<Saturday Review, 4 September 1869, 315-6>

<GUSHING MEN.>

<Eliza Lynn Linton>

<etext downloaded from Project Gutenberg with thanks>

The picture of a gushing creature all heart and no brains, all impulse

and no ballast, is familiar to most of us; and we know her, either by

repute or by personal acquaintance, as well as we know our alphabet.

But we are not so familiar with the idea of the gushing man. Yet

gushing men exist, if not in such numbers as their sisters, still in

quite sufficient force to constitute a distinct type. The gushing man

is the furthest possible removed from the ordinary manly ideal, as

women create it out of their own imaginations. Women like to picture

men as inexorably just, yet tender; calm, grave, restrained, yet full

of passion well mastered; Greathearts with an eye cast Mercywards if

you will, else unapproachable by all the world; Goethes with one weak

corner left for Bettina, where love may queen it over wisdom, but in

all save love strong as Titans, powerful as gods, unchangeable as

fate. They forgive anything in a man who is manly according to their

own pattern and ideas. Even harshness amounting to brutality is

condoned if the hero have a jaw of sufficient squareness, and mighty

passions just within the limits of control--as witness \_Jane Eyre's\_

Rochester and his long line of unpleasant followers. But this

harshness must be accompanied by love. Like the Russian wife who wept

for want of her customary thrashing, taking immunity from the stick to

mean indifference, these women would rather have brutality with love

than no love at all.

But a gushing man, as judged by men among men, is a being so foreign

to the womanly ideal that very few understand him when they do see

him. And they do not call him gushing. He is frank, enthusiastic,

unworldly, aspiring; perhaps he is labelled with that word of power,

'high-souled;' but he is not gushing, save when spoken of by men who

despise him. For men have an intense contempt for him. A woman who has

no ballast, and whose self-restraint goes to the winds on every

occasion, is accepted for what she is worth, and but little

disappointment and less annoyance is felt for what is wanting. Indeed,

men in general expect so little from women that their follies count as

of course and only what might be looked for. They are like marriage,

or the English climate, or a lottery ticket, or a dark horse heavily

backed, and have to be taken for better or worse as they may turn out,

with the violent probability that the chances are all on the side of

the worse.

But the gushing man is inexcusable. He is a nuisance or a

laughing-stock; and as either he is resented. In his club, at the

mess-table, in the city, at home, wherever he may be and whatever he

may be about, he is always plunging headlong into difficulties and

dragging his friends with him; always quarrelling for a straw; putting

himself grossly in the wrong and vehemently apologizing afterwards;

hitting wild at one moment and down on his knees the next, and as

absurd in the one attitude as he is abject in the other. He falls in

love at first sight and makes a fool of himself on unknown ground

while with men he is ready to swear eternal friendship or undying

enmity before he has had time to know anything whatever about the

object of his regard or his dislike. In consequence he is being

perpetually associated with shaky names and brought into questionable

positions. He is full of confidence in himself on every occasion, and

is given to making the most positive assertions on things he knows

nothing about; when afterwards he is obliged to retract and to own

himself mistaken. But he is just as full of self-abasement when, like

vaulting ambition, he has overleaped himself and fallen into mistakes

and failures unawares. He makes rash bets about things of which he has

the best information; so he says; and will not be staved off by those

who know what folly he is committing, but insists on writing himself

down after Dogberry at the cost of just so much. He backs the worst

player at billiards on the strength of a chance hazard, and bets on

the losing hand at whist. He goes into wild speculations in the city,

where he is certain to land a pot of money according to his own

account and whence he comes with empty pockets, as you foretold and

warned. He takes up with all manner of doubtful schemes and yet more

doubtful promoters; but he will not be advised. Is he not gushing? and

does not the quality of gushingness include an Arcadian belief in the

virtue of all the world?

The gushing man is the very pabulum of sharks and sharpers; and it is

he whose impressibility and gullible good-nature supply wind for the

sails of half the rotten schemes afloat. Full of faith in his fellows,

and of belief in a brilliant future to be had by good luck and not by

hard work, he cannot bring himself to doubt either men or measures;

unless indeed his gushingness takes the form of suspicion, and then he

goes about delivering himself of accusations not one of which he can

substantiate by the weakest bulwark of fact, and doubting the

soundness of investments as safe as the Three per Cents.

In manner the gushing man is familiar and caressing. He may be

patronizing or playful according to the bent of his own nature. If the

first, he will call his superior, My dear boy, and pat him on the back

encouragingly; if the second, he will put his arm schoolboy fashion

round the neck of any man of note who has the misfortune of his

intimacy, and call him Old fellow, or Governor, or \_rex meus\_, as he

is inclined. With women his familiarity is excessively offensive. He

gives them pet names, or calls to them by their Christian names from one

end of the room to the other, and pats and paws them in all fraternal

affectionateness, after about the same length of acquaintanceship

as would bring other men from the bowing stage to that of shaking

hands. His manners throughout are enough to compromise the toughest

reputation; and one of the worst misfortunes that can befall a

woman whose circumstances lay her specially open to slander and

misrepresentation is to include among her friends a gushing man of

energetic tendencies, on the look-out to do her a good turn if he can,

and anxious to let people see on what familiar terms he stands with

her. He means nothing in the least degree improper when he puts his

arm round her waist, calls her My dear and even Darling in a loud

voice for all the world to hear; or when he seats himself at her table

before folk to write her private messages, which he makes believe to

be of so much importance that they must not be spoken aloud, and which

are of no importance at all. He is only familiar and gushing; and he

would be the first to cry out against the evil imagination of the

world which saw harm in what he does with such innocent intent.

The gushing man has one grave defect--he is not safe nor secret. From

no bad motive, but just from the blind propulsion of gushingness, he

cannot keep a secret, and he is sure to let out sooner or later all

he knows. He holds back nothing of his friends nor of his own--not

even when his honour is engaged in the trust; being essentially

loose-lipped, and with his emotional life always bubbling up through

the thin crust of conventional reserve. Not that he means to be

dishonourable; he is only gushing and unrestrained. Hence every friend

he has knows all about him. His latest lover learns the roll-call of

all his previous loves; and there is not a man in his club, with whom

he is on speaking terms, who does not know as much. Women who trust

themselves to gushing men simply trust themselves to broken reeds; and

they might as well look for a sieve that will hold water as expect a

man of the sieve nature to keep their secret, whatever it may cost

them and him to divulge it.

As a theorist the gushing man is for ever advocating untenable

opinions and taking up with extreme doctrines, which he announces

confidently and out of which he can be argued by the first opponent he

encounters. The facility with which he can be bowled over on any

ground--he calls it being converted--is in fact one of his most

striking characteristics; and a gushing man rushes from the school of

one professor to that of another, his zeal unabated, no matter how

many his reconversions. He is always finding the truth, which he never

retains; and the loudest and most active in damning a cast-off

doctrine is the gushing man who has once followed it. As a leader, he

is irresistible to both boys and women. His enthusiastic,

unreflecting, unballasted character finds a ready response in the

youthful and feminine nature; and he is the idol of a small knot of

ardent worshippers, who believe in him as the logical and

well-balanced man is never believed in. He takes them captive by a

community of imagination, of impulsiveness, of exaggeration; and is

followed just in proportion to his unfitness to lead.

This is the kind of man who writes sentimental novels, with a good

deal of love laced with a vague form of pantheism or of weak

evangelical religion, to suit all tastes; or he is great in a certain

kind of indefinite poetry which no one has yet been found to

understand, save perhaps, a special Soul Sister, which is the subdued

version among us of the more suggestive Spiritual Wife. He adores the

feminine virtues, which he places far beyond all the masculine ones;

and expatiates on the beauty of the female character which he thinks

is to be the rule of the future. Perhaps though, he goes off into

panegyrics on the Vikings and the Berserkers; or else plunges boldly

into the mists of the Arthurian era, and gushes in obsolete English

about chivalry and the Round Table, Sir Launcelot and the Holy Graal,

to the bewilderment of his entranced audience to whom he does not

supply a glossary. In religion he is generally a mystic and always in

extremes. He can never be pinned down to logic, to facts, to reason;

and to his mind the golden mean is the sin for which the Laodicean

Church was cursed. Feeling and emotion and imagination do all the

work of the world according to him; and when he is asked to reason and

to demonstrate, he answers, with the lofty air of one secure of the

better way, that he Loves, and that Love sees further and more clearly

than reason.

As the strong-minded woman is a mistake among women, so is the gushing

man among men. Fluid, unstable, without curb to govern or rein to

guide, he brings into the masculine world all the mental frailties of

the feminine, and adds to them the force of his own organization as a

man. Whatever he may be he is a disaster; and at all times is

associated with failure. He is the revolutionary leader who gets up

abortive risings--the schemer whose plans run into sand--the poet

whose books are read only by schoolgirls, or lie on the publisher's

shelves uncut, as his gushingness bubbles over into twaddle or exhales

itself in the smoke of obscurity--the fanatic whose faith is more

madness than philosophy--the man of society who is the butt of his

male companions and the terror of his lady acquaintances--the father

of a family which he does his best, unintentionally, to ruin by

neglect, which he calls nature, or by eccentricity of training, which

he calls faith--and the husband of a woman who either worships him in

blind belief, or who laughs at him in secret, as heart or head

preponderates in her character. In any case he is a man who never

finds the fitting time or place; and who dies as he has lived, with

everything about him incomplete.