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<MEN'S FAVOURITES.>

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We often hear women speak with a certain curious disdain of one of

themselves as a 'gentlemen's favourite;' generally adding that

gentlemen's favourites are never liked by their own sex, and giving

you to understand that they are minxes rather than otherwise, and

objectionable in proportion to their attractiveness. They never can

understand why they should be so attractive, they say; and hold it as

one of the unfathomable mysteries of men's bad taste--the girls to

whom no man addresses half a dozen words in the course of the evening

being far prettier and nicer than the favourite with whom everybody is

talking, and for whom all men are contending. Yet see how utterly they

are neglected, while she is surrounded with admirers. But then she is

an artful little flirt, they say, who lays herself out to attract,

while the others are content to stay quietly in the shade until they

are sought. And they speak as if to attract men's admiration was a

sin, and not one of the final causes of woman as well as one of her

chief social duties.

There is always war between the women who are gentlemen's favourites

and those who are not; and if the last dislike the first, the first

despise the last, and go out of their way to provoke them; a thing not

difficult to do when a woman gives her mind to it. A gentlemen's

favourite is generally attacked on the score of her morality, not to

speak of her manners, which are pronounced as bad as they can be;

while, how pretty soever men may think her, her own sex decry her, and

pick her to pieces with such effect that they do not leave her a

single charm. She is assumed to be incapable of anything like real

earnestness of feeling; of anything like true womanliness of

sentiment; to be ignorant of the higher rules of modesty; to be fast

or sly, according to her speciality of style; and if you listen to her

dissector you will find in time that she has every fault incidental to

a frail humanity, while her noblest virtue is in all probability a

'kind of good nature' which does not count for much. In return, the

favourite sneers at the wallflower, whom she calls stupid and

spiteful, and whom she rejoices to annoy by the excess of her

popularity; nothing pleasing her so much as to make herself look worse

than she is in the way of men's liking--except it be to carry off the

one tup lamb belonging to a wallflower, and brand him as of her own

multitudinous herd. The quarrel is a deadly one as regards the

combatants, but it has very little effect on the 'ring;' for,

notwithstanding the faults and frailties of which they hear so much,

the men flock round the one and make her the public favourite of the

set. But, as the valid result, probably the prize match of the circle

chooses a stupid wallflower for life; and the favourite who has

ridiculed the successful prizeholder scores of times, and who would

give ten years of her life to be in her place, has to swallow her

confusion as she best can, and accept her discomfiture as if she liked

it.

If a men's favourite begins her career unmarried, she most frequently

remains unmarried to the end; fulfilling her mission of charming all

and fixing none till she comes to the age when her sex has no mission

at all. If she is married she has developed after the event; in her

nonage having been a shy if observant wallflower, quietly watching the

methods which later she has so ably applied, and taking lessons from

the very girls who queened it over her with that insolent supremacy

which, more than all else, she noted, envied and profited by. If she

marries while a favourite and in the full swing of her triumphs, she

probably gets pulled up by her husband (unless she is in India, or

wherever else women are at a premium and mistresses of the situation),

and subsides into the best and most domestic kind of 'brooding hen.'

However that may be, marriage, which is the great transforming agent

of a woman's character, seldom leaves her on the same lines as before;

though sometimes of course the foolish virgin developes into the

frisky matron, and the girl who begins life as a men's favourite ends

it as a mature siren.

There are two kinds of men's favourites--the bright women who amuse

them and the sympathetic ones who love them. But these last are of a

doubtful, what country people call 'chancy,' kind; women who show

their feelings too openly, who fall in love too seriously, or perhaps

unasked altogether, being more likely to irritate and repel than to

charm. But the bright, animated women who know how to talk and do not

preach; who say innocent things in an audacious way and audacious

things in an innocent way; who are clever without pedantry; frank

without impudence; quick to follow a lead when shown them; and who

know the difference between badinage and earnestness, flirting and

serious intentions--these are the women who are liked by men and whose

social success in no wise depends on their beauty.

Of one thing the clever woman who wants to be a men's favourite must

always be careful--to keep that half step in the rear which alone

reconciles men to her superiority of wit. She must not shine so much

by her own light as by contact with theirs; and her most brilliant

sallies ought to convey the impression of being struck out by them

rather than of being elaborated by herself alone--suggested by what

had gone before, if improved on for their advantage. Else she offends

masculine self-love, never slow to take fire, and gains an element of

hardness and self-assertion incompatible with her character of

favourite. Not that men dislike all kinds of self-assertion. The

irrepressible little woman with her trim waist and jaunty air, pert,

pretty, defiant, who laughs in the face of the burly policeman able to

crush her between his finger and thumb, and to whom ropes and barriers

are things to be skipped over or dived under, as the case may be--she

who is all cackle and self-assertion like a little bantam, is also

most frequently a men's favourite, and encouraged in her saucy

forwardness.

Then there is the graceful, fragile, swan-necked woman, who, a

generation ago, would have been one of the Della Cruscan school, all

poetry and music and fine feelings, and of a delicacy so refined that

broad-browed Nature herself had to be veiled and toned down to the

subdued key proper for the graceful creature to accept--but nowadays

this graceful creature plunges boldly into the midst of the most

tremendous realism, is an ardent advocate for woman's rights, and

perhaps goes out 'on the rampage,' on platforms and the like to

advocate doctrines as little in harmony with the kind of being she is

as would be a diet of horseflesh and brandy. She gets her following;

and men who do not agree with her delight to set her off on her

favourite topics, just as women like to see their little girls play

with their dolls and repeat to the harmless dummy the experiences

which have been real to themselves.

These two classes of self-assertion are mere plays which amuse men;

but when it comes to a reality, and is no longer a play--when a man is

made to feel small, useless, insignificant by the side of a woman--he

meets them with something he neither likes nor easily forgives; and if

such a woman had the beauty of Venus, she would not be a men's

favourite of the right sort; though some of course would admire her

and do their best to spoil and make a fool of her.

A men's favourite of the right sort must, among other things, be well

up in the accidence of flirting, and know how to take it at exactly

its proper value. She must be able to accept broad compliments, or

more subtle love-making, without either too serious an acceptance or

too grave a deprecation. This is a great art, and one that, more than

any other, puts men at their ease and sets the machinery of pleasant

intercourse in harmonious action. Never to show whether she is really

hit or not; never to give a fop occasion for a boast nor an enemy room

for a pitying sneer; to take everything in good part and to be as

quick in giving as in receiving; never to be off her guard; never to

throw away her arms; to conceal any number of foxes that may be

gnawing at her beneath her cloak--this kind of flirting, in which most

men's favourites are adepts, is an art that reaches almost the

dimensions of a science. And it is just that in which your very

intense, your very earnest and sincere, women are utter failures. They

know nothing of badinage, but take everything \_au grand sérieux\_; and

when you mean to be simply playful and complimentary, imagine you in

tragic earnest, and think themselves obliged to frown down a

compliment as a liberty; or else they accept it with a passionate

pleasure that shows how deeply it has struck.

These intense and very sincere women are not as a rule men's

favourites, unless they have other qualities of such a pleasant and

seductive kind as to excuse the enormous blunder they make of wearing

their hearts on their sleeves for drawing-room daws to peck at, and

the still greater blunder of confounding love-making with love. They

may be, and if they have nice manners and are good-tempered they

probably are, of the race of popular women; that is, liked by both men

and women; but they are not men's favourites \_par excellence\_, who

moreover are never liked by women at all.

Women are quite right in one thing, hard as it seems to say it:--men's

favourites, whom women dislike and distrust, are not usually good for

much morally. They are often false, insincere, superficial, and

possibly with a very low aim in life. And the men know all this, but

forgive it for the sake of the pleasantness and charm which is the

grace that shadows, or rather brightens, all the rest; having

oftentimes indeed a half-contemptuous tolerance for the sins of their

favourites as not expecting anything better from them. Grant that they

are false, that they sail perilously near the wind, are shifty and

untrustworthy--what of that? They are not favourites because of their

good qualities, only because of their pleasant ones; because of that

subtle \_je ne sais quoi\_ of old writers which stands one in such good

stead when one is at a loss for an analysis, and which is the only

term that expresses the strong yet indefinite charm which certain

women possess for men. It is not beauty; it is not necessarily

cleverness taken in the sense of education, though it must be a

keenness if not depth of intellect, and smartness if not the power of

reasoning; it certainly is not goodness; it is not always youth, nor

yet warmth of feeling--though all these things come in as

characteristics in their turn; but it is companionship and the power

of amusing. Still, what is it that creates this power, this

companionship? A smart, pert, flippant little minx, as women call her,

with a shrill voice and a saucy air, may be the men's favourite of one

set; a refined, graceful woman, speaking softly, and with pleading

eyes, may be the favourite of another; a third may be a blunt,

off-handed young person, given to speaking her mind so that there

shall be no mistake; a fourth may be a silent and seemingly a shy

woman, fond of sitting out in retired places, and with a reputation

for flirting of a quiet kind that sets the woman's fingers tingling.

There is no settled rule anyhow, and all kinds have their special

sphere of shining, according to circumstances. But whatever they may

be, they are useful in their generation and valuable for such work as

they have to do. Society is a miserably dull affair to men when there

are no favourites of any sort; where the womanhood in the room is of

the kind that herds together as if for protection, and looks askance

over its shoulder at the wolves in coats and beards who prowl about

the sheepfold of petticoats; where conversation is monosyllabic in

form and restricted in substance; where pleasant men who talk are

considered dangerous, and fascinating women who answer immoral; where

the matrons are grim and the maidens still in the bread-and-butter

stage of existence; and where young wives take matrimonial fidelity to

mean making themselves disagreeable to every man but their husband, on

the plea that one never knows what may happen, and that you cannot go

on with what you never begin.