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<DRAWING-ROOM EPIPHYTES.>

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In every coterie we find certain stray damsels unattached; young

ladies of personable appearance and showy accomplishments who go about

the world alone, and whose parents, never seen, are living in some

obscure lodgings where they pinch and screw to furnish their

daughter's bravery. Some one or two great ladies of the set patronize

these girls, take them about a good deal, and ask them to all their

drums and at-homes. They are useful in their degree; very

good-natured; always ready to fetch and carry in a confidential kind

of way; to sing and play when they are asked ~~ and they sing and play

with almost professional skill; full of the small talk of the day, and

not likely to bore their companions with untimely discussions on

dangerous subjects, nor to startle them with enthusiasm about

anything. They serve to fill a vacant place when wanted; and they look

nice and keep up the ball so far as their own sphere extends. They are

safe, too; and, though lively and amusing, are never known to retail

gossip nor talk scandal in public.

Who are they? <reg orig=”No one”> No-one </reg> exactly knows. They are Miss A. and Miss B., and

they have collaterals of respectable name and standing; cousins in

Government offices; dead uncles of good military rank; perhaps a

father, dead or alive, with a quite unexceptionable position; but you

never see them with their natural belongings, and <reg orig=”no one”> no-one </reg> thinks of

visiting them at their own homes. They are sure to have a mother in

bad health, who never goes out and never sees <reg orig=”any one”> anyone </reg>; and if you

should by chance come across her, you find a shabby, painful, peevish

woman who seems at odds with life altogether, and who is as unlike her

showy daughter as a russet wren is unlike a humming-bird. The

drawing-room epiphyte introduces mamma, when necessary, with a

creditable effort at indifference, not to say content, with her

conditions; but if you can read signs, you know what she is feeling

about that suit of rusty black, and how little she enjoys the

rencounter.

Sometimes she has a brother, of whom she never speaks unless obliged,

and of whose occupation and whereabouts, when asked, she gives only

the vaguest account. He has an office in the City; or he has gone

abroad; or he is in the navy and she forgets the name of his ship;

but, whatever he is, you can get no clue more distinct than this. If

you should chance to see him, you get a greater surprise than you had

when you met the mother; and you wonder, with a deeper wonder, how

such a sister should have sprung from the same stock as that which

produced such a brother. Sometimes however, the brother is as

presentable as the sister; in which case he probably follows much the

same course as herself, and hangs on to the skirts of those of the

Upper Ten who recognize him ~~ preferring to idle away his life and

energy as a well-dressed epiphyte of greatness rather than live the

life of a man in a lower social sphere. But, as a rule, stray damsels

have neither brothers nor sisters visible to the world, and only a

widowed mother in the background, whose health is bad and who does not

go out.

The ulterior object of the ladies who patronize these pretty epiphytes

is to get them married; partly from personal kindness, partly from the

pleasure all women have in bringing about a marriage that does not

interfere with themselves. But they seldom accomplish this object. Who

is to marry the epiphyte? The men of the society into which she has

been brought from the outside have their own ambitions to realize.

They want money, or land, or a good family connexion, to make the

sacrifice an equal bargain and to gild the yoke of matrimony with

becoming splendour. And the drawing room epiphyte has nothing to offer

as her contribution but a fine pair of eyes, a good-natured manner,

and a pretty taste for music. To marry well among the society in which

she finds herself is therefore almost impossible. And her tastes have

been so far formed as to render a marriage into lower circumstances

almost as impossible on the other side.

Besides, what could she do as the wife of a clergyman, say on three

hundred a year, with a poor parish to look after and an increasing

tribe of babies to feed and clothe? Her clear high notes, her splendid

register, her brilliant touch, will not help her then; and the taste

with which she makes up half-worn silk gowns, and transforms what was

a rag into an ornament, will not do much towards finding the necessary

boots and loaves which keep her sisters awake at night wondering how

they are to be got. She has been taught nothing of the art of home

life, if she has learnt much of that of the drawing-room. She cannot

cook, nor make a little go a long way by the cunning of good

management and a well-masked economy; she cannot do serviceable

needlework, though she may be great in fancy work, and quite a genius

in millinery; and the habit of having plenty of servants about her has

destroyed the habit of turning her hand to anything like energetic

self-help. Epiphyte as she is, penniless stray damsel more than half

maintained by the kindness of her grand friends, she has to keep up

the sham of appearances before those friends' domestics. And as

ladyhood in England is chiefly measured by a woman's uselessness, and

to do anything in the way of rational work would be a spot on her

ermine, the poor epiphyte of the drawing-room, with mamma in rusty

black in those shabby lodgings of theirs, learns in self-defence to

practise all the foolish helplessness of her superiors; and, to retain

the respect of the servants, loses her own.

What is she then but one of those misplaced beings who are neither of

one sphere nor of another? She is not of the <hi> grandes dames </hi> on her own account, yet she lives in their houses as one among them. She is

not a woman who can make the best of things; who, notable and

industrious, and by her clever contrivances of saving and substitution

is able to order a home comfortably on next to nothing; and yet she

has no solid claim to anything but the undercut of the middle classes,

and no right to expect more than the most ordinary marriage. She is

nothing. Ashamed and unable to work, she has to accept gratuities

which are not wages. Waiting on Providence and floated by her friends,

she wanders though society ever on the look-out for chances. Each new

acquaintance is a fresh hope, and every house that opens to her

contains the potentiality of final success. To be met everywhere is

the ultimate point of her ambition with respect to means; the end kept

steadily, if fruitlessly, in view, is that satisfying settlement which

shall take her out of the category of a hanger-on and give her a

<hi> locus standi </hi> of her own. But it does not come.

Year by year we meet the drawing-room epiphyte in the old haunts ~~ at

Brighton; at Ryde; at half-a-dozen good houses in London; on a visit

to the friends who make much of her one day and snub her the next ~~ but

she does not 'go off.' She is pretty, she is agreeable, she is well

dressed, she is accomplished; but she does not find the husband for

whom all this is offered as the equivalent. Year by year she grows

fatter or thinner as her constitution expands into obesity or shrivels

into leanness; the lines about her fine eyes deepen; the powder is a

little thicker on her cheeks; and there are more than shrewd

suspicions of a touch of rouge or of antimony, with a judicious

application of patent hair-restorer to lift up the faded tints.

Fighting desperately with that old enemy Time, she disputes line by

line the tribute he claims; and succeeds so far as to continue a good

make-up for a year or two after other women of her own age have given

in and consented to look their years. But the drawing-room epiphyte is

nothing if she is not young ~~ which is synonymous with power to

interest and amuse. Her friends, the great ladies who hold

drawing-rooms and gather society in shoals, want points of colour in

their rooms as well as serviceable foils. The apple-pie that was all

made of quinces was a failure, wanting the homely <hi> couche </hi> from which

the savour of the more fragrant fruit might be thrown up. On the other

hand there are social meetings which are like apple-pies without any

quince at all; and then the epiphyte is invaluable, and her music

worth as much in its degree as if she were a prima donna, each of

whose notes ranked as gold. So that when she ceases to be young, when

she loses her high notes and has gout in her fingers, she fails in her

only <hi> raison d'être </hi>, and her occupation is gone. Hence her hard

struggles with the old enemy, and her half-heroic, half-tragic

determination not to give in while a shred of force remains.

On the day when she collapses into an old woman she is lost. She has

nothing for it then but to withdraw from the brilliant drawing-rooms

she has so long haunted into dingy lodgings in a back street, and live

as her mother lived before her. Forgotten by the world which she has

spent her life in waiting on, she has leisure to reflect on the

relative values of things, and to lament, as she probably will, that

she gave living grain for gilded husks; that she exchanged the

realities of love and home, which might have been hers had she been

contented to accept them on a lower social scale, for the barren

pleasures of the day and the delusive hope of marrying well in a

sphere where she had no solid foothold. She had her choice, like

others; but she chose to throw for high stakes at heavy odds, and in

so doing let slip what she originally held. The bird in the hand might

have been of a homely kind enough; still, it was always the bird;

while the two golden pheasants in the bush flew away unsalted, and

left her only their shadows to run after.

On the whole then, we incline to the belief that the drawing-room

epiphyte is a mistake, and that those stray damsels who wander about

society unattended by any natural protector and always more or less in

the character of adventuresses, would do better to keep to the sphere

determined by parental circumstances than to let themselves be taken

into one which does not belong to them and which they cannot hold.

And furthermore it seems to us that, irrespective of its present

instability and future fruitlessness, the position of a drawing-room

epiphyte is one which no woman of sense would accept, and to which no

woman of spirit would submit.