in

these remote districts ~~ the doves are in a state of great moral

tribulation. They are scandalized by Mrs. Highflyer's costume and

complexion, and think her manners odd and doubtful; her slang shocks

them; and when they meet her in the lanes, talking so loudly and

laughing so shrilly with that horrid-looking man in a green cutaway,

they feel as fluttered as their namesakes when a hawk is hovering over

the farmyard. The dashing captain, who does not use a prayer-book at

church, who stares at all the girls so rudely, and who has even been

seen to wink at some of the prettier cottage girls, and his handsome

wife with her equivocal complexion and pronounced fashions, who makes

eyes at the curate, are never heartily adopted by the local magnates,

though vouched for by some far-away backer; and the doves always feel

them to be strange bodies among them, and out of their rightful

element somehow. If things go quietly without an explosion, well and

good; but if the truth bursts to the surface in the shape of a London

detective, and the Highflyers are found to be no better than they

should be, the consternation and half-awed wonderment at the existence

of so much effrontery and villany in their atmosphere create an

impression which no time effaces. The first clash of innocence with

evil is an event in the life of the innocent the effect of which

nothing ever destroys.

The dovecot is rather dull in the winter, and the doves are somewhat

moped; but even then they have the church to decorate, and the

sentiment of Christmas to enliven them. The absent ones of the

family too, return to the old hearth while they can; and as the great

joy of the dovecot lies in the family union that is kept up, and in

the family love which is so strong, the visits of those who no longer

live at home bring a moral summer as warm and cheering as the physical

sunshine. But they do not all assemble. For many of the doves marry

men whose work lies abroad; these quiet country-houses being the

favourite matrimonial hunting-grounds for colonists and Anglo-Indians.

So that some are always absent whose healths are drunk in the

traditional punch, while eyes grow moist as the names are given. Doves

are not disinclined to marry men who have to go abroad, for all the

passionate family love common to them. Travel is a golden dream to

them in their still homes; but travel properly companioned. For even

the most adventurous among them are not independent, as we mean when

we speak of independence in women. They are essentially home-girls,

family-girls, doves who cannot exist without a dovecot, however

humble. The family is everything to them; and they are utterly unfit

for the solitude which so many of our self-supporting women can accept

quite resignedly. Not that they are necessarily useless even as

breadwinners. They could work, if pushed to it; but it must be in a

quiet womanly way, with the mother, the sister, the husband as the

helper ~~ with the home as the place of rest and the refuge. Their whole

lines are laid in love and quietness; not by any means in inaction,

but all centred within the home circle. If they marry, they find

the love of their husband enough for them, and have no desire for

other men's admiration. Their babies are all the world to them, and

they do not think maternity an infliction, as so many of the miserably

fashionable think it. They like the occupation of housekeeping, and

feel pride in their fine linen and clean service, in their

well-ordered table and neatly-balanced accounts. They are kind to

their servants, who generally come from the old home, and whose

families they therefore know; but they keep up a certain dignity and

tone of superiority towards them in the midst of all their kindness,

which very few town-bred mistresses can keep to town-bred maids. They

have always been the aristocracy in their native place; and they carry

through life the ineffaceable stamp which being 'the best' gives.

Doves are essentially mild and gentle women; not queens of society

even when they are pretty, because not caring for social success and

therefore not laying themselves out for it; for if they please at home

that is all they care for, holding love before admiration, and the

esteem of one higher than the praise of many. If a fault is to be

found with them it is that they have not perhaps quite enough salt for

the general taste, used as it is to such highly-seasoned social food;

but do we really want our women to have so very much character? Do not

our splendid passionate creatures lead madly wretched lives and make

miserably uncomfortable homes? and are not our glorious heroines

better in pictures and in fiction than seated by the domestic fire, or

checking the baker's bill? No doubt the quiet home-staying doves seem

tame enough when we think of the gorgeous beings made familiar to us

by romance, and history, which is more romantic still; but as our

daily lives run chiefly in prose, our doves are better fitted for

things as they are; and to men who want wives and not playthings, and

who care for the peace of family life and the dignity of home, they

are beyond price when they can be found and secured. So that, on the

whole, we can dispense with the splendid creatures of character and

the magnificent queens of society sooner than with the quiet and

unobtrusive doves. And though they do spoil men most monstrously, they

know where to draw the line, and while petting their own at home they

keep strangers abroad at a distance, and make themselves respected as

only modest and gentle women are respected by men.