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<SHUNTED DOWAGERS.>

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The typical mother-in-law is, as we all know, fair game for every

one's satire; and according to the odd notions which prevail on

certain points, a man is assumed to show his love for his wife by

systematic disrespect to her mother, and to think that her new

affections will be knit all the closer the more loosely he can induce

her to hold her old ones. The mother-in-law, according to this view of

things, has every fault. She interferes, and always at the wrong time

and on the wrong side; she makes a tiff into a quarrel and widens a

coolness into a breach; she is self-opinionated and does not go with

the times; she treats her daughter like a child and her son-in-law

like an appendage; she spoils the elder children and feeds the baby

with injudicious generosity; she spends too much on her dress,

wears too many rings, trumps her partner's best card and does not

attend to the 'call;'--and she is fat. But even the well abused

mother-in-law--the portly old dowager who has had her day and is no

longer pleasing in the eyes of men--even she has her wrongs like most

of us; and if she sometimes asserts her rights more aggressively than

patiently, she has to put up with many disagreeable rubs for her own

part; and female tempers over fifty are not notorious for humility.

Take the case of a widow with means, whose family is settled. Not a

daughter to chaperone, not a son to marry; all are so far happily off

her hands, and she is left alone. But what does her loneliness mean?

In the first place, while her grief for her husband is yet new--and we

will assume that she does grieve for him--she has to turn out of the

house where she has been queen and mistress for the best years of her

life; to abdicate state and style in favour of her son and her son's

wife whom she is sure not to like; and, however good her jointure may

be, she must necessarily find her new home one of second-rate

importance. Perhaps however, the family objects to her having a home

of her own. Dear mamma must give up housekeeping and divide her time

among them all; but specially among her daughters, being more likely

to get on well with their husbands than with her sons' wives.

Dear mamma has means, be it remembered. Perhaps she is a good natured

soul, a trifle weak and vain in proportion; who knows what

evil-disposed person may not get influence over her and exercise it to

the detriment of all concerned? She has the power of making her will,

and, granting that she is proof against the fascinations of some

fortune-hunting scamp twenty years at the least her junior--may be

forty, who knows? do not men continually marry their grandmothers if

they are well paid for it?--and though every daughter's mamma is of

course normally superior to weakness of this kind, yet accidents will

happen where least expected. And even if there is no possible fear of

the fascinating scamp on the look-out for a widow with a jointure,

there are artful companions and intriguing maids who worm themselves

into confidence and ultimate power; sly professors of faiths dependent

on filthy lucre for their proof of divinity; and on the whole, all

things considered, dear mamma's purse and person are safest in the

custody of her children. So the poor lady, who was once the head of a

place, gives up all title to a home of her own, and spends her time

among her married daughters, in whose houses she is neither guest nor

mistress. She is only mamma; one of the family without a voice in the

family arrangements; a member of a community without a recognized

status; shunted; set aside; and yet with dangers of the most delicate

kind besetting her path in all directions. Nothing can be much more

unsatisfactory than such a position; and none much more difficult to

steer through, without renouncing the natural right of self-assertion

on the one hand, or certainly rasping the exaggerated susceptibilities

of touchy people on the other.

In general the shunted dowager has as little indirect influence as

direct power; and her opinion is never asked nor desired as a matter

of graceful acknowledgment of her maturer judgment. If she is appealed

to, it is in some family dispute between her son and daughter, where

her partizanship is sought only as a makeweight for one or other of

the belligerents. But, so far as she individually is concerned, she is

given to understand that she is rococo, out of date, absurd; that,

since she was young and active, things have entered on a new phase

where she is nowhere, and that her past experience is not of the

slightest use as things are nowadays. If she has still energy enough

left, so that she likes to have her say and do her will, she has to

pass under a continual fire of opposition. If she is timid,

phlegmatic, indolent, or peaceable, and with no fight in her, she is

quietly sat upon and extinguished.

Dear mamma is the best creature in the world so long as she is the

mere pawn on the young folks' domestic chess-board, to be placed

without an opposing will or sentiment of her own. She is the 'greatest

comfort' to her daughter; and even her son-in-law assents to her

presence, so long as she takes the children when required to do so,

does her share of the tending and more than her share of the giving,

but never presuming to administer nor to correct; so long as she is

placidly ready to take off all the bores; listen to the interminable

story-tellers; play propriety for the young people; make conversation

for the helplessly stupid or nervous; so long in fact as she will make

herself generally useful to others, demand nothing on her own account,

and be content to stand on the siding while the younger world whisks

up and down at express speed at its pleasure. Let her do more than

this--let her sometimes attempt to manage and sometimes object to be

managed--let her have a will of her own and seek to impose it--and

then 'dear mamma is so trying, so fond of interfering, so unable to

understand things;' and nothing but mysterious 'considerations' induce

either daughter or son-in-law to keep her.

No one seems to understand the heartache it must have cost her, and

that it must be continually costing her, to see herself so suddenly

and completely shunted. Only a year ago and she had pretensions of all

kinds. Time had dealt with her leniently, and no moment had come when

she had suddenly leaped a gulf and passed from one age to another

without gradations. She had drifted almost imperceptibly through the

various stages into a long term of mature sirenhood, remaining always

young and pretty to her husband. But now her widow's cap marks an era

in her life, and the loss of her old home a new and descending step in

her career. She is plainly held to have done with the world and all

individual happiness--all personal importance; plainly told that she

is now only an interposing cushion to soften the shock or ease the

strain for others. But she does not quite see it for her own part, and

after having been so long first--first in her society, in her home,

with her husband, with her children--it is a little hard on her that

she should have to sink down all at once into a mere rootless waif, a

kind of family possession belonging to every one in turn and the

common property of all, but possessing nothing of herself.

Of course dear mamma can make herself bitterly disagreeable if she

likes. She can taunt instead of letting herself be snubbed. She can

interfere where she is not wanted; give unpalatable advice; make

unpleasant remarks; tell stinging truths; and in all ways act up to

the reputation of the typical mother-in-law. But in general that is

only when she has kept her life in her own hands; has still her place

and her own home; remains the centre of the family and its recognized

head; with the dreadful power of making innumerable codicils and

leaving munificent bequests. If she has gone into the Learism of

living about among her daughters, it is scarce likely that she has

character enough to be actively disagreeable or aggressive.

On a first visit to a country-house it is sometimes difficult to

rightly localize the old lady on the sofa who goes in and out of the

room apparently without purpose, and who seems to have privileges but

no rights. Whose property is she? What is she doing here? She is dear

mamma certainly; but is she a personage or a dependent? Is she on a

visit like the rest of us? Is she the maternal lodger whose income

helps not unhandsomely? or, has she no private fortune, and so lives

with her son-in-law because she cannot afford to keep house on her own

account? She is evidently shunted, whatever her circumstances, and has

no \_locus standi\_ save that given by sufferance, convenience, or

affection. Naturally she is the last of the dowagers visiting at the

house. She may come before the younger women, from the respect due to

age; but her place is at the rear of all her own contemporaries; not

for the graceful fiction of hospitality, but because she is one of the

family and therefore must give precedence to strangers.

She is the movable circumstance of the home life. The young wife, of

course, has her fixed place and settled duties; the master is the

master; the guests have their graduated rights; but the shunted

dowager is peripatetic and elastic as well as shunted, and to be used

according to general convenience. If a place is vacant, which there is

no one else to fill, dear mamma must please to take it; if the party

is larger than there are places, dear mamma must please stay away. She

is assumed to have got over the age when pleasure means pleasure, and

to know no more of disappointment than of skipping. In fact, she is

assumed to have got over all individuality of every kind, and to be

able to sacrifice or to restrain as she may be required by the rest.

Perhaps one of her greatest trials lies in the silence she is obliged

to keep, if she would keep peace. She must sit still and see things

done which are gall and wormwood to her. Say that she has been

specially punctilious in habits, suave in bearing, perhaps a trifling

humbugging and flattering--she has to make the best of her daughter's

brusqueries and uncontrolled tempers, of her son-in-law's dirty boots,

and the new religion of outspokenness which both profess. Say that she

has been accustomed to speak her mind with the uncompromising boldness

of a woman owning a place and stake in the county--she has to curb the

natural indignation of her soul when her young people, wiser in their

generation or not so securely planted, make friends with all sorts and

conditions, are universally sweet to everybody, hunt after popularity

with untiring zest, and live according to the doctrine of angels

unawares. The ways of the house are not her ways, and things are not

ordered as she used to order them. People are invited with whom she

would not have shaken hands, and others are left out whose

acquaintance she would have specially affected. All sorts of

subversive doctrines are afloat, and the old family traditions are

sure to be set aside. She abhors the Ritualistic tendencies of her

son-in-law, or she despises his Evangelical proclivities; his politics

are not sound and his vote fatally on the wrong side; and she laments

that her daughter, so differently brought up, should have been won

over as she has been to her husband's views. But what of that? She is

only a dowager shunted and laid on the shelf; and what she likes or

dislikes does not weigh a feather in the balance, so long as her purse

and person are safe in the family, and her will securely locked up in

the solicitor's iron safe, with no likelihood of secret codicils

upstairs. On the whole then, there is a word to be said even for the

dreadful mother-in-law of general scorn; and, as the shunted dowager,

the poor soul has her griefs of no slight weight and her daily

humiliations bitter enough to bear.