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<LIMP PEOPLE.>

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Vice is bad and malignant wickedness is worse, but beyond either in

evil results to mankind is weakness; which indeed is the pabulum by

which vice is fed and the agent by which malignity works. If

<reg orig=”every one”> everyone </reg>

in this world had a backbone, there would not be so much misery nor

guilt as there is now; for we must give each individual of the

<p> 'cruel strong' </p> a large following of weaker victims;

and it would be easy to

demonstrate that the progress of nations has always been in proportion

to the number of stiff backbones among them. Yet unfortunately limp

people abound, to the detriment of society and to their own certain

sorrow; molluscs, predestined to be the food of the stronger, with no

power of self-defence nor of self-support, but having to be protected

against outside dangers if they are to be preserved at all; ~~ and

perhaps when you have done all that you can do, not safe even then,

and most likely not worth the trouble taken about them. Open the gates

for but a moment, and they are swept up by the first passer-by. Let

them loose from your own sustaining hand, and they fall abroad in a

mass of flabby helplessness, unable to work, to resist, to

retain ~~ mere heaps of moral protoplasm, pitiable as well as

contemptible; perhaps pitiable because so contemptible. See one of

these poor creatures left a widow, if a woman ~~ turned out of his

office, if a man ~~ and then judge of the value of a backbone by the

miserable consequences of its absence. The widow is simply lost in the

wilderness of her domestic solitude, as much so as would be a child if

set in the midst of a pathless moor with

<reg orig=”no one”> no-one </reg> to guide him to the

safe highway. She may have money and she may have relations, but she

is as poor as if she had nothing better than parish relief; and unless

<reg orig=”some one”> someone </reg> will take her up

and manage everything for her

conscientiously, she is as lonely as if she were an exile in a strange

land. She has been so long used to lean on the stronger arm of her

husband, that she cannot stand upright now that her support has been

taken from her. Her servants make her their prey; her children

tyrannize over her and ignore her authority; her boys go to the bad;

her girls get fast and loud; all her own meek little ideas of modesty

and virtue are rudely thrust to the wall; and she is obliged to submit

to a family disorder which she neither likes nor encourages, but which

she has not the strength to oppose nor the wisdom to direct. She may

be the incarnation of all saintly qualities in her own person, but by

mere want of strength she is the occasion by which a very pandemonium

is possible; and the worst house of a community is sure to be that of

a quiet, gentle, molluscous little widow, without one single vicious

proclivity but without the power to repress or even to rebuke vice in

others.

A molluscous man too, suddenly ejected from his long-accustomed

groove, where, like a toad embedded in the rock, he had made his niche

exactly fitting to his own shape, presents just as wretched a picture

of helplessness and unshiftiness. In vain his friends suggest this or

that independent endeavour; he shakes his head, and says he can't ~~ it

won't do. What he wants is a place where he is not obliged to depend

on himself; where he has to do a fixed amount of work for a fixed

amount of salary; and where his fibreless plasticity may find a mould

ready formed, into which it may run without the necessity of forging

shapes for itself. Many a man of respectable intellectual powers has

gone down into ruin, and died miserably, because of this limpness

which made it impossible for him to break new ground or to work at

anything whatsoever with the stimulus of hope only. He must be

bolstered up by certainty, supported by the walls of his groove, else

he can do nothing; and if he cannot get into this friendly groove, he

lets himself drift into destruction.

In no manner are limp people to be depended on; their very central

quality being fluidity, which is a bad thing to rest on. Take them in

their family quarrels ~~ and they are always quarrelling among

themselves ~~ you think they must have broken with each other for ever;

that surely they can never forget or forgive all the insolent

expressions, the hard words, the full-flavoured epithets which they

have flung at one another; but the next time you meet them they are

quite good friends again, and going on in the old fluid way as if no

fiery storms had lately troubled the domestic horizon. Perhaps they

have induced you to take sides; if so, you may look out, for you are

certain to be thrown over and to have the enmity of both parties

instead of only one. They are much given to this kind of thing, and

fond of making pellets for you to shoot; when, after the shot, they

disclaim and disown you. They speak against each other furiously, tell

you all the family secrets and make them worse and greater than they

really are. If you are credulous for your own part you take them

literally; and if highly moral, you probably act on their accusations

in a spirit of rhadamanthine justice, and the absolute need of

rewarding sin according to its sinfulness. Beware; their accusations

are baseless as the wind, and acting on them will lead to your certain

discomfiture. The only safe way with limp people is never to believe

what they say; or, if you are forced to believe, never to translate

your faith into deeds nor even words; never to commit yourself to

partizanship in any form whatever. They do not intend it, in all

probability, but by very force of their weakness limp people are

almost invariably untruthful and treacherous. By the force too, of

this same weakness, they are incapable of anything like true

friendship, and in fact make the most dangerous friends to be found.

They are so plastic that they take the shape of every hand which holds

them; and if you do not know them well, you may be deceived by their

softness of touch, and think them sympathetic because they are fluid.

They leave you full of promises to hold all you have told them sacred,

and before an hour is out they have repeated to your greatest enemy

every word you have said. They had not the faintest intention of doing

so when they left you, but they <p> 'slop about,' </p>

as the Americans say;

and sloppy folk cannot hold secrets. The traitors of life are the

limp, much more than the wicked ~~ people who let things be wormed out

of them rather than intentionally betray them. They repent likely

enough; Judas hanged himself; but of what good is their repentance

when the mischief is done? Not all the tears in the world can put out

the fire when once lighted, and to hang oneself because one has

betrayed another will make no difference save in the number of victims

which one's own weakness has created.

Limp men are invariably under petticoat government, and it all depends

on chance and the run of circumstance whose petticoat is dominant. The

mother's, for a long period; then the sisters'. If the wife's, there

is sure to be war in the camp belonging to the invertebrate commander;

for such a man creates infinitely more jealousy among his womankind

than the most discursive and the most unjust. He is a power, not to

act, but to be used; and the woman who can hold him with the firmest

grasp has necessarily the largest share of good things belonging. She

can close or draw his purse-strings at pleasure. She can use his name

and mask herself behind his authority at pleasure. He is the undying

Jorkins who is never without a Spenlow to set him well up in front;

and we can scarcely wonder that the various female Spenlows who shoot

with his bow and manipulate his circumstances are jealous of each

other to a frantic pitch ~~ regarding his limpness, as they do, as so

much raw material from which they can spin out their own strength.

As the mollusc has to become the prey of <reg orig=”some one”>

Someone </reg>, the question simply

resolves itself into whose? the new wife's or the old sisters'? Who

shall govern, sitting on his shoulders? and to whom shall he be

assigned captive? He generally inclines to his wife, if she is younger

than he and has a backbone of her own; and you may see a limp man of

this kind, with a fringe of old-rooted female epiphytes, gradually

drop one after another of the ancient stock, till at last his wife and

her relations take up all the space and are the only ones he supports.

His own kith and kin go bare while he clothes her and hers in purple

and fine linen; and the fatted calves in his stalls are liberally

slain for the prodigals on her side of the house, while the dutiful

sons on his own get nothing better than the husks.

Another characteristic of limp people is their curious ingratitude.

Give them nine-tenths of your substance, and they will turn against

you if you refuse them the remaining tenth. Lend them all the money

you can spare, and lend in utter hopelessness of any future day of

reckoning, but refrain once for your own imperative needs, and they

will leave your house open-mouthed at your stinginess. To be grateful

implies some kind of retentive faculty; and this is just what the limp

have not. Another characteristic of a different kind is the rashness

with which they throw themselves into circumstances which they

afterwards find they cannot bear. They never know how to calculate

their forces, and spend the latter half of their life in regretting

what they had spent the former half in endeavouring to attain, or to

get rid of, as it might chance. If they marry A. they wish they had

taken B. instead; as house-mistresses they turn away their servants at

short notice after long complaint, and then beg them to remain if by

any means they can bribe them to stay. They know nothing of that clear

incisive action which sets men and women at ease with themselves, and

enables them to bear consequences, be they good or ill, with dignity

and resignation.

A limp backboneless creature always falls foul of conditions, whatever

they may be; thinking the right side better than the left, and the

left so much nicer than the right, according to its own place of

standing for the moment; and what heads plan and hands execute, lips

are never weary of bemoaning. In fact the limp, like fretful babies,

do not know what they want, being unconscious that the whole mischief

lies in their having a vertebral column of gristle instead of one of

bone. They spread themselves abroad and take the world into their

confidence ~~ weep in public and rave in private ~~ and cry aloud to the

priest and the Levite passing by on the other side (maybe heavily

laden for their own share) to come over and help them, poor sprawling

molluscs, when no man but themselves can set them upright.

The confidences of the limp are told through a trumpet to all four

corners of the sky, and are as easy to get at, with the very gentlest

pressure, as the juice of an over-ripe grape. And no lessons of

experience will ever teach them reticence, or caution in their choice

of confidants.

Not difficult to press into the service of any cause whatever, they

are the very curse of all causes which they assume to serve. They

collapse at the first touch of persecution, of misunderstanding, of

harsh judgment, and fall abroad in hopeless panic at the mere tread of

the coming foe. Always convinced by the last speaker, facile to catch

and impossible to hold, they are the prizes, the decoy ducks, for

which contending parties fight, perpetually oscillating between the

maintenance of old abuses and the advocacy of dangerous reforms; but

the side to which they have pledged themselves on Monday they forsake

on Tuesday under the plea of reconversion. Neither can they carry out

any design of their own, if their friends take it in hand to

over-persuade them.

If a man of this stamp has painted a picture he can be induced to

change the whole key, the central circumstance and the principal

figure, at the suggestion of a confident critic who is only a pupil in

the art of which he is, at least technically, a master. If he is

preaching or lecturing, he thinks more of the people he is addressing

than of what he has to say; and, though impelled at times to use the

scalping-knife, hopes he doesn't wound. Vehement advocates at times,

these men's enthusiasm is merely temporary, and burns itself out by

its own energy of expression; and how fierce soever their aspect when

they ruffle their feathers and make believe to fight, one vigorous

peck from their opponent proves their anatomy as that of a creature

without vertebræ, pulpy, gristly, gelatinous, and limp. All things

have their uses and good issues; but what portion of the general good

the limp are designed to subserve is one of those mysteries not to be

revealed in time nor space.