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<PRIVILEGED PERSONS.>

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We all number among our acquaintances certain privileged persons;

people who make their own laws without regard to the received canons

of society, and who claim exemption from some of the moral and most of

the conventional obligations which are considered binding on others.

The privileged person may be male or female; but is more often the

latter; sundry restraining influences keeping men in check which are

inoperative with women. Women indeed, when they choose to fall out of

the ranks and follow an independent path of their own, care very

little for any influences at all, the restraining power which will

keep them in line being yet an unknown quantity. As a woman then, we

will first deal with the privileged person.

One embodiment of the privileged person is she whose forte lies in

saying unpleasant things with praiseworthy coolness. She aims at a

reputation for smartness or for honesty, according to the character of

her intellect, and she uses what she gets without stint or sparing. If

clever, she is noted for her sarcastic speeches and epigrammatic

brilliancy; and her good things are bandied about from one to the

other of her friends; with an uneasy sense however, in the laughter

they excite. For every one feels that he who laughs to-day may have

cause to wince to-morrow, and that dancing on one's own grave is by no

means an exhilarating exercise.

No one is safe with her--not even her nearest and dearest; and she

does not care how deeply she wounds when she is about it. But her

victims rarely retaliate; which is the oddest part of the business.

They resign themselves meekly enough to the scalpel, and comfort

themselves with the reflection that it is only pretty Fanny's way, and

that she is known to all the world as a privileged person who may say

what she likes. It falls hard though, on the uninitiated and

sensitive, when they are first introduced to a privileged person with

a talent for saying smart things and no pity to speak of. Perhaps they

have learned their manners too well to retort in kind, if even they

are able; and so feel themselves constrained to bear the unexpected

smart, as the Spartan boy bore his fox. One sees them at times endure

their humiliation before folk with a courageous kind of stoicism which

would do honour to a better cause. Perhaps they are too much taken

aback to be able to marshal their wits for a serviceable

counter-thrust; all they can do is to look confused and feel angry;

but sometimes, if seldom, the privileged person with a talent for

sarcastic sayings meets with her match and gets paid off in her own

coin--which greatly offends her, while it rejoices those of her

friends who have suffered many things at her hands before. If she is

rude in a more sledge-hammer kind of way--rude through what it pleases

her to call honesty and the privilege of speaking her mind--her

attacks are easier to meet, being more openly made and less dependent

on quickness or subtlety of intellect to parry.

Sometimes indeed, by their very coarseness they defeat themselves.

When a woman of this kind says in a loud voice, as her final argument

in a discussion, 'Then you must be a fool,' as we have known a woman

tell her hostess, she has blunted her own weapon and armed her

opponent. All her privileges cannot change the essential constitution

of things; and, rudeness being the boomerang of the drawing-room which

returns on the head of the thrower, the privileged person who prides

herself on her honesty, and who is not too squeamish as to its use,

finds herself discomfited by the very silence and forbearance of her

victim. In either case however, whether using the rapier or the

sledge-hammer, the person privileged in speech is partly a nuisance

and partly a stirrer-up of society. People gather round to hear her,

when she has grappled with a victim worthy of her steel, and is using

it with effect. Yet unless her social status is such that she can

command a following by reason of the flunkeyism inherent in human

nature, she is sure to find herself dropped before her appointed end

has come. People get afraid of her ill-nature for themselves, and

tired of hearing the same things repeated of others. For even a clever

woman has her intellectual limits, and is forced after a time to

double back on herself and re-open the old workings. It is all very

well, people think, to read sharp satires on society in the abstract,

and to fit the cap as one likes. Even if it fits oneself, one can bear

the fool's crown with some small degree of equanimity in the hope that

others will not discover the fact; but when it comes to a hand-to-hand

attack, with bystanders to witness, and oneself reduced to an

ignominious silence, it is another matter altogether; and, however

sparkling the gifts of one's privileged friend, one would rather not

put oneself in the way of their exercise. So she is gradually shunned

till she is finally abandoned; what was once the clever impertinence

of a pretty person, or the frank insolence of a cherubic hoyden,

having turned by time into the acrid humour of a grim female who keeps

no terms with any one, and with whom therefore, no terms are kept. The

pretty person given to smart sayings with a sting in them and the

cherubic hoyden who allows herself the use of the weapon of honesty,

would do well to ponder on the inevitable end, when the only real

patent of their privileges has run out, and they have no longer youth

and beauty to plead in condonation for their bad breeding.

Another exercise of peculiar privilege is to be found in the matter of

flirting. Some women are able to flirt with impunity to an extent

which would simply destroy any one else. They flirt with the most

delicious frankness, yet for all practical purposes keep their place

in society undisturbed and their repute intact. They have the art of

making the best of two worlds, the secret of which is all their own,

yet which causes the weak to stumble and the rash to fall. They ride

on two horses at once, with a skill as consummate as their daring; but

the feeble sisters who follow after them slip down between, and come

to grief and public disaster as their reward. It is in vain to try to

analyze the terms on which this kind of privilege is founded. Say that

one pretty person takes the tone of universal relationship--that she

has an illimitable fund of sisterliness always at command for a host

of 'dear boys' of her own age; or, when a little older and drawing

near to the borders of mature sirenhood, that she is a kind of

oecumenical aunt to a large congregation of well-looking nephews--she

may steer safely through the shallows of this dangerous coast and land

at last on the \_terra firma\_ of a respected old age; but let another

try it, and she goes to the bottom like a stone. And yet the first has

pushed her privileges as far as they will go, while the second has

only played with hers; but the one comes triumphantly into port with

all colours flying, and the other makes shipwreck and is lost.

And why the one escapes and the other goes down is a mystery given to

no one to fathom. But so it is; and every student of society is aware

of this strange elasticity of privilege with certain pretty friends,

and must have more than once wondered at Mrs. Grundy's leniency to the

flagrant sinner on the right side of the square, coupled with her

severity to the lesser naughtiness on the left. The flirting form of

privilege is the most partial in its limitations of all; and things

which one fair patentee may do with impunity, retaining her garlands,

will cause another to be stripped bare and chastised with scorpions;

and no one knows why nor how the difference is made.

Another self-granted privilege is the licence some give themselves in

the way of taking liberties, and the boldness with which they force

your barriers. Indeed there is no barrier that can stand against these

resolute invaders. You are not at home, say, to all the world, but the

privileged person is sure you will see him or her, and forthwith

mounts your stairs with a cheerful conscience, carrying his welcome

with him--so he says. Admitted into your penetralia, the privileges of

this bold sect increase, being of the same order as the traditional

ell on the grant of the inch. They drop in at all times, and are never

troubled with modest doubts. They elect themselves your 'casuals,' for

whom you are supposed to have always a place at your table; and you

are obliged to invite them into the dining-room when the servant

sounds the gong and the roast mutton makes itself evident. They hear

you are giving an evening, and they tell you they will come,

uninvited; taking for granted that you intended to ask them, and

would have been sorry if you had forgotten. They tack themselves on to

your party at a fête and air their privileges in public--when the man

whom of all others you would like best for a son-in-law is hovering

about, kept at bay by the privileged person's familiar manner towards

yourself and your daughter.

Your friend would laugh at you if you hinted to him that he might by

chance be misinterpreted. He argues that every one knows him and his

ways; and acts as if he held a talisman by which the truth could be

read through the thickest crust of appearances. It would be well

sometimes if he had this talisman, for his familiarity is a

bewildering kind of thing to strangers on their first introduction to

a house where he has privileges; and it takes time, and some

misapprehension, before it is rightly understood. We do not know how

to catalogue this man who is so wonderfully at ease with our new

friends. We know that he is not a relation, and yet he acts as one

bound by the closest ties. The girls are no longer children, but his

manner towards them would be a little too familiar if they were half a

dozen years younger than they are; and we come at last to the

conclusion that the father owes him money, or that the wife had

been--well, what?--in the days gone by; and that he is therefore

master of the situation and beyond the reach of rebuke. All things

considered, this kind of privilege is dangerous, and to be carefully

avoided by parents and guardians. Indeed, every form of this patent

is dangerous; the chances being that sooner or later familiarity will

degenerate into contempt and a bitter rupture take the place of the

former excessive intimacy.

The neglect of all ordinary social observances is another reading of

the patent of privilege which certain people grant themselves. These

are the people who never return your calls; who do not think

themselves obliged to answer your invitations; who do not keep their

appointments; and who forget their promises. It is useless to reproach

them, to expect from them the grace of punctuality, the politeness of

a reply, or the faintest stirrings of a social conscience in anything.

They are privileged to the observance of a general neglect, and you

must make your account with them as they are. If they are

good-natured, they will spend much time and energy in framing

apologies which may or may not tell. If women, graceful, and liking to

be liked without taking much trouble about it, they will profess a

thousand sorrows and shames the next time they see you, and play the

pretty hypocrite with more or less success. You must not mind what

they do, they say pleadingly; no one does; they are such notoriously

bad callers no one ever expects them to pay visits like other people;

or they are so lazy about writing, please don't mind if they don't

answer your letters nor even your invitations: they don't mean to be

rude, only they don't like writing; or they are so dreadfully busy

they cannot do half they ought and are sometimes obliged to break

their engagements; and so on. And you, probably for the twentieth

time, accept excuses which mean nothing but 'I am a privileged

person,' and go on again as before, hoping for better things against

all the lessons of past experience. How can you do otherwise with that

charming face looking so sweetly into yours, and the coquettish little

hypocrisies played off for your benefit? If that charming face were

old or ugly, things would be different; but so long as women possess

\_la beauté du diable\_ men can do nothing but treat them as angels.

And so we come round to the root of the matter once more. The

privileged person, whose patent society has endorsed, must be a young,

pretty, charming woman. Failing these conditions, she is a mere

adventuress whose discomfiture is not far off; with these, her patent

will last just so long as they do. And when they have gone, she will

degenerate into a 'horror,' at whom the bold will laugh, the timid

tremble, and whose company the wise will avoid.