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<OUR MASKS.>

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We should do badly, as things are ordered, if we went about the world

with our natural moral faces. Even stopping short of the extravagance

of betraying our most important secrets, as in a Palace of Truth, and

frankly telling men and women that we think them fools or bores, it is

difficult for the most honest person in society to do without

something of a mask in regard to minor matters. The old quarrel

between nature and art, and where the limits of each should extend,

has not yet got itself arranged; and it is doubtful whether it will

during the present dispensation. It may be put to rights in some

future state of human development, when the spiritualists will have it

all their own way and tell us exactly what we ought to do; but pending

this forecast of the millennium, we are obliged to have recourse to

art for the better concealment of our natural selves, and especially,

for the maintenance of that queer bundle of compromises and

conventions which we call society.

The oddest consequence of the artificial state in which we find

ourselves obliged to live is that nature looks like affectation, and

that the highest art is the most like nature of anything we know. It

is in drawing-rooms as on the stage. A thoroughly inartificial actor

would be a mere dummy, just as in the Greek theatre a man with his

natural face would have seemed mean and insignificant to the

spectators accustomed to fixed types of heroic size and set intention.

But he whose acting brings the house down because of its truth to

nature is he whose art has been the most profoundly studied, and with

whom the concealment of art has therefore been the most perfectly

attained. So in society. A man of thoroughly natural manners passes as

either morose or pert according to his mood--either stupid because

disinclined to exert himself, or obtrusive because in the humour to

talk. He means no offence, honest body! but he makes himself

disagreeable all the same. Such a man is the pest of his club, and the

nuisance of every drawing-room he enters. It matters little whether he

is constitutionally boorish or good-natured; he is natural; and his

naturalness comes like an ugly patch of frieze on the cloth of gold

with which the goddess of conventionality is draped.

Natural women too, may be found at times--women who demonstrate on

small occasions, sincerely no doubt, but excessively; women who skip

like young lambs when they are pleased and pout like naughty children

when they are displeased; who disdain all those little arts of dress

which conceal defects and heighten beauties, and who are always at war

with the fashions of the day; who despise those conventional graces

of manner which have come to be part of the religion of society,

contradicting point-blank, softening no refusal with the expression of

a regret they do not feel, yawning in the face of the bore, admiring

with the \_naïveté\_ of a savage whatever is new to them or pleasing.

Such women are not agreeable companions, however devoid of affectation

they may be, however stanch adherents to truth and things as they are,

according to their boast. The woman who has not a particle of

untrained spontaneity left in her and who has herself in hand on all

occasions, who gives herself to her company and is always collected,

graceful, and at ease, playing her part without a trip, but always

playing her part and never letting herself drop into uncontrolled

naturalness--this is the woman whom men agree to call, not only

charming, but thoroughly natural as well.

On the other hand, the untrained woman who speaks just as she thinks,

and who cares more to express her own sensations than to study those

of her companions, is sneered at as silly or underbred, as the current

sets; or perhaps as affected; her transparency, to which the world is

not accustomed and to which it does not wish to get accustomed,

puzzling the critics of their kind. Social naturalness, like perfect

theatrical representation, is everywhere the result of the best art;

that is, of the most careful training. It simulates self-forgetfulness

by the very perfection of its self-control, while untrained nature is

self-assertion at all corners, and is founded on the imperious

consciousness of personality.

All of us carry our masks into society. We offer an eidolon to our

fellow-creatures, showing our features but not expressing our mind;

and the one whose eidolon, while betraying least of the being within,

reflects most of the beings without, is the most popular and

considered the most self-revealed. We may take it as a certainty that

we never really know any one. We may know the broad outlines of

character; and we generally believe far more than we have warranty

for; but we rarely, if ever, penetrate the inner circle wherein the

man's real self hides. If our friend is a person of small curiosity

and large self-respect, we may trust him not to commit a base action;

if he has a calm temperament, with physical strength and without

imagination, he will not do a cowardly one; if he has the habit of

truth, he will not tell a lie on any paltry occasion; if he is

tenacious and secret, he will not betray his cause nor his friend. But

we know very little more than this. Even with one's most familiar

friend there is always one secret door in the casket which is never

opened; and those which are thrown wide apart are not those which lead

to the most cherished treasures. With the frankest or the shallowest

there are depths never sounded; what shall we say, then, of those who

have real profundity of character?

Who is not conscious of an ego that no man has seen? In praise or

blame we feel that we are not thoroughly known. There is something

infinitely pathetic in this dumb consciousness of an inner self, an

unrevealed truth, which bears us up through injustice and makes us

shrink from excessive praise. Our very lovers love us for the least

worthy part of us, or for fancied virtues which we do not possess; and

if our worst enemies knew us as we are, they would come round to the

other side and shake hands over the grave of their mistaken estimate.

The mask hides the reality in either case, for good or for ill; and we

know that if it could be removed, we should be judged differently. For

the matter of that it never can be removed. The most transparent are

judged according to the temper of the spectator; and the mind sees

what it brings in our judgment of our fellows as well as in other

things.

But, apart from that inner nature, that hidden part which so few

people even imagine exists in each other, the masks we wear in society

cover histories, sufferings, feelings, which would set the world

aflame if betrayed. No one who gets below the smooth crust of

conventional life can be ignorant of the fierce lava flood that

sometimes flows and rages underneath. In those quiet drawing-rooms

where everything looks the embodiment of harmony, of tranquil

understanding, and where the absence of mystery is the first thing

felt, there are dramas at the very time enacting of which only the

exceptionally observant catch the right cue. Ruin faces some whose

ship of good fortune seems sailing steadily on a halcyon sea; a

hideous secret stands like a spectre in the doorway of another. The

domestic happiness which these covenant between themselves to show in

the full sunshine to the world is no better than a Dead Sea apple

displayed for pride, for policy, and of which those who eat alone know

the extreme bitterness. The grand repute which makes men honour the

name to the very echo, is a sham, and tottering to its fall. Here the

confessing religionist hides by the fervour of his amens the

scepticism which he dares not show by the honesty of his negation;

there the respectable moralist denounces in his mask the iniquities

which he practises daily when he lays it aside. To the right the masks

of two loving friends greet each other with smiles and large

expressions of affection, then part, to push the friendly falsehood

aside, and to whisper confidentially to the crowd what scoundrelism

they have mutually embraced; to the left another couple of unreasoning

foes want only to see each other in unmasked simplicity to become fast

allies for life. The world and all it disguises play sad mischief with

human affections as well as with truth.

Everything serves for a mask. A man's public character makes one which

is as impenetrable in its disguise as any. The world takes one or two

salient points and subordinates every other characteristic to these.

It ignores all those subtle intricacies which modify thought and

action at every turn, producing apparent inconsistency--but only

apparent; and it boldly blocks out a mask of one or two dominant

lines as the representative of a nature protean because complex. Any

quality that makes itself seen from behind this mask which popular

opinion has created out of a man's public character is voted as

inconsistent, or, it may be, insincere; and the richer the nature the

less it is understood. So it is with us all in our degree:--a thought

which might lead us to gentler judgments on each other than it is the

fashion to cultivate, knowing as we do that we each wear a mask which

hides our real self from the world; and that if this real self is less

beautiful than our admirers say, it is infinitely less hideous than

our enemies would make it to appear.