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<OLD FRIENDS.>

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We know all that can be said in laudation of old friends--the people

whose worth has been tried and their constancy proved--who have come

when you have called and danced when you have piped--been faithful in

sunshine and shadow alike--not envious of your prosperity nor

deserting you in your adversity--old friends who, like old wine, have

lost the crudity of newness, have mellowed by keeping, and have

blended the ripeness of age with the vigour of youth. It is all true

in certain circumstances and under certain conditions; but the old

friend of this ideal type is as hard to find as any other ideal; while

bad imitations abound, and life is rendered miserable by them.

There are old friends who make the fact of old friendship a basis for

every kind of unpleasantness. Their opinion is not asked, but they

volunteer it on all occasions, and are sure to give it in the manner

which galls you most and which you can least resent. They snub you

before your latest acquaintances--charming people of good status with

whom you especially desire to stand well; and break up your

pretensions of present superiority by that sledge-hammer of old

friendship which knows you down to the ground and will stand no

nonsense. The more formal and fastidious your company, the more they

will rasp your nerves by the coarse familiarity of their address; and

they know no greater pleasure than to put you in a false position by

pretending to keep you in your true place. They run in on you at all

times; and you have neither an hour undisturbed nor a pursuit

uninterrupted, still less a circumstance of your life kept sacred from

them. The strictest orders to your servant are ignored; and they push

past any amount of verbal barriers with the irresistible force of old

friendship to which nothing can be denied. Whatever you are doing you

can just see them, they say, smiling; and they have neither conscience

nor compassion when they come and eat up your time, which is your

money, for the gratification of hearing themselves talk and of

learning how you are getting on. They do not scruple to ask about your

affairs direct questions to which you must perforce give an answer;

silence or evasion betraying the truth as much as assent; and they

will make you a present of their mind on the matter, which, though to

the last degree condemnatory, you are expected to accept with becoming

gratitude and humility.

If you have known them in your early boyhood, when you were all

uncivilized hail-fellows together, they refuse to respect your maturer

dignity, and will Tom and Dick and Harry you to the end, though you

sit in a horsehair wig on the bench, while your old friend, once your

class-mate of the country grammar school where you both got your

rudiments, is only a city clerk, badly paid and married to his

landlady's daughter.

To women this kind of return from the grave of the past is a dreadful

infliction and oftentimes a danger. The playfellows of the romping

hoydenish days dash home, bearded and bronzed, from Australia or

California; stride into the calm circle of refined matronhood with the

old familiar manner and using the old familiar terms; ask Fan or Nell

if she remembers this or that adventure on the mountain-side? by the

lake? in the wood?--topping their query by a meaning laugh as if more

remained behind than was expedient to declare. They slap the dignified

husband on the back, and call him a d----d lucky dog; telling him

that they envy him his catch, and would gladly stand in his shoes if

they could. It was all that cross-cornered cursed fate of theirs which

sent them off to Australia or California; else he, the dignified

husband, would never have had the chance--hey, Fan? And they wink when

they say it, as if they had good grounds to go on. The wife is on

thorns all the time these hateful visits last. She wonders how she

could ever have been on romping terms with such a horror, even in her

youngest days; and feels that she shall hate her own name for ever,

after hearing it mouthed and bawled by her old friend with such

aggressive familiarity. The husband, if jealous by nature, begins to

look sullen and suspicious. Even if he is not jealous, but only

reserved and conventional, he does not like what he sees, still less

what he hears; and is more than half inclined to think he has made a

mistake, and that the Fan or Nell of his bosom would have been better

mated with the old friend from the backwoods than with him.

The old friends who turn up in this way at all corners of your life

are sure to be needy, and hold their old friendship as a claim on your

balance at the bank. They stick closer to you than a brother, and you

are expected to stick as close to them; and, as a sign thereof, to

provide for their necessities as so much interest on the old account

of affection still running. If you shrink from them and try to shunt

them quietly, they go about the world proclaiming your ingratitude,

and trumpeting forth their deserts and your demerits. They deride your

present success, which they call stuck-up and mushroom; telling all

the minor miseries of your past, when your father found it hard to

provide suitably for his large family, and their mother had more than

once to give yours a child's frock and pinafore in pity for your rags.

They generally contrive to make a division in your circle; and you

find some of your new friends look coldly on you because it is said

you have been ungrateful to your old. The whole story may be a myth,

the mere coinage of vanity and disappointment; but when did the world

stop to prove the truth before it condemned?

There is no circumstance so accidental, no kindness so trivial, that

it cannot be made to constitute a claim to friendship for life and

all that friendship includes--intimacy before the world; pecuniary

help when needed; no denial of time; no family secrets; unvarying

inclusion in all your entertainments; personal participation in all

your successes; liberty to say unpleasant things without offence and

to interfere in your arrangements; and the right to take at least one

corner of your soul, and that not a small one, which is not to be your

own but your old friends'. Have they, by the merest chance, introduced

you to your wife the beautiful heiress, to your husband the good

match?--the world echoes with the news, and the echoes are never

suffered to die out. It is told everywhere, and always as if your

happy marriage were the object they had had in view from the earliest

times--as if they had lived and worked for a consummation which in

reality came about by the purest accident. Have they been helpful and

friendly when your first child was born, or nursery sickness was in

your house?--you are bought for life, you and your offspring; unless

you have had the happy thought of making them sponsors, when they

learn the knack of disappearing from your immediate circle, and of

only turning up on those formal occasions which do not admit of making

presents. Did they introduce you to your first employer?--your

subsequent success is the work of their hands, and they bear your fame

on their shoulders like complacent Atlases balancing the world.

They go about cackling to every one who will listen to them how they

got your first essay into print; how they mentioned your name to the

Commissioners, and how, in consequence, the Commissioners gave you

that place whence dates your marvellous rise in life; how they advised

your father to send you to sea and so to make a man of you, and thus

were the indirect cause of your K.C.B.-ship. But for them you would

have been a mere nobody, grubbing in a dingy City office to this day.

They gave you your start, and you owe all you are to them. And if you

fail to honour their draft on your gratitude to the fullest amount,

they proclaim you a defaulter to the most sacred claims and the most

pious feelings of humanity. You point the moral of the base

ingratitude of man, and are a text on which they preach the sermon of

non-intervention in the affairs of others. Let drowning men sink; let

the weak go to the wall; and on no account let any one trouble himself

about the welfare of old friends, if this is to be the reward.

Henceforth, you are morally branded, and your old friend takes care

that the iron shall be hot. There is no service, however trifling, but

can be made a yoke to hang round your neck for life; and the more you

struggle against it the more it galls you. Your best plan of bearing

it is with the patience which laughs and lets things slide. If

however, you are resolute in repudiation, you must take the sure

result without wincing.

To these friends of your own add the friends of the family--those

uncomfortable adhesives who cling to you like so many octopods,

and are not to be shaken off by any means known to you. They claim

you as their own--something in which they have the rights of

part-proprietorship--because they knew you when you were in your

cradle, and had bored your parents as they want to bore you. It is of

no use to say that circumstances are of less weight than character.

You and they may stand at opposite poles in thought, in aspiration, in

social condition, in habits. Nevertheless they insist on it that the

bare fact of longtime acquaintance is to be of more value than all

these vital discrepancies; and you find yourself saddled with friends

who are utterly uncongenial to you in every respect, because your

father once lived next door to them in the country town where you were

born, and spent one evening a week in their society playing long whist

for threepenny points. You inherit your weak chest and your snub nose,

gout in your blood and a handful of ugly skeletons in your cupboard;

these are things you cannot get rid of; things which come as part of

the tangled yarn of your life and are the inalienable misfortunes of

inheritance; but it is too bad to add family friends whom of your own

accord you would never have known; and to have them seated as Old Men

of the Sea on your neck, never to be shaken off while they live.

In fact, this whole question of friendship wants revision. The general

tendency is to make it too stringent in its terms, and too

indissoluble in its fastenings. If the present should not make one

forget the past, neither should the past tyrannize over the present.

Old friends may have been pleasant enough in their day, but a day is

not for ever, and they are hurtful and unpleasant now, under new

conditions and in changed circumstances. They disturb the harmony of

our surroundings, and no one can feel happy in discord.

They themselves too, change; we all do, as life goes on and experience

increases; and it is simply absurd to bring the old fashions of early

days into the new relations of later times. We are not the Tom, Dick,

and Harry of our boyhood in any essential save identity of person;

neither are they the Bill and Jim they were. We have gone to the

right, they to the left; and the gap between us is wider and deeper

than that of mere time. Of what use then, to try to galvanize the dead

past into the semblance of vitality? Each knows in his heart that it

is dead; and the only one who wishes to galvanize it into simulated

life is the one who will somehow benefit by the discomfort and

abasement of the other. For our own part, we think one of the most

needful things to learn on our way through the world is, that the dead

are dead, and that silent burial is better than spasmodic galvanism.