<Saturday Review, 24 July 1869, 112-3>

<FLATTERY.>

<Eliza Lynn Linton>

<etext downloaded from Project Gutenberg with thanks>

Nothing is so delightful as flattery. To hear and believe pleasant

fictions about oneself is a temptation too seductive for weak mortals

to resist, as the typical legends of all mythologies and the private

histories of most individuals show; in consequence of which, home

truths, to one used to ideal portraiture, come like draughts of

'bitter cup' to the dram-drinker. And flattery is dram-drinking; and

yet not quite without good uses to balance its undeniable evil, if it

be only exaggeration and not wholly falsehood; that is, if it assumes

as a matter of course the presence of virtues potential to your

character but not always active, and praises you for what you might be

if you chose to live up to your best. Many a weak brother and weaker

sister, and all children, can be heartened into goodness by a little

dash of judicious praise or flattery where ponderous exhortation and

grave reproof would fail; just as a heavily-laden horse can be coaxed

up-hill when the whip and spur would lead to untimely jibbing. If, on

the contrary, the flattery is of a kind that makes you believe

yourself an exceptionally fine fellow when you are only 'mean

trash' ~~ a king of men when you are nothing better nor nobler than a

moral nigger ~~ making you satisfied with yourself when at your

worst ~~ then it is an unmitigated evil; for it then becomes

dram-drinking of a very poisonous kind, which sooner or later does for

your soul what unlimited blue ruin does for your body. But this is

what we generally mean when we speak of flattery; and this is the kind

which has such a deservedly bad name from moralists of all ages.

The flatteries of men to women, and those of women to men, are very

different in kind and direction. Men flatter women for what they

are ~~ for their beauty, their grace, their sweetness, their

charmingness in general; while a woman will flatter a man for what he

does ~~ for his speech in the House last night, of which she understands

little; for his book, of which she understands less; or for his

pleading, of which she understands nothing at all. Not that this

signifies much on either side. The most unintellectual little woman in

the world has brains enough to look up in your face sweetly, and

breathe out something that sounds like 'beautiful ~~ charming ~~ so

clever,' vaguely sketching the outline of a hymn of praise to which

your own vanity supplies the versicles. For you must have an

exceptionally strong head if you can rate the sketch at its real value

and see for yourself how utterly meaningless it is.

You may be the most mystical poet of the day, suggesting to your

acutest readers grave doubts as to your own power of comprehending

yourself; or you may be the most subtle metaphysician, to follow

whom in your labyrinth of reasoning requires perhaps the rarest

order of brains to be met with; but you will nevertheless believe

any narrow-browed, small-headed woman who tells you in a low sweet

voice, with a gentle uplifting of her eyes and a suggestive curve

of her lip, that she has found you both intelligible and charming,

and that she quite agrees with you and shares your every sentiment.

If she further tells you that all her life long she has thought in

exactly the same way but was wholly unable to express herself, and

that you have now supplied her want and translated into words her

vague ideas, and if she says this with a reverential kind of

effusiveness, you are done for, so far as your critical power goes;

and should some candid friend, whom she has not flattered, tell you

with brutal frankness that your bewitching little flatterer has

neither the brains nor the education to understand you, you will set

him down as a slanderer, spiteful and malignant, and call his candour

envy because he has not been so lucky as yourself.

The most subtle form of flattery is that which asks your advice with

the pretence of needing it ~~ your advice, particularly ~~ yours above

that of all other persons, as the wisest, best, most useful to be

obtained. This too is a form that belongs rather to women in their

relations with men than the converse; though sometimes men will

pretend to want a woman's advice about their love affairs, and

will perhaps make-believe to be guided by it. Not unfrequently,

however, asking one woman's opinion and advice about another is a

masked manner of love-making on its own account; though sometimes it

may be done for flattery only, when there are reasons. Of course not

all advice-asking is flattery; but when intended only to please and

not meant to be genuine, it is perhaps one of the most potent

instruments of the art to be met with.

But if seeking advice be the most subtle form of flattery, the most

intoxicating is that which pretends to moral elevation or reform by

your influence. The reformation of a rake is a work which no woman

alive could be found to resist if the rake offered it to her as his

last chance of salvation; and to lead a pretty sinner back to the ways

of picturesque virtue by his own influence only is a temptation to

self-reliance which no man could refuse ~~ a flattery which not Diogenes

nor Zeno himself could see through. The pretensions of <reg orig=”any one”> anyone </reg> else

would be laughed at cruelly enough; but this is one of the things

where personal experience and critical judgment never go in harness

together ~~ one of the manifestations of flattery which would overcome

the calmest and bewilder the wisest.

Priests of all denominations are especially open to this kind of

flattery; not only from pretty sinners who have gone openly out of the

right line, but from quite comely and respectable maids and matrons

who have lived blamelessly so far as the broad moral distinctions

go, yet who have not lived the Awakened Life until roused thereunto by

this peculiarly favoured minister. It is a tremendous trial of a man's

discernment when such flattery is offered to him. How much of this

pretended awakening is real? How much of this sudden spiritual insight

is true, and not a mere phrasing, artfully adopted for pleasantness

only? These are the cases where we most want that famous spear of

Ithuriel to help us to a right estimate, for they are beyond the power

of any ordinary man to determine.

But if priests are subject to these delusions of flattery on the one

hand, they know how to practise them on the other. Take away the

flattery which, mingled with occasional rebuke, forms the great

ministerial spur, and both Revivalism and Ritualism would flag like

flowers without 'the gentle dews.' Scolded for their faults in dress,

for their vanity, extravagance and other feminine vices, are not women

also flattered as the favourites of heaven and of the Church? Are they

not told that they are the lilies of the ecclesiastical garden? the

divinely appointed missionaries for the preservation of virtue and

godly truth in the world? without whom the coarser race of men would

be given over to inconceivable spiritual evil, to infidelity and all

immorality. We may be very sure of this, that if humanity, and

especially feminine humanity, were not flattered as well as chastened,

clerical influence would not last for a day.

There is one kind of flattery which is common to both men and women,

and that is the expressed preference of sex. Thus, when men want to

flatter women, they say how infinitely they prefer their society to

that of their own sex; and women will say the same to men. Or, if they

do not say it, they will act it. See a set of women congregated

together without the light of a manly countenance among them. They may

talk to each other certainly; and one or two will sit away together

and discuss their private affairs with animation; but the great mass

of them are only half vitalized while waiting the advent of the men to

rouse them into life and the desire to please. No man who goes up

first from the dinner-table, and earlier than he was expected, can

fail to see the change which comes over those wearied, limp,

indifferent-looking faces and figures so soon as he enters the room.

He is like the prince whose kiss woke up the Sleeping Beauty and all

her court; and can <reg orig=”any one”> anyone </reg> say that this is not flattery of the most

delightful kind? To be the Pygmalion even for a moment, and for the

weakest order of soul-giving, is about the greatest pleasure that a

man can know, if he be susceptible to the finer kinds of flattery.

Some women indeed, not only show their preference for men, but openly

confess it, and confess at the same time to a lofty contempt or

abhorrence for the society of women. These are generally women who

are, or have been, beauties; or who have literary and intellectual

pretensions; or who despise babies and contemn housekeeping, and

profess themselves unable to talk to other women because of their

narrowness and stupidity. But for the most part they are women who, by

their beauty or their position, have been used to receive extra

attention from men; and thus their preference is not flattery so much

as <hi> exigence </hi>. Women who have been in India, or wherever else they are

in the minority in society, are of this kind; and nothing is more

amazing to them when they first come home than the attentions which a

certain style of Englishwoman pays to men, instead of demanding and

receiving attentions from them.

There are also those sweet, humble, caressing women who flatter you

with every word and look, but whose flattery is nothing but a pretty

dress put on for show and taken off when the show is done with.

Anything serves for an occasion with these people. Why, the way in

which certain unmarried women will caress a child before you is an

implied flattery; and they know it. If only they would be careful to

carry these pretty ante-nuptial ways into the home where nothing is to

be gained by them but a humdrum husband's happiness! But too often the

woman whose whole attitude was one of flattering devotion before her

end was gained, gives up every shred of that which she had in such

profusion, when she has attained her object, and lets the home go bare

of that which was so beautiful and seductive in the ball-room and the

flirting corner.

Some men however, want more home flattery to keep them tolerably happy

and up to the mark than any woman with a soul to be saved by truth can

give. Poets and artists are of this kind ~~ men who literally live on

praise, without which they droop and can do nothing. With them it is

absolutely necessary that the people with whom they are associated

should be of appreciative and sympathetic natures; but the burden

comes heavy when they want, as they generally do, so much more than

this. For, in truth, they want flattery in excess of sympathy; and if

they do not get it they hold themselves as the victims of an unkind

fate, and fill the world with the echo of their woes. This is

nine-tenths of the cause why great geniuses are so often unhappy in

married life. They demand more incessant flattery than can be kept up

by one woman, unless she has not only an exceptional power of love but

also an exceptional power of self-suppression. They think that by

virtue of their genius they are entitled to a Benjamin's mess of

devotion double that given to other men; and when they get only

Judah's share, they cry out that they are ill-used, and make the world

think them ill-used as well.

But though a little home flattery helps the home life immeasurably,

and greases the creaking domestic wheels more than anything else can,

a great deal is just the most pernicious thing that can be offered.

The belief prevalent in some families that all the very small and

commonplace members thereof are the world's wonders and greater

than <reg orig=”any one”> anyone </reg> else ~~ that <reg orig=”no one”> no-one </reg> is so clever as Harry, <reg orig=”no one”> no-one </reg> so pretty

as Julia, that Amy's red hair is of a more brilliant gold than can be

found elsewhere, and Edward's mathematical abilities about equal to

Newton's ~~ this belief, nourished and acted on, is sure to turn out an

insufferable collection of prigs and self-conceited damsels who have

to be brought down innumerable pegs before they find their own level.

But we often see this; especially in country places where there is not

much society to give a standard for comparative measurement; and we

know that those fond parents and doting relations are blindly and

diligently sowing seeds of bitterness for a future harvest of sorrow

for their darlings. These young people must be made to suffer if they

are to be of any good whatever in the world; and finding their level,

after the exalted position which they have been supposed to fill so

long, and being pelted with the unsavoury missiles of truth in

exchange for all the incense of flattery to which they have been used,

will be suffering enough. But it has to be gone through; this being

one of the penalties to which the unwisdom of love so often subjects

its objects.

The flattery met with in society is not often very harmful save to

coarse or specially simple natures. You must be either one or the

other to be able to believe it. Lady Morgan was perhaps the most

unblushing and excessive of the tribe of social flatterers; but that

was her engine, the ladder by which she did a good part of her

climbing. We must not confound with this kind of flattery the

impulsive expression of praise or love which certain outspoken people

indulge in to the last. You may as well try to dam up Niagara as to

make some folks reticent of their thoughts and feelings. And when one

of this kind sees anything that he or she likes, the praise has to

come out, with superlatives if the creature be prone to exaggeration.

But this is not flattery; it is merely a certain childlike

expansiveness which lasts with some into quite old age. Unfortunately,

very few understand this childlike expansiveness when they see it.

Hence it subjects its possessor to misrepresentation and unfriendly

jibes, so soon as his or her back is turned, and the explosion of

exaggerated but perfectly sincere praise is discussed critically by

the uninterested part of the audience.