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<SWEET SEVENTEEN.>

<Eliza Lynn Linton>

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A vast amount of poetry has always been thrown round that special time

of a woman's life when,

Standing with reluctant feet

Where the brook and river meet,

she is no longer a child and yet not quite a woman--that transition

time between the closed bud and the full-blown flower which we in

England express by the term, among others, of Sweet Seventeen. Without

meaning to be sentimental, or to envelope things in a golden haze

wrought by the imagination only and nowhere to be found in fact, we

cannot deny the peculiar charm which belongs to a girl of this age, if

she is nice, and neither pert nor silly. Besides, it is not only what

she is that interests us, but what she will be; for this is the time

when the character is settling into its permanent form, so that the

great thought of every one connected with her is, How will she turn

out? Into what kind of woman will the girl develop? and, What kind of

life will she make for herself?

Certainly Sweet Seventeen may be a most unlovely creature, and in

fact she often is; a creature hard and forward, having lost the

innocence and obedience of childhood and having gained nothing yet of

the tact and grace of womanhood; a creature whose hopes and thoughts

are all centred on the time when she shall be brought out and have her

fling of flirting and fine dresses with the rest. Or she may be only a

gauche and giggling schoolgirl, with a mind as narrow as her life,

given up to the small intrigues and scandals of the dormitory and the

playground--a girl who scamps her lessons and cheats her masters;

whose highest efforts of intellect are shown in the cleverness with

which she can break the rules of the establishment without being found

out; who thinks talking at forbidden times, peeping through forbidden

windows, giving silly nicknames to her companions and teachers, and

telling silly secrets with less truth than ingenuity in them, the

greatest fun imaginable, and all the greater because of the spice of

rebellion and perversity with which her folly is dashed. Or she may be

a mere tomboy, regretting her sex and despising its restraints;

cultivating schoolboy slang and aping schoolboy habits; ridiculing her

sisters and disliked by her companions, while thinking girlhood a bore

and womanhood a mistake in exact proportion to its feminality. Or she

may be a budding miss, shy and awkward, with no harm in her and as

little good--a mere sketch of a girl, without a leading line as yet

made out or the dominant colour so much as indicated.

Sometimes she is awkward in another way, being studious and

preoccupied--when she passes for odd and original, and is partly

feared, partly disliked, and wholly misunderstood by her own young

world; and sometimes she has a cynical contempt for men and beauty and

pleasure and dress, when she will make herself ridiculous by her

revolt against all the canons of good taste and conventionality. But

after her \_début\_ in tattered garments of severe colours and ungainly

cut, she will probably end her days as a frantic Fashionable, the

salvation of whose soul depends on the faultless propriety of her

wardrobe. The eccentricities of Sweet Seventeen not unfrequently

revenge themselves by an exactly opposite extravagance of maturity.

But though there are enough and to spare of girls according to all

these patterns, the Sweet Seventeen of one's affections is none of

them. And yet she is not always the same, but has her different

presentations, her varying facets, which give her variety of charm and

beauty.

The best and loveliest thing about Sweet Seventeen is her sense of

duty--for the most part a new sense. She no longer needs to be told

what to do; she has not to be kept to her tasks by the fear of

authority nor the submissive grace of obedience; but of her own free

will, because understanding that it is her duty and that duty is a

holier thing than self-will, she conscientiously does what she does

not like to do, and cheerfully gives up what she desires without being

driven or exhorted. She has generally before her mind some favourite

heroine in a girl's novel, who goes through much painful discipline

and comes out all the brighter for it in the end; and she makes noble

resolves of living as worthily as her model. She comforts her soul

too, with passages from Longfellow and Tennyson and the 'Christian

Year,' and learns long extracts from 'Evangeline' and the 'Idyls;'

poetry having an almost magical influence over her, nearly as powerful

as the Sunday sermons to which she listens so devoutly and tries so

patiently to understand. For the first time she wakes to a dim sense

of her own individuality, and confesses to herself that she has a life

of her own, apart from and extraneous to her mere family membership.

She is not only the sister or the daughter living with and for her

parents or her brothers and sisters, but she is also herself, with a

future of her own not to be shared with them, not to be touched by

them. And she begins to have vague dreams of this future and its

hero--dreams that are as much of fairyland as if they were of the

young prince coming over the sea in a golden boat to find the princess

in a tower of brass waiting for him.

Quite impersonal, and with a hero only in the clouds, nevertheless

these dreams are suggested by the special circumstances of her life,

by her favourite books or the style of society in which she has been

placed. The young prince is either a beautiful and high-souled

clergyman--not unlike the young vicar or the new curate, but

infinitely more beautiful--an apostle in the standing collar and

single-breasted coat of the nineteenth century; or he is an artist in

a velvet blouse and with flowing hair, living in a world of beauty

such as no Philistine can imagine; or he is a gallant sailor, with

blue eyes and a loose necktie, looking up to heaven in a gale, and

thinking of his mother and sisters at home and of the one still more

beloved, when he certainly ought to be thinking of tarry ropes and

coarse sailcloth; or he is a magnificent young officer heading his men

at a charge, and looking supremely well got up and handsome. This is

the kind of \_futur\_ she dreams of when she dreams at all, which is not

often. The reality of her mature life is perhaps a stolid square-set

squire, or a prosaic city merchant without the thinnest thread of

romance in his composition; while her own life, which was to be such a

lovely poem of graceful usefulness and heroic beauty, sinks into the

prosaic routine of housekeeping and society, the sigh after the

vanished ideal growing fainter and fainter as the weight of fact grows

heavier.

Married men are all sacred to Sweet Seventeen when she is a good girl;

so are engaged men. For the matter of that, she believes that nothing

could induce her to marry either a widower or one who had been already

engaged, as nothing could induce her to marry any man under five foot

eleven, or with a snub nose or sandy whiskers. Sweet Seventeen has in

general the most profound aversion for boys. To be sure she may have

her favourites--very few and very seldom; but she mostly thinks them

stupid or conceited, and impartially resents either their awkward

attentions to herself or their assumptions of superiority. An

abnormally clever boy--the Poet-Laureate or George Stephenson of his

generation--is her detestation, because he is odd and unlike every one

else; while the one that she dislikes least among them is the school

hero, who is first in the sports and takes all the prizes, and who

goes through life loved by every one and never famous.

For her several brothers she has a range of entirely different

feelings. Her younger schoolboy brothers she regards as the torments

of her existence, whose unkempt hair, dirty boots and rude manners are

her special crosses, to be borne with patience, tempered by an active

endeavour after reform. But the more advanced, and those who are older

than herself, are her loves for whom she has an enthusiastic

admiration, and whose future she believes in as something specially

brilliant and successful. If only slightly older or younger than

herself, she impresses them powerfully with the sentiment of her

superiority, and patronizes them--kindly enough; but she makes them

feel the ineffable supremacy of her sex, and how that she by virtue of

her womanhood is a glorified creature beside them--an Ariel to their

Caliban.

Now too, she begins to speak to her mother on more equal terms; to

criticize her dress, and to make her understand that she considers her

old-fashioned and inclined to be dowdy. She ties her bonnet-strings

for her; arranges her cap; smartens up her old dress and compels her

to buy a new one; and, while considering her immeasurably ancient,

likes her to look nice, and thinks her in her own way beautiful.

Sometimes she opposes and quarrels with her, if the mother has less

tact than arbitrariness. But this is not her natural state; for one of

the characteristics of Sweet Seventeen is her love for her mother and

her need of better counsel and guidance; so that if she comes into

opposition with her it is only through extreme pain, and the bitter

teaching of tyranny and injustice. This is just the age indeed, when

the mother's influence is everything to a girl; and when a silly, an

unjust, or an unprincipled woman is the very ruin of her life. But

with a low or evil-natured mother we seldom see a Sweet Seventeen

worth the trouble of writing about: which shows at least one

thing--the importance of the womanly influence at such a time, and how

so much that we blame in our modern girls lies to the account of their

mothers.

Great tact is required with Sweet Seventeen in such society as is

allowed her; care to bring her out a little without obtruding her on

the world, without making her forward and consequential, and without

attracting too much attention to her. She is no longer a child to be

shut away in the nursery, but she is not yet entitled to the place and

consideration of a member of society. And yet it would be cruel to

debar her wholly from all that is going on in the house. To be sure

there is the governess, as well as mamma, to look after her manners

and to give her rope enough and not too much; but by the time a girl

is seventeen a governess has ceased to be the autocrat \_ex officio\_,

and she obeys her or not according to their respective strengths.

Still, the governess or mamma is for the most part at her elbow; and

Sweet Seventeen, if well brought up, is left very little to her own

guidance, and sees the world only through half-opened doors.

Girls of this age are often wonderfully sad, and full of a kind of

wondering despair at the sin and misery they are beginning to learn.

They take up extreme views in religion and talk largely on the

nothingness of pleasure and the emptiness of the world; and many fair

young creatures whom their elders, laden with sorrowful experience,

think full of hope and joy, are ready to give up all the pleasure of

life, and to lay down life itself, for very disgust of that of which

they know nothing. They delight in sorrowful lamentations and

sentimental regrets put into rhyme; and one of the funniest things in

the world is to see a girl dancing with the merriest in the evening,

and to hear her talking broken-hearted pessimism in the morning. It is

merely an example of the old proverb about the meeting of extremes;

vacuity leading to the same results as experience.

But however she takes this unknown life, it is always in an unreal and

romantic aspect. Some of more robust mind delight in the bolder

stories of Greece and Rome, and wish they had played a part in the

sensational heroism of those grand old times; while others go to

Venice, and make pictures for themselves out of the gliding gondolas

and the mysterious Council of Ten, the lovely ladies with grim old

fathers and high-handed brothers acting as gaolers, and the handsome

cavaliers serenading them in the moonlight. That is their idea of

love. They have no perception of anything warmer. It is all romance

and poetry, and tender glances from afar, and long and patient wooing

under difficulties and a little danger, with scarce a word spoken, and

nothing more expressive than a flower furtively given, or a fleeting

pressure of the finger tips. They know nothing else and expect nothing

else. Their cherry is without stone, their bird without bone, their

orange without rind, as in the old song; and they imagine a love as

unreal as all the rest.

When thrown into actualities, though--say when left motherless, and

the eldest girl of perhaps a large family with a father to comfort and

a young brood to see after--Sweet Seventeen is often very beautiful in

her degree, and rises grandly to her position. Sometimes the burden of

her responsibilities is too much for her tender shoulders, and she is

overweighted, and fails. Sometimes too she is tyrannical and selfish

in such a position, and uses her power ill; and sometimes she is

careless and good-humoured, when they all scramble up together,

through confusion, dirt and disorder, till the close time is over, and

they scatter themselves abroad. Sometimes she is a martyr, and makes

herself and every one else uncomfortable by the perpetual

demonstration of her martyrdom, and how she considers herself

sacrificed and put upon. Indeed she is not unfrequently a martyr from

other causes than heavy duties, being fond of adopting unworkable

views which cannot run in the family groove anyhow. If she falls upon

this rock she is in her glory; youth being marvellously proud of

voluntary crucifixion, and thinking itself especially ill-used because

it must be made conformable and is prevented from making itself

ridiculous.

But Sweet Seventeen is intolerant of all moral differences. What she

holds to be right is the absolute, the one sole and only just law; and

she thinks it tampering with sin to allow that any one else has an

equal right with herself to a contrary opinion. But on the whole she

is a pleasant, loveable interesting creature; and one's greatest

regret about her is that she is so often in the hands of unsuitable

guides, and that her powers and noble impulses get so stunted and

shadowed by the commonplace training which is her general lot, and the

low aims of life which are the only ones held out to her.