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<THE EPICENE SEX.>

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There has always been in the world a kind of women whom one scarcely

knows how to classify as to sex; men by their instincts, women by

their form, but neither men nor women as we regard either in the

ideal. In early times they were divided into two classes; the Amazons

who, donning helmet and cuirass, went to the wars that they might be

with their lovers, or perhaps only for an innate liking for rough

work; and the tribe of ancient women, so withered and so wild, who

should be women yet whose beards forbade men so to account them, and

for whom public opinion usually closed the controversy by declaring

that they were witches--that is, creatures so unlike the rightful

woman of nature that only the devil himself was supposed to be

answerable for them. These particular manifestations have long since

passed away, and we have nowadays neither Amazons learning the

goose-step in our barrack-yards, nor witches brewing hell-broth on

Scottish moors; but we have the Epicene Sex all the same--women who

would defy the acutest social Cuvier among us to classify, but who

are growing daily into more importance and making continually fresh

strides in their unwholesome way.

Possessed by a restless discontent with their appointed work, and

fired with a mad desire to dabble in all things unseemly, which they

call ambition; blasphemous to the sweetest virtues of their sex, which

until now have been accounted both their own pride and the safeguard

of society; holding it no honour to be reticent, unselfish, patient,

obedient, but swaggering to the front, ready to try conclusions in

aggression, in selfishness, in insolent disregard of duty, in cynical

abasement of modesty, with the hardest and least estimable of the men

they emulate;--these women of the doubtful gender have managed to drop

all their own special graces while unable to gather up any of the more

valuable virtues of men. They are no more philosophical than the most

inconsequent sister who judges all things according to her feelings,

and commends or condemns principles as she happens to like or dislike

the persons advocating them; and they are as hysterical and

intemperate in their political cries as if the whole world wagged by

impulse only. They are no more magnanimous under rebuke than the

stanchest advocate of the sacredness of sex, but resent all hostile

criticism as passionately, and from grounds as merely personal, as if

they were still shrouded from public blame by the safety of their

privacy; and they are as little useful in their blatant energy as when

they spent their days in working monstrous patterns in crude-coloured

wools, or found spiritual satisfaction in cutting holes in strips of

calico to sew up again with a new stitch. They have committed the

mistake of abandoning such work as they can do well, while trying to

manipulate things which they touch only to spoil; they have ceased to

be women and not learnt to be men; they have thrown aside beauty and

not put on strength.

The latest development of the impulses which animate the epicene sex

has taken its expression in after-dinner oratory. If we were as

malicious to women as those whose follies we rebuke would have the

world believe, we should encourage them to fight it out with womanly

modesty and the world's esteem on this line. Their worst enemies could

not wish to see them inflict on themselves a greater annoyance than

the obligation of getting on their legs after the cheese has been

removed, to turn on a stream of verbal insipidity for a quarter of an

hour at a stretch. Only men who have something to say on the subject

that may be on hand, and so are glad of every opportunity for

elucidation or advocacy, or men who are eaten up with vanity, take

pleasure in speechifying after dinner. Its uselessness is apparent;

its mock hilarity is ghastly; even at political 'banquets,' when words

are supposed to have some deep meaning, we get very little substance

in it; while all the funny part of the business is the dreariest

comedy, the unreality of which brings it close to tragedy.

If anything were wanting to show how much vanity prompts a certain

class of women in their ways and works, and how tremendous is their

passion for notoriety and personal display, it would be this

assumption of the functions of the post-prandial orator. Indeed they

have taken greatly of late to public speaking all round; and some

among them seem only easy when they are standing before a crowd, to be

admired if they are pretty, applauded if they are pert, and, in any

case, the centre of attraction for the moment. We do not look forward

with pleasure to the time when ladies will rise after their champagne

and port, with flushed cheeks and eyes more bright than beautiful,

steadying themselves adroitly against the back of their chairs, and

rolling out either those interminable periods with no nominatives and

no climax under which we have all so often suffered, or spasmodically

jerking forth a few unconnected sentences of which the sole merit is

their brevity. In the beginning of things, when the wedge has to be

introduced, only the best of its kind puts itself forward; and

doubtless the ladies who have already varied the usual dull routine of

after-dinner oratory by their livelier utterances have done the thing

comparatively well, and avoided a breakdown; but we own that we

tremble at the thought of the flood of feminine eloquence which will

be let loose if the fashion spreads.

Fancy the heavy British matron rearing her ample shoulders above the

board, as she lays down the law on the duties of men towards

women--especially sons-in-law--and the advantage to all concerned if

wives are liberally dealt with in the matter of housekeeping money,

and let to go their own way without marital hindrance. Or think of the

woman's-rights woman, with her hybrid costume and her hard face,

showing society how it can be saved from destruction only by throwing

the balance of power into the hands of women--by the nobler and

brighter instincts of the oppressed sex swamping that rude, rough,

masculine element which has so long mismanaged matters. Or even think

of the coquettish and alluring little woman getting up before a crowd

of men and firing off the neatest and smartest park of verbal

artillery possible, every shot of which tells and is applauded to the

echo. How will men take it all? For ourselves, having too sincere a

respect for women as they ought to be, and as nature meant them to be,

we do not wish to see them turned into social buffoons, the mark for

jeering comments and angry hisses when what they say displeases their

hearers, told to 'sit down,' and 'shut up,' with entreaties to some

strong man to 'take them out of that and carry them home to the

nursery,' by a hundred voices roughened with drink and shouting. But

if women expect that hostile feelings and opinions will be tamed or

altogether suppressed in their honour because they choose to thrust

themselves where they have no business, they will find out their

mistake, perhaps when too late. If they abandon their safe cover and

come out into the open, they must look to be hit like the rest. We

cannot too often repeat that if they will mingle in the specialities

of men's lives, they must put up with men's treatment and not cry out

when they are struck home. In deference to them plain-speaking has

been banished from the drawing rooms of society; but it is too much to

expect men to sit in their own places under heavy boredom or fatuous

gabble without wincing; and it is childish to ask us to make a

free-gift of our truth and time to women who outrage one and waste the

other. On the other hand the cheers which would follow if they hit the

humour of the hour, or if, being specially pretty or specially smart,

they afforded so much more than the ordinary excitement to the guests,

would to our minds be just as offensive as the rougher truth, and

perhaps more so. The leering approbation of men never over-nice in

thought and now heated with wine, such as are always to be found at

public dinners, is an infliction from which we should have imagined

any woman with purity or self-respect would have shrunk with shame and

dismay. But women who take to after-dinner speeches cannot be either

nervous or fastidious.

Perhaps it is expecting too much of women of this kind if we ask them

to consider themselves in relation to men's liking. They profess to

despise the masculine animal they are so fond of imitating, and to be

careless of his liking; holding it a matter of supreme indifference

whether they are to his taste or not. But it may be as well to say

plainly that the disgust which we may presume the normal healthy woman

feels for men who paint and pad and wear stays and work Berlin

work--men who give their minds to chignons and costumes; who spy after

their maids' love-letters, and watch their boys as cats watch

mice--men who occupy themselves with domestic details they should know

nothing about; who look after the baby's pap-boat and the cinders in

the dust-heap, and can call the various articles of household linen by

their proper names--the disgust which the womanly woman feels for them

is exactly that which the manly man feels for the epicene sex.

Hard, unblushing, unloving women whose ideal of happiness lies in

swagger and notoriety; who hate home life and despise home virtues;

who have no tender regard for men and no instinctive love for

children; who despise the modesty of sex as they deny its natural

fitness--these women have worse than no charm for men, and their place

in the human family seems altogether a mistake. If there were any

special work which they could do better than manly men or feminine

women, we could understand their economic uses, and accept them as

eminently unlovely outgrowths of a natural law, but at least as

necessary and natural. But they are not wanted. They simply disgust

men and mislead women; and those women whom they do not mislead in

their own they often influence too strongly in the other direction by

way of reaction, rendering them sickly in their sweetness, and weak

rather than womanly. If the interlacing margins of certain things are

lovely, as colours which blend together are more harmonious than those

which are crudely distinct, it is not so with the interlacing margin

of sex. Let men be men, and women women, sharply, unmistakably

defined; but to have an ambiguous sex which is neither the one nor the

other, possessing the coarser passions and instincts of men without

their strength or better judgment, and the position and privileges of

women without their tenderness, their sense of duty, or their modesty,

is a state of things that we should like to see abolished by public

opinion, which alone can touch it.