

Her children arise up, and call her blessed; her husband also, and he praiseth her.

Many daughters have done virtuously, but thou excellest them all.

Favour is deceitful, and beauty is vain; but a woman that feareth the Lord, she shall be praised.

Give her of the fruit of her hands; and let her own works praise her in the gates."

CHAPTER VII.

Female Friendships.

"And what is Friendship but a name,
A charm that lulls to sleep,
A shade that follows wealth and fame,
And leaves the wretch to weep?"

THIS remark, expressed too tersely and intelligibly to be considered "poetry" now-a-days, must apply to the nobler sex. Few observant persons will allege against ours, that even in its lowest form our friendship is deceitful. Fickle it may be, weak, exaggerated, sentimental—the mere lath-and-plaster imitation of a palace great enough for a demigod to dwell in—but it is rarely false, parasitical, or diplomatic. The countless secondary motives which many men

are mean enough to have—nay, to own—are all but impossible to us; impossible from the very faults of our nature—our frivolity, irrationality, and incapacity to seize on more than one idea at the same time. In truth, a sad proportion of us are too empty-headed to be double-minded, too shallow to be insincere. Nay, even the worst of us being more direct and simple of character than men are, our lightest friendship—the merest passing liking that we decorate with that name—is, while it lasts, more true than the generality of the so-called “friendships” of mankind.

But—and this “but” will, I am aware, raise a whole nest of hornets—from our very peculiarities of temperament, women’s friendships are rarely or never so firm, so just, or so enduring, as those of men—*when* you can find them. Damon and Pythias, Orestes and Pylades, Brutus and Cassius—last and loveliest, David and Jonathan, are pictures unmatched by any from our

sex, down even to the far-famed ladies of Llangollen. When such a bond really does exist, from its exception to general masculine idiosyncrasies—especially the enormous absorption in and devotion to Number One—from its total absence of sentimentality, its undemonstrativeness, depth, and power, a friendship between two men is a higher thing than between any two women—nay, one of the highest and noblest sights in the whole world. Precisely as, were comparisons not as foolish as they are odious, a truly good man, from the larger capacities of male nature both for virtue and vice, is, in one sense, more good than any good woman. But this question I leave to controversialists, who enjoy breaking their own heads, or one another’s, over a bone contention which is usually not worth picking after all.

Yet, though dissenting from much of the romance talked about female friendships, believing that two-thirds of them spring from mere idle-

ness, or from that *besoin d'aimer* which, for want of natural domestic ties, makes this one a temporary substitute, Heaven forbid I should so malign my sex as to say they are incapable of an emotion which, in its right form and place, constitutes the strength, help, and sweetness of many, many lives; and the more so because it is one of the first sweetnesses we know.

Probably there are few women who have not had some first friendship, as delicious and almost as passionate as first love. It may not last—it seldom does; but at the time it is one of the purest, most self-forgetful and self-denying attachments that the human heart can experience: with many, the nearest approximation to that feeling called love—I mean love in its highest form, apart from all selfishnesses and sensuousnesses—which in all their after-life they will ever know. This girlish friendship, however fleeting in its character, and romantic, even silly, in its manifestations, let us take heed how we make

light of, lest we be mocking at things more sacred than we are aware.

And yet, it is not the real thing—not *friendship*, but rather a kind of foreshadowing of love; as jealous, as exacting, as unreasoning—as wildly happy and supremely miserable; ridiculously so to a looker-on, but to the parties concerned, as vivid and sincere as any after-passion into which the girl may fall; for the time being, perhaps long after, colouring all her world. Yet it is but a dream, to melt away like a dream when love appears; or if it then wishes to keep up its vitality at all, it must change its character, temper its exactions, resign its rights: in short, be buried and come to life again in a totally different form. Afterwards, should Laura and Matilda, with a house to mind and a husband to fuss over, find themselves actually kissing the babies instead of one another—and managing to exist for a year without meeting, or a month without letter-writing, yet feel life no blank,

and affection a reality still—then their attachment has taken its true shape as friendship, shown itself capable of friendship's distinguishing feature—namely, tenderness without appropriation; and the women, young or old, will love one another faithfully to the end of their lives.

Perhaps this, which is the test of the sentiment, explains why we thus seldom attain to it, in its highest phase, because nature has made us in all our feelings so intensely personal. We have instincts, passions, domestic affections, but friendship is, strictly speaking, none of the three. It is—to borrow the phrase so misused by that arch *im-moralist*, that high-priest of intellectual self-worship, Goethe—an elective affinity, based upon the spiritual consanguinity, which, though frequently co-existent with, is different from any tie of instinct or blood-relationship. Therefore, neither the sanctities nor weaknesses of these rightly appertain to it; its duties, immunities, benefits and pains, belong to a distinct sphere,

of which the vital atmosphere is perfect liberty. A bond, not of nature but of choice, it should exist and be maintained calm, free, and clear, having neither rights nor jealousies; at once the firmest and most independent of all human ties.

“Enough,” said Rasselas to Imlac; “you convince me that no man can ever be a poet.” And truly, reviewing friendship in its purest essence, one is prone to think that, in this imperfect world of ours, no man—certainly no woman—ever can be a *friend*. And yet we all own some dozens; from Mrs. Granville Jones, who invites “a few friends”—say two hundred—to pass with her a “social evening”—to the poor costermonger, who shouts after the little pugilistic sweep the familiar tragico-comic saying: “Hit him hard; he’s got no friends!” And who that is not an utter misanthrope would refuse to those of his or her acquaintance that persist in claiming it, the kindly title, and the pleasant social charities which belong thereto?

" Love is sweet,
Given or returned ;"

and so is friendship; when, be it ever so infinitesimal in quantity, its quality is unadulterated springing, as, I repeat, women's friendship almost always does spring, out of that one-idea'd impulsiveness, often wrong-headed, but rarely evil-hearted, which makes us at once so charming and so troublesome, and which, I fear, never will be got out of us till we cease to be women, and become what men sometimes call us—and they well know they give us but too much need to be—angels.

Yes, with all our folly, we are not false: not even when Lavinia Smith adores with all her innocent soul the condescending Celestina Jones, though meeting twenty years after as fat Mrs. Brown and vulgar Mrs. Green, they may with difficulty remember one another's Christian names: not when Bessy Thompson, blessed with three particularly nice brothers, owns likewise

three times three "dearest" friends, who honestly persuade themselves and her that they come only to see dear Bessy; nevertheless, the fondness is real enough to outlast many bothers caused by said brothers, or even a cantankerous sister-in-law to end with. Nay, when Miss Hopkins, that middle-aged and strong-minded "young lady" of blighted affections, and Mrs. Jenkins, that woman of sublime aspirations, who has unluckily "mated with a clown," coalesce against the opposite sex, fall into one another's arms and vow eternal friendship—for a year; after which, for five more, they make all their acquaintances uncomfortable by their eternal enmity—even in this lamentable phase of the sentiment, it is more respectable than the time-serving, place-hunting, dinner-seeking devotion which Messrs. Tape and Tadpole choose to denominate "friendship."

Men may laugh at us, and we deserve it:

we are often egregious fools, but we are honest fools; and our folly, at least in this matter, usually ends where theirs begins—with middle life, or marriage.

It is the unmarried, the solitary, who are most prone to that sort of "sentimental" friendship with their own or the opposite sex, which, though often most noble, unselfish, and true, is in some forms ludicrous, in others dangerous. For two women, past earliest girlhood, to be completely absorbed in one another, and make public demonstration of the fact, by caresses or quarrels, is so repugnant to common sense, that where it ceases to be silly it becomes actually wrong. But to see two women, whom Providence has denied nearer ties, by a wise substitution making the best of fate, loving, sustaining, and comforting one another, with a tenderness often closer than that of sisters, because it has all the novelty of election which belongs to the conjugal tie

itself—this, I say, is an honourable and lovely sight.

Not less so the friendship—rare, I grant, yet quite possible—which subsists between a man and woman whom circumstances, or their own idiosyncrasies, preclude from the slightest chance of ever "falling in love." That such friendships can exist, especially between persons of a certain temperament and order of mind, and remain for a lifetime, utterly pure, interfering with no rights, and transgressing no law of morals or society, most people's observation of life will testify; and he must take a very low view of human nature who dares to say that these attachments, satirically termed "Platonic," are impossible. But, at the same time, common sense must allow that they are rare to find, and not the happiest always, when found; because in some degree they are contrary to nature. Nature's law undoubtedly is,

that our nearest ties should be those of blood—father or brother, sister or mother—until comes the closer one of marriage; and it is always, if not wrong, rather pitiful, when any extraneous bond comes in between to forestall the entire affection that a young man ought to bring to his future wife, a young woman to her husband. I say *ought*—God knows if they ever do! But, however fate, or folly, or wickedness may interfere to prevent it, not the less true is the undoubted fact, that happy above all must be that marriage where neither husband nor wife ever had a friend so dear as one another.

After marriage, for either party to have or to desire a dearer or closer friend than the other, is a state of things so inconceivably deplorable—the more erring, the more deplorable—that it will not bear discussion. Such cases there are; but He who in the mystery

of marriage prefigured a greater mystery still, alone can judge them, for He only knows their miseries, their temptations, and their wrongs.

While allowing that a treaty of friendship, “pure and simple,” can exist between a man and woman—under peculiar circumstances, even between a young man and a young woman—it must also be allowed that the experiment is difficult, often dangerous; so dangerous, that the matter-of-fact half of the world will not believe in it at all. Parents and guardians very naturally object to a gentleman’s “hanging up his hat” in their houses, or taking sentimental twilight rambles with their fair young daughters. They insist, and justly, that he ought to

“Come with a good will, or come not at all;”

namely, as a mere acquaintance, a pleasant friend of the family—the *whole* family, or as a declared suitor. And though this may fall rather hard upon the young man, who has just a hundred

a-year, and, with every disposition towards flirting, a strong horror of matrimony—still, it is wisest and best. It may save both parties from frittering away, in a score of false sentimental likings, the love that ought to belong but to one; or, still worse, from committing or suffering what, beginning blamelessly on either side, frequently ends in incurable pain, irremediable wrong.

Therefore it is, generally speaking, those further on in life, with whom the love-phase is past, or for whom it never existed, who may best use the right, which every pure and independent heart undoubtedly has, of saying: "I take this man or woman for my friend: only a friend—never either more or less—whom as such I mean to keep to the end of my days." And if more of these, who really know what friendship is, would have the moral courage to assert its dignity against the sneers of society, which is loath to believe in anything higher

and purer than itself, I think it would be all the better for the world.

Women's friendships with one another are of course free from all these perils, and yet they have their own. The wonderful law of sex—which exists spiritually as well as materially, and often independent of matter altogether; since we see many a man who is much more of a woman, and many a woman who would certainly be the "better-half" of any man who cared for her—this law can rarely be withstood with impunity. In most friends whose attachment is specially deep and lasting, we can usually trace a difference—of strong or weak, gay or grave, brilliant or solid—answering in some measure to the difference of sex. Otherwise, a close, all-engrossing friendship between two women would seldom last long; or if it did, by their mutual feminine weaknesses acting and reacting upon one another, would most likely narrow the sympathies and deteriorate the character of both.

Herein lies the distinction—marked and inalienable—between friendship and love. The latter, being a natural necessity, requires but *the one*, whom it absorbs and assimilates till the two diverse, and often opposite characters, become a safe unity—according to divine ordinance, “one flesh.” But friendship, to be friendship at all, must have an independent self-existence, capable of gradations and varieties; for though we can have but one dearest friend, it would argue small power of either appreciating or loving to have only one friend.

On the other hand, the “hare with many friends” has passed into a proverb. Such a condition is manifestly impossible. The gentleman who, in answer to his servant’s request to be allowed to go and “see a friend,” cries:—

“Fetch me my coat, John! Though the night be raw,
I’ll see him too—the first I ever saw:”

this cynic, poor wretch! speaks wiser than he is

ware of. One simple fact explains and limits the whole question—that those only can find true friends who have in themselves the will and capacity to be such.

A friend. Not perhaps until later life, until the follies, passions, and selfishnesses of youth have died out, do we—I mean especially we women—recognise the inestimable blessing, the responsibility awful as sweet, of possessing or of being a friend. And though, not willing to run counter to the world’s kindly custom, we may give that solemn title to many who do not exactly own it; though year by year the fierce experience of life, through death, circumstance, or change, narrows the circle of those who do own it; still that man or woman must have been very unfortunate—perhaps, as there can be no result without a cause, worse than unfortunate—who, looking back on thirty, forty, or fifty years of existence, cannot say from the heart, “I thank God for my friends.”

I said before, that the very element in which true friendship lives, and out of which it cannot live at all, is perfect *liberty*.

Friendship once conceived should, like love, in one sense last for ever. That it does not; that in the world's harsh wear and tear many a very sincere attachment is slowly obliterated, or both parties grow out of it and cast it, like a snake his last year's skin—though that implies something of the snake-nature, I fear—are facts too mournfully common to be denied. But there is a third fact, as mournfully *uncommon*, which needs to be remembered likewise: we may lose the friend—the friendship we never can or ought to lose. Actively, it may exist no more; but passively, it is just as binding as the first moment when we pledged it, as we believed, for ever. Its duties, like its delights, may have become a dead-letter; but none of its claims or confidences have we ever afterwards the smallest right to abjure or to break.

And here is one accusation which I must sorrowfully bring against women, as being much more guilty than men. We can keep a secret—ay, against all satire, I protest we can—while the confider remains our friend; but if that tie ceases, pop! out it comes! and in the bitterness of invective, the pang of wounded feeling, or afterwards in mere thoughtlessness, and easy forgetting of what is so easily healed, a thousand things are said and done for which nothing can ever atone. The lost friendship, which, once certain that it is past all revival, ought to be buried as solemnly and silently as a lost love, is cast out into the open street for all the snarling curs of society to gnaw at and mangle, and all the contemptuous misogynists who pass by to point the finger at—
“See what your grand ideals all come to!”

Good women—dear my sisters! be our friendships false or true, wise or foolish, living or dead—let us at least learn to keep them sacred! Men are far better than we in this. Rarely will a man

voluntarily or thoughtlessly betray a friend's confidence, either at the time or afterwards. He will say, even to his own wife: "I can't tell you this—I have no right tell you:" and if she has the least spark of good feeling, she will honour and love him all the dearer for so saying. More rarely still will a man be heard, as women constantly are, speaking ill of some friend who a little while before, while the friendship lasted, was all perfection. What is necessary to be said he will say, but not a syllable more, leaving all the rest in that safe, still atmosphere, where all good fructifies and evil perishes—the atmosphere of silence.

Ay, above all things, what women need to learn in their friendships is the sanctity of silence—silence in outward demonstration, silence under wrong, silence with regard to the outside world, and often a delicate silence between one another. About the greatest virtue a friend can have, is to be able to hold her tongue; and though this,

like all virtues carried to extremity, may grow into a fault, and do great harm, still, it never can do so much harm as that horrible laxity and profligacy of speech which is at the root of half the quarrels, cruelties, and injustices of the world.

And let every woman, old or young, in commencing a friendship, be careful that it is to the right thing she has given the right name. If so, let her enter upon it thoughtfully, earnestly, advisedly, as upon an engagement made for life, which in truth it is; since, whether its duration be brief or long, it is a tangible reality, and, as such, must have its influence on the total chronicle of existence, wherein no line can ever be quite blotted out. Let her, with the strength and comfort of it, prepare to take the burden; determined, whatever the other may do, to fulfil her own part, and act up to her own duty, absolutely and conscientiously, to the

end. For truly, the greatest of all external blessings is it to be able to lean your heart against another heart, faithful, tender, true, and tried, and record with a thankfulness that years deepen instead of diminishing, "I have got a friend!"

CHAPTER VIII.

Gossip.

ONE of the wisest and best among our English ethical writers, the author of *Companions of my Solitude*, says, *à propos* of gossip, that one half of the evil-speaking of the world arises, not from *malice prepense*, but from mere want of amusement. And I think we may even grant that in the other half, constituted small of mind or selfish in disposition, it is seldom worse than the natural falling back from large abstract interests, which they cannot understand, upon those which they can—alas! only the narrow, commonplace, and personal.