<Saturday Review, 12 November 1870, 618-9>

<GREAT GIRLS.>

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Nothing is more distinctive among women than the difference of

relative age to be found between them. Two women of the same number of

years will be substantially of different epochs of life--the one faded

in person, wearied in mind, fossilized in sympathy; the other fresh

both in face and feeling, with sympathies as broad and keen as they

were when she was in her first youth; with a brain still as receptive,

as quick to learn, a temper still as easy to be amused, as ready to

love, as when she emerged from the school-room to the drawing-room.

The one you suspect of understating her age by half-a-dozen years or

more when she tells you she is not over forty; the other makes you

wonder if she has not overstated hers by just so much when she

laughingly confesses to the same age. The one is an old woman who

seems as if she had never been young, the other 'just a great girl

yet,' who seems as if she would never grow old; and nothing is equal

between them but the number of days each has lived.

This kind of woman, so fresh and active, so intellectually as well as

emotionally alive, is never anything but a girl; never loses some of

the sweetest characteristics of girlhood. You see her first as a young

wife and mother, and you imagine she has left the school-room for

about as many months as she has been married years. Her face has none

of that untranslatable expression, that look of robbed bloom, which

experience gives; in her manner is none of the preoccupation so

observable in most young mothers, whose attention never seems wholly

given to the thing on hand, and whose hearts seem always full of a

secret care or an unimparted joy. Brisk and airy, braving all

weathers, ready for any amusement, interested in the current questions

of history and society, by some wonderful faculty of organizing

seeming to have all her time to herself as if she had no house cares

and no nursery duties, yet these somehow not neglected, she is the

very ideal of a happy girl roving through life as through a daisy

field, on whom sorrow has not yet laid its hand and to whose lot has

fallen no Dead Sea apple. And when one hears her name and style for

the first time as a matron, and sees her with two or three sturdy

little fellows hanging about her slender neck and calling her mamma,

one feels as if nature had somehow made a mistake, and that our slim

and simple-mannered damsel had only made-believe to have taken up the

serious burdens of life, and was nothing but a great girl after all.

Grown older she is still the great girl she was ten years ago, if her

type of girlishness is a little changed and her gaiety of manner a

little less persistent. But even now, with a big boy at Eton and a

daughter whose presentation is not so far off, she is younger than her

staid and melancholy sister, her junior by many years, who has gone in

for the Immensities and the Worship of Sorrow, who thinks laughter the

sign of a vacant mind, and that to be interesting and picturesque a

woman must have unserviceable nerves and a defective digestion. Her

sister looks as if all that makes life worth living for lies behind

her, and only the grave is beyond; she, the great girl, with her

bright face and even temper, believes that her future will be as

joyous as her present, as innocent as her past, as full of love and as

purely happy. She has known some sorrows truly, and she has gained

such experience as comes only through the rending of the

heart-strings; but nothing that she has passed through has seared nor

soured her, and if it has taken off just the lighter edge of her

girlishness it has left the core as bright and cheery as ever.

In person she is generally of the style called 'elegant' and

wonderfully young in mere physical appearance. Perhaps sharp eyes

might spy out here and there a little silver thread among the soft

brown hair; and when fatigued or set in a cross light, lines not quite

belonging to the teens may be traced about her eyes and mouth; but in

favourable conditions, with her graceful figure advantageously draped

and her fair face flushed and animated, she looks just a great girl,

no more; and she feels as she looks. It is well for her if her husband

is a wise man, and more proud of her than he is jealous; for he must

submit to see her admired by all the men who know her, according to

their individual manner of expressing admiration. But as purity of

nature and singleness of heart belong to her qualification for great

girlishness, he has no cause for alarm, and she is as safe with Don

Juan as with St. Anthony.

These great girls, as middle-aged matrons, are often seen in the

country; and one of the things which most strikes a Londoner is the

abiding youthfulness of this kind of matron. She has a large family,

the elders of which are grown up, but she has lost none of the beauty

for which her youth was noted, though it is now a different kind of

beauty from what it was then; and she has still the air and manners of

a girl. She blushes easily, is shy, and sometimes apt to be a little

awkward, though always sweet and gentle; she knows very little of real

life and less of its vices; she is pitiful to sorrow, affectionate to

her friends who are few in number, and strongly attached to her own

family; she has no theological doubts, no scientific proclivities, and

the conditions of society and the family do not perplex her. She

thinks Darwinism and protoplasm dangerous innovations; and the

doctrine of Free Love with Mrs. Cady Staunton's development is

something too shocking for her to talk about. She lifts her calm clear

eyes in wonder at the wild proceedings of the shrieking sisterhood,

and cannot for the life of her make out what all this tumult means,

and what the women want. For herself, she has no doubts whatever, no

moral uncertainties. The path of duty is as plain to her as are the

words of the Bible, and she loves her husband too well to wish to be

his rival or to desire an individualized existence outside his. She is

his wife, she says; and that seems more satisfactory to her than to be

herself a Somebody in the full light of notoriety, with him in the

shade as her appendage.

If inclined to be intolerant to any one, it is to those who seek to

disturb the existing state of things, or whose speculations unsettle

men's minds; those who, as she thinks, entangle the sense of that

which is clear and straightforward enough if they would but leave it

alone, and who, by their love of iconoclasm, run the risk of

destroying more than idols. But she is intolerant only because she

believes that when men put forth false doctrines they put them forth

for a bad purpose, and to do intentional mischief. Had she not this

simple faith, which no philosophic questionings have either enlarged

or disturbed, she would not be the great girl she is; and what she

would have gained in catholicity she would have lost in freshness. For

herself, she has no self-asserting power, and would shrink from any

kind of public action; but she likes to visit the poor, and is

sedulous in the matter of tracts and flannel-petticoats, vexing the

souls of the sterner, if wiser, guardians and magistrates by her

generosity which they affirm only encourages idleness and creates

pauperism. She cannot see it in that light. Charity is one of the

cardinal virtues of Christianity; accordingly, charitable she will

be, in spite of all that political economists may say.

She belongs to her family, they do not belong to her; and you seldom

hear her say 'I went' or 'I did.' It is always 'we;' which, though a

small point, is a significant one, showing how little she holds to

anything like an isolated individuality, and how entirely she feels a

woman's life to belong to and be bound up in her home relations. She

is romantic too, and has her dreams and memories of early days; when

her eyes grow moist as she looks at her husband--the first and only

man she ever loved--and the past seems to be only part of the present.

The experience which she must needs have had has served only to make

her more gentle, more pitiful, than the ordinary girl, who is

naturally inclined to be a little hard; and of all her household she

is the kindest and the most intrinsically sympathetic. She keeps up

her youth for the children's sake she says; and they love her more

like an elder sister than the traditional mother. They never think of

her as old, for she is their constant companion and can do all that

they do. She is fond of exercise; is a good walker; an active climber;

a bold horsewoman; a great promoter of picnics and open-air

amusements. She looks almost as young as her eldest daughter

differentiated by a cap and covered shoulders; and her sons have a

certain playfulness in their love for her which makes them more her

brothers than her sons. Some of them are elderly men before she has

ceased to be a great girl; for she keeps her youth to the last by

virtue of a clear conscience, a pure mind and a loving nature. She is

wise in her generation and takes care of her health by means of active

habits, fresh air, cold water and a sparing use of medicines and

stimulants; and if the dear soul is proud of anything it is of her

figure, which she keeps trim and elastic to the last, and of the

clearness of her complexion, which no heated rooms have soddened, no

accustomed strong waters have clouded nor bloated.

Then there are great girls of another kind--women who, losing the

sweetness of youth, do not get in its stead the dignity of maturity;

who are fretful, impatient, undisciplined, knowing no more of

themselves nor human nature than they did when they were nineteen, yet

retaining nothing of that innocent simplicity, that single-hearted

freshness and joyousness of nature which one does not wish to see

disturbed even for the sake of a deeper knowledge. These are the women

who will not get old and who consequently do not keep young; who, when

they are fifty, dress themselves in gauze and rosebuds, and think to

conceal their years by a judicious use of many paint-pots and the

liberality of the hairdresser; who are jealous of their daughters,

whom they keep back as much and as long as they can, and terribly

aggrieved at their irrepressible six feet of sonship; women who have a

trick of putting up their fans before their faces as if they were

blushing; who give you the impression of flounces and ringlets, and

who flirt by means of much laughter and a long-sustained giggle; who

talk incessantly, yet have said nothing to the purpose when they have

done; and who simper and confess they are not strong-minded but only

'awfully silly little things,' when you try to lead the conversation

into anything graver than fashion and flirting. They are women who

never learn repose of mind nor dignity of manner; who never lose their

taste for mindless amusements, and never acquire one for nature nor

for quiet happiness; and who like to have lovers always hanging about

them--men for the most part younger than themselves, whom they call

naughty boys and tap playfully by way of rebuke. They are women unable

to give young girls good advice on prudence or conduct; mothers who

know nothing of children; mistresses ignorant of the alphabet of

housekeeping; wives whose husbands are merely the bankers, and most

probably the bugbears, of the establishment; women who think it

horrible to get old and to whom, when you talk of spiritual peace or

intellectual pleasures, you are as unintelligible as if you were

discoursing in the Hebrew tongue. As a class they are wonderfully

inept; and their hands are practically useless, save as ring-stands

and glove-stretchers. For they can do nothing with them, not even

frivolous fancy-work. They read only novels; and one of the marvels of

their existence is what they do with themselves in those hours when

they are not dressing, flirting, nor paying visits.

If they are of a querulous and nervous type, their children fly from

them to the furthest corners of the house; if they are molluscous and

good-natured, they let themselves be manipulated up to a certain

point, but always on the understanding that they are only a few years

older than their daughters; almost all these women, by some fatality

peculiar to themselves, having married when they were about ten years

old, and having given birth to progeny with the uncomfortable property

of looking at the least half a dozen years older than they are. This

accounts for the phenomenon of a girlish matron of this kind, dressed

to represent first youth, with a sturdy black-browed débutante by her

side, looking, you would swear to it, of full majority if a day. Her

only chance is to get that black-browed tell-tale married out of hand;

and this is the reason why so many daughters of great girls of this

type make such notoriously early--and bad--matches; and why, when once

married, they are never seen in society again.

Grandmaternity and girlishness scarcely fit in well together, and

rosebuds are a little out of place when a nursery of the second degree

is established. There are scores of women fluttering through society

at this moment whose elder daughters have been socially burked by the

friendly agency of a marriage almost as soon as, or even before, they

were introduced, and who are therefore, no longer witnesses against

the hairdresser and the paint-pots; and there are scores of these

same marriageable daughters eating out their hearts and spoiling their

pretty faces in the school-room a couple of years beyond their time,

that mamma may still believe the world takes her to be under thirty

yet--and young at that.