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<OLD LADIES.>

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The world is notoriously unjust to its veterans, and above all it is

unjust to its ancient females. Everywhere, and from all time, an old

woman has been taken to express the last stage of uselessness and

exhaustion; and while a meeting of bearded dotards goes by the name of

a council of sages, and its deliberations are respected accordingly, a

congregation of grey-haired matrons is nothing but a congregation of

old women, whose thoughts and opinions on any subject whatsoever have

no more value than the chattering of so many magpies. In fact the poor

old ladies have a hard time of it; and if we look at it in its right

light, perhaps nothing proves more thoroughly the coarse flavour of

the world's esteem respecting women than this disdain which they

excite when they are old. And yet what charming old ladies one has

known at times!--women quite as charming in their own way at seventy

as their grand-daughters are at seventeen, and all the more so because

they have no design now to be charming, because they have given up the

attempt to please for the reaction of praise, and long since have

consented to become old though they have never drifted into

unpersonableness nor neglect. While retaining the intellectual

vivacity and active sympathies of maturity, they have added the

softness, the mellowness, the tempering got only from experience and

advancing age. They are women who have seen and known and read a great

deal; and who have suffered much; but whose sorrows have neither

hardened nor soured them--but rather have made them even more

sympathetic with the sorrows of others, and pitiful for all the young.

They have lived through and lived down all their own trials, and have

come out into peace on the other side; but they remember the trials of

the fiery passage, and they feel for those who have still to bear the

pressure of the pain they have overcome. These are not women much met

with in society; they are of the kind which mostly stays at home and

lets the world come to them. They have done with the hurry and glitter

of life, and they no longer care to carry their grey hairs abroad.

They retain their hold on the affections of their kind; they take an

interest in the history, the science, the progress of the day; but

they rest tranquil and content by their own fireside, and they sit to

receive, and do not go out to gather.

The fashionable old lady who haunts the theatres and drawing-rooms,

bewigged, befrizzled, painted, ghastly in her vain attempts to appear

young, hideous in her frenzied clutch at the pleasures melting from

her grasp, desperate in her wild hold on a life that is passing away

from her so rapidly, knows nothing of the quiet dignity and happiness

of her ancient sister who has been wise enough to renounce before she

lost. In her own house, where gather a small knot of men of mind and

women of character, where the young bring their perplexities and the

mature their deeper thoughts, the dear old lady of ripe experience,

loving sympathies and cultivated intellect holds a better court than

is known to any of those miserable old creatures who prowl about the

gay places of the world, and wrestle with the young for their crowns

and garlands--those wretched simulacra of womanhood who will not grow

old and who cannot become wise. She is the best kind of old lady

extant, answering to the matron of classic times--to the Mother in

Israel before whom the tribes made obeisance in token of respect; the

woman whose book of life has been well studied and closely read, and

kept clean in all its pages. She has been no prude however, and no

mere idealist. She must have been wife, mother and widow; that is, she

must have known many things of joy and grief and have had the

fountains of life unsealed. However wise and good she may be, as a

spinster she has had only half a life; and it is the best half which

has been denied her. How can she tell others, when they come to her in

their troubles, how time and a healthy will have wrought with her, if

she has never passed through the same circumstances? Theoretic comfort

is all very well, but one word of experience goes beyond volumes of

counsel based on general principles and a lively imagination.

One type of old lady, growing yearly scarcer, is the old lady whose

religious and political theories are based on the doctrines of

Voltaire and Paine's \_Rights of Man\_--the old lady who remembers Hunt

and Thistlewood and the Birmingham riots; who talks of the French

Revolution as if it were yesterday; and who has heard so often of the

Porteus mob from poor papa that one would think she had assisted at

the hanging herself. She is an infinitely old woman, for the most part

birdlike, chirrupy, and wonderfully alive. She has never gone beyond

her early teaching, but is a fossil radical of the old school; and she

thinks the Gods departed when Hunt and his set died out. She is an

irreligious old creature, and scoffs with more cleverness than grace

at everything new or earnest. She would as lief see Romanism rampant

at once as this newfangled mummery they call Ritualism; and Romanism

is her version of the unchaining of Satan. As for science--well, it is

all very wonderful, but more wonderful she thinks than true; and she

cannot quite make up her mind about the spectroscope or protoplasm. Of

the two, protoplasm commends itself most to her imagination, for

private reasons of her own connected with the Pentateuch; but these

things are not so much in her way as Voltaire and Diderot, Volney and

Tom Paine, and she is content to abide by her ancient cairns and to

leave the leaping-poles of science to younger and stronger hands.

This type of old lady is for the most part an ancient spinster, whose

life has worn itself away in the arid deserts of mental doubt and

emotional negation. If she ever loved it was in secret, some

thin-lipped embodied Idea long years ago. Most likely she did not get

even to this unsatisfactory length, but contented herself with books

and discussions only. If she had ever honestly loved and been loved,

perhaps she would have gone beyond Voltaire, and have learned

something truer than a scoff.

The old lady of strong instinctive affections, who never reflects and

never attempts to restrain her kindly weaknesses, stands at the other

end of the scale. She is the grandmother \_par excellence\_, and spends

her life in spoiling the little ones, cramming them with sugar-plums

and rich cake whenever she has the chance, and nullifying mamma's

punishments by surreptitious gifts and goodies. She is the dearly

beloved of our childish recollections; and to the last days of our

life we cherish the remembrance of the kind old lady with her beaming

smile, taking out of her large black reticule, or the more mysterious

recesses of her unfathomable pocket, wonderful little screws of paper

which her withered hands thrust into our chubby fists; but we can

understand now what an awful nuisance she must have been to the

authorities, and how impossible she made it to preserve anything like

discipline and the terrors of domestic law in the family.

The old lady who remains a mere child to the end; who looks very much

like a faded old wax doll with her scanty hair blown out into

transparent ringlets, and her jaunty cap bedecked with flowers and

gay-coloured bows; who cannot rise into the dignity of true

womanliness; who knows nothing useful; can give no wise advice: has no

sentiment of protection, but on the contrary demands all sorts of care

and protection for herself--she, simpering and giggling as if she were

fifteen, is by no means an old lady of the finest type. But she is

better than the leering old lady who says coarse things, and who, like

Béranger's immortal creation, passes her time in regretting her plump

arms and her well-turned ankle and the lost time that can never be

recalled, and who is altogether a most unedifying old person and by no

means nice company for the young.

Then there is the irascible old lady, who rates her servants and is

free with full-flavoured epithets against sluts in general; who is

like a tigress over her last unmarried daughter, and, when crippled

and disabled, still insists on keeping the keys, which she delivers up

when wanted only with a snarl and a suspicious caution. She has been

one of the race of active housekeepers, and has prided herself on her

exceptional ability that way for so long that she cannot bear to

yield, even when she can no longer do any good; so she sits in her

easy chair, like old Pope and Pagan in \_Pilgrim's Progress\_, and gnaws

her fingers at the younger world which passes her by. She is an

infliction to her daughter for all the years of her life, and to the

last keeps her in leading-strings, tied up as tight as the sinewy old

hands can knot them; treating her always as an irresponsible young

thing who needs both guidance and control, though the girl has passed

into the middle-aged woman by now, shuffling through life a poor

spiritless creature who has faded before she has fully blossomed, and

who dies like a fruit that has dropped from the tree before it has

ripened.

Twin sister to this kind is the grim female become ancient; the gaunt

old lady with a stiff backbone, who sits upright and walks with a firm

tread like a man; a leathery old lady, who despises all your weak

slips of girls that have nerves and headaches and cannot walk their

paltry mile without fatigue; a desiccated old lady, large-boned and

lean, without an ounce of superfluous fat about her, with keen eyes

yet, with which she boasts that she can thread a needle and read small

print by candlelight; an indestructible old lady, who looks as if

nothing short of an earthquake would put an end to her. The friend of

her youth is now a stout, soft, helpless old lady, much bedraped in

woollen shawls, given to frequent sippings of brandy and water, and

ensconced in the chimney corner like a huge clay figure set to dry.

For her the indestructible old lady has the supremest contempt,

heightened in intensity by a vivid remembrance of the time when they

were friends and rivals. Ah, poor Laura, she says, straightening

herself; she was always a poor creature, and see what she is now! To

those who wait long enough the wheel always comes round, she thinks;

and the days when Laura bore away the bell from her for grace and

sweetness and loveableness generally are avenged now, when the one is

a mere mollusc and the other has a serviceable backbone that will last

for many a year yet.

Then there is the musical old lady, who is fond of playing small

anonymous pieces of a jiggy character full of queer turns and shakes,

music that seems all written in demi-semi-quavers, and that she gives

in a tripping, catching way, as if the keys of the piano were hot.

Sometimes she will sing, as a great favour, old-world songs which are

almost pathetic for the thin and broken voice that chirrups out the

sentiment with which they abound; and sometimes, as a still greater

favour, she will stand up in the dance, and do the poor uncertain

ghosts of what were once steps, in the days when dancing was dancing

and not the graceless lounge it is now. But her dancing-days are over,

she says, after half-a-dozen turns; though, indeed, sometimes she

takes a frisky fit and goes in for the whole quadrille:--and pays for

it the next day.

The very dress of old ladies is in itself a study and a revelation of

character. There are the beautiful old women who make themselves like

old pictures by a profusion of soft lace and tender greys; and the

stately old ladies who affect rich rustling silks and sombre velvet;

and there are the original and individual old ladies, who dress

themselves after their own kind, like Mrs. Basil Montagu, Miss Jane

Porter, and dear Mrs. Duncan Stewart, and have a \_cachet\_ of their own

with which fashion has nothing to do. And there are the old women who

wear rusty black stuffs and ugly helmet-like caps; and those who

affect uniformity and going with the stream, when the fashion has

become national--and these have been much exercised of late with the

strait skirts and the new bonnets. But Providence is liberal and

milliners are fertile in resources. In fact, in this as in all other

sections of humanity, there are those who are beautiful and wise, and

those who are foolish and unlovely; those who make the best of things

as they are, and those who make the worst, by treating them as what

they are not; those who extract honey, and those who find only poison.

For in old age, as in youth, are to be found beauty, use, grace and

value, but in different aspects and on another platform. And the folly

is when this difference is not allowed for, or when the possibility of

these graces is denied and their utility ignored.