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<SCRAMBLERS.>

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There are people who are never what Northern housewives call

'straight'--people who seem to have been born in a scramble, who live

in a scramble, and who, when their time comes, will die in a scramble,

just able to scrawl their signature to a will that ought to have been

made years ago, and that does not embody their real intentions now.

Emphatically the Unready, they are never prepared for anything,

whether expected or unexpected; they make no plans more stable than

good intentions; and they neither calculate nor foresee. Everything

with them is hurry and confusion; not because they have more to do

than other people, but because they do it more loosely and less

methodically--because they have not learnt the art of dovetailing nor

the mystery of packing. Consequently half their pleasures and more

than half their duties slip through their fingers for want of the

knack of compact holding; and their lives are passed in trying to pick

up what they have let drop and in frantic endeavours to remedy their

mistakes. For scramblers are always making mistakes and going through

an endless round of forgetting. They never remember their

engagements, but accept in the blandest and frankest way imaginable

two or more invitations for the same day and hour, and assure you

quite seriously when, taught by experience, you push them hard and

probe them deep, that they have no engagement whatever on hand and are

certain not to fail you. In an evil hour you trust to them. When the

day comes they suddenly wake to the fact that they had accepted Mrs.

So-and-So's invitation before yours; and all you get for your empty

place and your careful arrangements ruthlessly upset, is a hurried

note of apology which comes perhaps in the middle of dinner, perhaps

sometime next day, when too late to be of use.

If they forget their own engagements they also ignore yours, no matter

how distinctly you may have tabulated them; and are sure to come

rattling to your house on the day when you said emphatically you were

engaged and could not see them. If you keep to your programme and

refuse to admit them, more likely than not you affront them.

Engagements being in their eyes moveable feasts, which it does not in

the least degree signify whether they keep on the date set down or

not, they cannot understand your rigidity of purpose; and were it not

that as a tribe they are good-natured, and too fluid to hold even

annoyance for any length of time, you would in all probability have a

quarrel fastened on you because your scrambling friends chose to make

a calendar for themselves and to insist on your setting your diary by

it.

As they ignore your appointed hours, so do they forget your

street and number. They always stick to your first card, though you

may have moved many times since it was printed, duly apprizing them of

each change as it occurred. That does not help you, for they never

note the changes of their friends' addresses, but keep loyally to the

first. It all comes to the same in the end, they say, and the postman

is cleverer than they. But they do not often trouble their friends

with letters on their own account, for they have a speciality for not

answering such as are written to them. When they do by chance answer

them, they never reply to the questions asked nor give the news

demanded. They do not even reply to invitations like other people, but

leave you to infer from their silence the acceptance or rejection they

are meditating. When they in their turn invite you, they generally

puzzle you by mismatching the day of the week with the date of the

month, leaving you tormented with doubt which you are to go by; and

they forget to give you the hour. Besides this, they write an

illegible hand; and they are famous for the blots they make and the

Queen's heads they omit.

A scrambling wife is no light cross to a man who values order and

regularity as part of his home life. She may be, and probably is, the

best-tempered creature in the world--a peevish scrambler would be too

unendurable--but a fresh face, bright eyes and a merry laugh do not

atone for never-ending disorder and discomfort. This kind of thing

does not depend on income and is not to be remedied by riches. The

households where my lady has nothing to do but let her maid keep

her to the hours she herself has appointed are just as uncomfortable

in their way as poorer establishments, if my lady is a scrambler, and

cannot be taught method and the value of holding on by the forelock.

Sometimes my lady gets herself into such an inextricable coil of

promises and engagements, all crossing each other, that in despair she

takes to her bed and gives herself out as ill, and so cuts what she

cannot untie. People wonder at her sudden indisposition, looking as

she did only yesterday in the bloom of health; and they wonder at her

radiant reappearance in a day or two without a trace of even languor

upon her. They do not know that her retirement was simply a version of

the famous rope trick, and that, like the Brothers Davenport, she went

into the dark to shake herself free of the cords with which she had

suffered herself to be bound. It is a short and easy method certainly,

but it has rather too much of the echo of 'Wolf' in it to bear

frequent repetition.

In houses of a lower grade, where the lady is her own housekeeper, the

habit of scrambling of course leads to far greater and more manifest

confusion. The servants catch from the mistress the trick of

overstaying time; and punctuality at last comes to mean an elastic

margin, where fixed duties and their appointed times appear

cometically at irregular intervals. The cook is late with dinner; the

coachman begins to put-to a little after the hour he was ordered

to be at the door; but they know that, however late they are, the

chances are ten to one their mistress will not be ready for them, and

that in her heart she will be grateful to them for the shelter their

own unpunctuality affords her. This being so, they take their time and

dawdle at their pleasure; thus adding to the pressure which always

comes at the end of the scrambler's day, when everything is thrown

into a chaotic mass and nothing comes out straight or complete.

Did any one ever know a scrambling woman ready at the moment in her

own house? That she should be punctual to any appointment out of her

house is, of course, not to be thought of; but she makes an awkward

thing of it sometimes at home. Her guests are often all assembled, and

the dinner hour has struck, before she has torn off one gown and

dragged on another. What she cannot tie she pins; and her pins are

many and demonstrative. She wisps up her hair, not having left herself

time to braid it; and the consequence is that before she has been half

an hour in the room ends and tails are sure to stray playfully from

their fastenings and come tumbling about her ears. Her jewels are

mismatched, her colours ill-assorted, her belt is awry, her bouquet

falling to pieces. She rushes into the drawing-room in her morning

slippers, smiling and good-tempered, with a patch-work look about

her--something forgotten in her attire that makes her whole appearance

shaky and unfinished--fastening her last button or clasping on

her first bracelet. She is full of regrets and excuses delivered in

her joyous, buoyant manner, or in a voice so winning, an accent so

coaxing, that you cannot be annoyed. Besides, you leave the annoyance

to her husband, who is sure to have in reserve a pickle quite

sufficiently strong for the inevitable rod, as the poor scrambler

knows too well. All you can do is to accept her apologies with a good

grace, and to carry away with you a vivid recollection of an awkward

half-hour, a spoilt dinner, and a scrambling hostess all abroad and

out of time, sweeping through the room very heated, very

good-tempered, only half-dressed and chronically out of breath.

Scramblers can never learn the value of money, neither for themselves

nor for others. They are famous for borrowing small sums which they

forget to return; but, to do them justice, they are just as willing to

lend what they never dream of asking for again. Long ago they caught

hold of the fact that money is only a circulating medium, and they

have added an extra speed to the circulation at which slower folk

stand aghast. To be sure, the practical results of their theory are

not very satisfactory, and the confusion between the possessive

pronouns which distinguishes their financial catechism is apt to lead

to unpleasant issues.

Scrambling women are especially notorious for the way in which they

set themselves afloat without sufficient means to carry them on;

finding themselves stranded in mid-career because they have made

no calculations and have forgotten the rule of subtraction. They find

themselves at a small Italian town, say, where the virtues of the

British banking system are unknown, and where their letters of credit

and circular notes are not worth more than the value of the paper they

are written on. More than one British matron of respectable condition

and weak arithmetic has found herself in such a plight as this, with

her black-eyed landlord perfectly civil and well-bred, but as firm as

a rock in his resolution that the Signora shall not depart out of his

custody till his little account is paid--a plight out of which she has

to scramble the best way she can, with the loss perhaps of a little

dignity and of more repute--at least in the locality where her solid

scudi gave out and her precious paper could not be cashed. This is the

same woman who offers an omnibus conductor a sovereign for a

three-penny fare; who gives the village grocer a ten-pound note for a

shilling's-worth of sugar; and who, when she comes up to London for a

day's shopping, and has got her last parcel made up and ready to be

put into her cab, finds she has not left herself half enough money to

pay for it--with a shopman whose faith in human nature is by no means

lively, and who only last week was bitten by a lady swindler of

undeniable manners and appearance, and not very unlike herself. She

has been known too, to go into a confectioner's and, after having made

an excellent luncheon, to find to her dismay that she has left

her purse in the pocket of her other dress at home, and that she has

not six-pence about her. In fact there is not an equivocal position in

which forgetfulness, want of method, want of foresight, and all the

other characteristics which make up scrambling in the concrete, can

place her, in which she has not been at some time or other. But no

experience teaches her; the scrambler she was born, the scrambler she

will die, and to the last will tumble through her life, all her ends

flying and deprecating excuses on her lips.

Scramblers are notoriously great for making promises, and as notorious

for not performing what they promise. Kindhearted as they are in

general, and willing to do their friends a service--going out of their

way indeed to proffer kindnesses quite beyond your expectations and

the range of their duties towards you, and always undertaking works of

supererogation; which works in fact lead to more than half their

normal scramble--they forget the next hour the promise on which you

have based your dearest hopes. Or, if they do not forget it, they find

it is crowded out of time by a multitude of engagements and prior

promises, of all of which they were innocently oblivious when they

offered to do your business so frankly, and swore so confidently they

would set about it now at once and get it out of hand without delay.

The oath and the offer which you took to be as sure as the best

chain-cable, you will find on trial to be only a rope of sand that

could not bind so much as a bunch of tow together, still less

hold the anchor of a life; and many a heart, sick with hope deferred

and wrung with the disappointment which might have been so easily

prevented, has been half broken before now from the anguish that has

followed on the failure of the kindhearted scrambler to perform the

promise voluntarily made, and the service earnestly pressed on a

reluctant acceptor.

This is the tragic side of the scrambler's career, the shadow thrown

by almost every one of the class. For all the minor delinquencies of

hurry and unpunctuality in social affairs it is not difficult to find

full and ample forgiveness; but when it comes to untrustworthiness in

graver matters, then the scrambler becomes a scourge instead of only

an inconvenience. The only safe way of dealing with the class is to

take them when we can get hold of them, and to accept them for what

they are worth; but not to rely on them, and not to attempt any

mortising of our own affairs with their promises. They are the froth

and foam of society, pretty and pleasant enough in the sunlight as

they splash and splutter about the rocks; but they are not the deep

waters which bear the burden of our ships and by which the life of the

world is maintained.