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<FLIRTING.>

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There are certain things which can never be accurately

described ~~ things so shadowy, so fitful, so dependent on the mood of

the moment, both in the audience and the actor, that analysis and

representation are equally at fault. And flirting is one of them. What

is flirting? Who can define or determine? It is more serious than

talking nonsense and not so serious as making love; it is not chaff

and it is not feeling; it means something more than indifference and

yet something less than affection; it binds <reg orig=”no one”> no-one </reg>; it commits <reg orig=”no one”> no-one </reg>

though it raises expectations in the individual and sets society on

the look-out for results; it is a plaything in the hands of the

experienced but a deadly weapon against the breast of the unwary; and

it is a thing so vague, so protean, that the most accurate measurer of

moral values would be puzzled to say where it exactly ends and where

serious intentions begin.

But again we ask: What is flirting? What constitutes its essence? What

makes the difference between it and chaff on the one hand, and it and

love-making on the other? Has it a cumulative power, and,

according to the old saying of many a pickle making a mickle, does a

long series of small flirtings make up a concrete whole of love? or is

it like an unmortared heap of bricks, potential utilities if

conditions were changed, but valueless as things are? The man who

would be able to reduce flirting to a definite science, who could

analyze its elements and codify its laws, would be doing infinite

service to his generation; but we fear that this is about as difficult

as finding the pot of gold under the end of a rainbow, or catching

small birds with a pinch of salt.

<reg orig=”Every one”> Everyone </reg> has his or her ideas of what constitutes flirting;

consequently <reg orig=”every one”> everyone </reg> judges of that pleasant exercise according to

individual temperament and experience. Faded flowers, who see

impropriety in everything they are no longer able to enjoy, say with

more or less severity that Henry and Angelina are flirting if they are

laughing while whispering together in an alcove, probably the most

innocent nonsense in the world; but the fact that they are enjoying

themselves in their own way, albeit a silly one, is enough for the

faded flower to think they are after mischief, flirting being to her

mind about the worst bit of mischief that a fallen humanity can

perpetrate. The watchful mother, intent on chances, says that dancing

together oftener than is necessary for good breeding and just the

amount of attention demanded by circumstances, is flirting; timid

girls newly out, and not yet used to the odd ways of men, think

they are being flirted with outrageously if their partner fires off

the meekest little compliment at them, or looks at them more tenderly

than he would look at a cabbage; but bolder spirits of both sexes

think nothing worthy of the name which does not include a few

questionable familiarities, and an equivoke or two, more or less

risky. With some, flirting is nothing but the passing fun of the

moment; with others, it is the first lesson of the great unopened book

and means the beginning of the end; with some, it is not even angling

with intent; with others, it is deep-sea fishing with a broad,

boldly-made net, and taking all fish that come in as good for sport if

not for food.

Flirts are of many kinds as well as of all degrees. There are quiet

flirts and demonstrative flirts; flirts of the subtle sort whose

practice is made by the eyes alone, by the manner, by the tender

little sigh, by the bend of the head and the wave of the hand, to give

pathos and point to the otherwise harmless word; and flirts of the

open and rampant kind, who go up quite boldly towards the point, but

who never reach it, taking care to draw back in time before they

fairly cross the border. This is the kind which, as the flirt male,

does incalculable damage to the poor little fluttering dove to whom it

is as a bird of prey, handsome, bold, cruel; but this is the kind

which has unlimited success, using as it does that immense moral

leverage we call <p> 'tantalizing' </p> ~~ for ever rousing hopes and exciting

expectations, and luring a woman on as an <hi> ignis fatuus </hi> lures us

on across the marsh, in the vain belief that it will bring us to our

haven at last.

Akin to this kind are those male flirts who are great in the way in

which they manage to insinuate things without committing themselves to

positive statements. They generally contrive to give the impression of

some mysterious hindrance by which they are held back from full and

frank confession. They hint at fatal bonds, at unfortunate

attachments, at a past that has burnt them up or withered them up, at

any rate that has prevented their future from blossoming in the

direction in which they would fain have had it blossom and bear fruit.

They sketch out vaguely the outlines of some thrilling romance; a few,

of the Byronic breed, add the suspicion of some dark and melancholy

crime as a further romantic charm and personal obstacle; and when they

have got the girl's pity, and the love that is akin to pity, then they

cool down scientifically, never creating any scandal, never making any

rupture, never coming to a moment when awkward explanations can be

asked, but cooling nevertheless, till the thing drops of its own

accord and dies out from inanition; when they are free to carry their

sorrows and their mysteries elsewhere. Some men spend their lives in

this kind of thing, and find their pleasure in making all the women

they know madly or sentimentally in love with them; and if by chance

any poor moth who has burned her wings makes too loud an outcry,

the tables are turned against her dexterously, and she is held up to

public pity ~~ contempt would be a better word ~~ as one who has suffered

herself to love too well and by no means wisely, and who has run after

a Lothario by no means inclined to let himself be caught.

Then there are certain men who flirt only with married women, and

others who flirt only with girls; and the two pastimes are as

different as tropical sunlight and northern moonshine. And there are

some who are <p> 'brothers,' </p> and some who are <p> 'fathers' </p> to their young

friends ~~ suspicious fathers on the whole, not unlike Little Red

Ridinghood's grandmother the wolf, with perilously bright eyes, and

not a little danger to Red Ridinghood in the relationship, how

delightful soever it may be to the wolf. Some are content with

cousinship only ~~ which however breaks down quite sufficient fences;

and some are <p> 'dearest friends,' </p> no more, and find that an exceedingly

useful centre from which to work onward and outward. For, if any peg

will do on which to hang a discourse, so will any relationship or

adoption serve the ends of flirting, if it be so willed.

But what is flirting? Is sitting away in corners, talking in low

voices and looking personally affronted if any unlucky outsider comes

within earshot, flirting? Not necessarily. It is just possible that

Henry may be telling Angelina all about his admiration for her sister

Grace; or Angelina may be confessing to Henry what Charley said to

her last night; ~~ which makes her lower her eyes as she is doing now,

and play with the fringe of her fan so nervously. May be, if not

likely. So that sitting away in corners and whispering together is not

necessarily flirting, though it may look like it. Is dancing all the

<p> 'round' </p> dances together? This goes for decided flirting in the code of

the ball-room. But if the two keep well together? If they are really

fond of dancing, as one of the fine arts combining science and

enjoyment, they would dance with each other all night, though outside

the <p> 'marble halls' </p> they might be deadly enemies ~~ Montagues and

Capulets, with no echo of Romeo and Juliet to soften their mutual

dislike. So that not even dancing together oftener than is absolutely

necessary is unmistakeable evidence, any more than is sitting away in

corners, seeing that equal skill and keeping well in step are reasons

enough for perpetual partnership, making all idea of flirtation

unnecessary. In fact, there is no outward sign nor symbol of flirting

which may not be mistaken and turned round, because flirting is so

entirely in the intention and not in the mere formula, that it becomes

a kind of phantasm, a Proteus, impossible to seize or to depict with

accuracy.

One thing however, we can say ~~ taking gifts and attentions, offered

with evident design and accepted with tacit understanding, may be

certainly held as constituting an important element of flirting. But

this is flirting on the woman's side. And here you are being

continually taken in. Your flirt of the cunningly simple kind,

who smiles so sweetly and seems so flatteringly glad to see you when

you come, who takes all your presents and acted expressions of love

with the most bewitching gratitude and effusion, even she, so simple

as she seems to be, slips the thread and will not be caught if she

does not wish to be caught. At the decisive moment when you think you

have secured her, she makes a bound and is away; then turns round,

looks you in the face, and with many a tear and pretty asseveration

declares that she never understood you to mean what you say you have

meant all along; and that you are cruel to dispel her dream of a

pleasant and harmless friendship, and very wicked indeed because you

press her for a decision. Yes; you are cruel, because you have

believed her honest; cruel, because you did not see through the veil

of flattery and insincerity in which she clothed her selfishness;

cruel, because she was false. This is the flirt's logic when brought

to book, and forced to confess that her pretended love was only

flirting, and that she led you on to your destruction simply because

it pleased her vanity to make you her victim.

Then there are flirts of the open and rollicking kind, who let you go

far, very far indeed, when suddenly they pull up and assume an

offended air as if you had wilfully transgressed known and absolute

boundaries ~~ girls and women who lead you on, all in the way of good

fellowship, to knock you over when you have got just far enough to

lose your balance. That is their form of the art. They like to

see how far they can make a man forget himself, and how much stronger

their own delusive enticements are than prudence, experience and

common-sense. And there are flirts of the artful and <p> 'still waters' </p>

kind, something like the male flirts spoken of just now; sentimental

little pusses ~~ perhaps pretty young wives with uncomfortable husbands,

whose griefs have by no means soured nor scorched, but just mellowed

and refined, them. Or they may be of the sisterly class; creatures so

very frank, so very sisterly and confiding and unsuspicious of evil,

that really you scarcely know how to deal with them at all. And there

are flirts of the scientific kind; women who have studied the art

thoroughly; and who are adepts in the use of every weapon known ~~ using

each according to circumstances and the nature of the victim, and

using each with deadly precision. From such may a kind Providence

deliver us! As the tender mercies of the wicked, so are the scientific

flirts ~~ the women and the men who play at bowls with human hearts, for

the stakes of a whole life's happiness on the one side and a few weeks

of gratified vanity on the other.

It used to be an old schoolboy maxim that no real gentleman could be

refused by a lady, because no real gentleman could presume beyond his

line of encouragement. <hi> À fortiori </hi>, no lady would or could give more

encouragement than she meant. What are we to say then of our flirts if

this maxim be true? Are they really <p> 'no gentlemen' </p> and <p> 'no ladies,' </p>

according to the famous formula of the kitchen? Perhaps it would

be said so if gentlehood meant now, as it meant centuries ago, the

real worth and virtue of humanity. For flirting with intent is a

cruel, false, heartless amusement; and time was when cruelty and

falsehood were essentially sins which vitiated all claims to

gentlehood. And yet the world would be very dull without that innocent

kind of nonsense which often goes by the name of flirting ~~ that

pleasant something which is more than mere acquaintanceship and less

than formal loverhood ~~ that bright and animated intercourse which

makes the hours pass so easily, yet which leaves no bitter pang of

self-reproach ~~ that indefinite and undefinable interest by which the

one man or the one woman becomes a kind of microcosm for the time, the

epitome of all that is pleasant and of all that is lovely. The only

caution to be observed is: ~~ Do not go too far.