

LETTERS TO YOUNG WEMON.

The Prudent and Proper Use of Language.

Of all the griefs that harass the distressed, Sure the most bitter is a scornful jest.

—Samuel Johnson.

And lovelier things have mercy shown To every failing but their own, And every woe a tear can claim Except an erring sister's shame.

—Byron.

I have met with a good many young women, first and last, whose intellects were of that keen, quick variety which delights in uttering sharp things—often very hard things. They do it at first playfully; they produce a laugh which flatters them; and they soon get to doing it wantonly. They acquire an appetite for praise, and they become willing to procure it at whatever expense to others. Genuine wit in a man is almost always genial; wit in a woman, however genial it may be at first, almost always gets into personalities sooner or later, which makes it very dangerous and very hateful.

Man is held in restraint, whatever his tendencies may be, by the consideration that, as a man, he will be held responsible for his words, women presume, upon the fact that they are women, in taking license to say what they choose of each other, and of men in particular.

There is not always, perhaps there is not generally, malice in these sharp and hard speeches, but they poison nevertheless. They poison her who utters them, and they poison those who suffer from them. The utterer becomes the student, for a purpose, of the weak points of her friends, and they learn to hate her. I have known not a few women whose personal witticisms were enjoyed by the gossip-loving crowd around her, every man of whom would as soon think of marrying a tigress as the one he was flattering by the applause of his laugh.

Therefore I say that to be a witty woman is a very dangerous thing. To be a witty woman is to be the subject of very great temptations, for personalities form the very zest of gossip, an employment of which most women I think, know something by experiment.

Men are afraid of witty women, especially those who delight in making cutting speeches. They say very rationally, that if a woman will secure praise at the expense of one friend, she will also at the expense of others, and that no one can be safe. There is nothing in my eyes more admirable in a woman than an honest wish to hear no one spoken against—than that consideration for the feelings of others which leads her to treat all faults with tenderness, and all weaknesses and natural unpleasant peculiarities with indulgence. One of the most attractive sights in the world, to any young man of common sensibility, is that of a young woman who not only will neither say nor hear ill of any one, but who takes special pains to notice those whom the crowd neglect. Such a woman is the admired of all whose admiration is worth securing.

And now, young woman, if you are one of the sharp ones, and are tempted to say sharp things, remember that you are in very great danger of injuring yourself, not only in your own soul, but in the eyes of all those whom you imagine you are pleasing. I think as a general thing, that women are harder in their judgement of their own sex than men are of theirs, or even of them. This arises partially from jealousy—a wish to stand among the uppermost in the popular esteem. The praise of women, poured into the ears of other women, is not usually gratefully received. The disposition of women to judge harshly of each other is seen particularly in those instances in which a woman has taken a false step. Here the fact is patent; a woman forgets or forgives much less promptly than a man.

However deep the repentance, however decided the reformation, a woman never forgets that her sister has sinned, notwithstanding the fact that weakness and misfortune and a hundred mitigating if not exculpating circumstances plead in her behalf. It is the same with less important lapses of behavior, in a corresponding degree. I do not know but this is one of the safeguards which God intended should be around a woman's path, but it seems to me a very unwomanly and a very unchristian thing. It seems to me, too, to be a very unnatural thing. I judge that, much more than a man, a woman should be interested in securing justice for her own sex; and that if a sinning or silly woman should find a charitable defence anywhere, it should be among those who, like her, are exposed to the temptations, and particularly to the uncharitable misconstructions of a captious world.

What I would insist upon, is that you not only do not wound the feelings of your own sex by sharp criticisms, but that you be heartily enlisted in maintaining its honor. Do not think that you do this while putting down this one and that, in order to make your own immaculateness the more conspicuous. Believe what is generally true, that those who sin are those who sin rather through weakness than vicious tendency; that villains who wear cravats and waistcoats—the very men whom you are by no means particular enough to exclude from your company—are those who most deserve your reproaches. And now that I am upon this subject of talk, it will be well to say all I have to say upon it. It is a very common thing for young women to indulge in hyperbole. A pretty dress is very apt to be "perfectly splendid"; a disagreeable person is too often "perfectly hateful." A party in which the company enjoyed themselves somehow becomes transmuted into the "most delightful thing ever seen." A young man of respectable parents and manly bearing is very often "such a magnificent fellow." The adjective "perfect" that stands so much alone as never to have the privilege of help from comparatives and superlatives, is sadly overworked in company with several others of the intense and extravagant order. The result is that by the use of such language as this, your opinion soon becomes valueless. A woman who deals only in superlatives demonstrates at once the fact that her judgment is subordinate to her feelings, and that her opinions are entirely unreliable. All language thus loses its power and significance. The same words are brought into use to describe a ribbon in a milliner's window as are employed in the endeavor to do justice to Thalberg's execution of Beethoven's most heavenly symphony.

The use of hyperbole is so common among women that a woman's criticism is generally without value. Let me insist upon this thing. Be more economical in the use of your mother tongue. Apply your terms of praise with precision; use epithets with some degree of judgment and fitness. Do not waste your best and highest words upon inferior objects, and find that when you have met with something which really is superlative, great and good, the terms by which you would distinguish it have all been thrown away upon inferior things—that you are bankrupt in expression.

If a thing is simply good, say so; if pretty, say so; if very pretty, say so; if fine, say so; if very fine, say so; if grand, say so; if sublime, say so; if magnificent, say so; if splendid, say so. The words all have different meanings and you may say them all of as many different objects, and not use the word "perfect" once. This is a very large word. You will probably be obliged to save it for application to the Deity or to His works, or that serene rest which remains for those who love Him.

Young women are very apt to imbibe another bad habit, namely, the use of slang.

I was walking along the street the other day when I met an elegantly dressed lady and gentleman, upon the sidewalk. My attention was the more attracted to them because they were evidently strangers. At any rate they impressed me as being thoroughly refined and gentle people. As I came within hearing of their voices—they were

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