

THE WOMAN OF THE WORLD.

WE all know that there are certain conventional laws by which our social doings and seemings are regulated; but what is the power which compels the observance of these laws? There is no company police to keep people moving on, no fines or other penalties; nobody but the very outrageous need fear being turned out of the room; we have every one of us strong inclinations and strong will; then, how comes it that we get on so smoothly? Why are there no outbreaks of individual character? How is it that we seem dovetailed into each other, as if we formed a homogeneous mass? What is the influence which keeps up the weak and keeps down the strong, and spreads itself like oil upon the boiling sea of human passion? We have a notion of our own, that all this is the work of an individual of the female sex; and, indeed, even the most unconscious and unreflecting would appear to assign to that individual her true position and authority, in naming her the Woman of the World.

Society could never exist in a state of civilisation without the woman of the world. The man of the world has his own department, his own *métier*; but she it is who keeps up the general equilibrium. She is a calm, quiet, lady-like person, not obtrusive, and not easily put out of the way. You do not know by external observation that she is in the room; you feel it instinctively. The atmosphere she brings with her is peculiar, you cannot tell how. It is neither warm nor chill, neither moist nor dry; but it is repressive. You do not move in it with natural freedom, although you feel nothing that could be called *gené*. Her manner is generally sweet, sometimes even caressing, and you feel flattered and elevated as you meet her approving eye. But you cannot get into it. There is a glassy surface, beautiful but hard, of which you can make nothing, and presently you feel a kind of strangeness come over you, as if you were not looking into the eye of a creature of your own kind. What you miss is sympathy.

It is to her want of sympathy the woman of the world owes her position. The same deficiency is indispensable in the other individuals—such as a great monarch, or a great general—who rule the fate of mankind; but with this difference, that in them it is partial and limited, and in her universal. In them, it bears relation to their trade or mission; in her, it is a peculiarity of her general nature. She is accused of inhumanity; of sporting with the feelings of those about her, and rending, when they interfere with her plans, the strings of the heart as ruthlessly as if they were fiddlestrings. But all that is nonsense. She does not, it is true, ignore the existence of strings and feelings; on the contrary, they are in her eyes a great fact, without which she could do nothing. But her theory is, that they are merely a superficial net-work surrounding the character, the growth of education and other circumstances, and that they may be twisted, broken and fastened anew at pleasure by skilful fingers. No, she is not inhumane. She works for others' good and her own greatness. Sighs and tears may be the result of her opera-

tions; but so are they of the operations of the beneficent surgeon. She dislikes giving pain, and comforts and sustains the patient to the best of her power; but at the most, she knows sighs are but wind, and tears but water, and so she does her duty.

Although without sympathy, the woman of the world has great sensitiveness. She sits in the room like a spider, with her web fitting as closely to the whole area as the carpet; and she feels the slightest touch upon the slightest filament. So do the company; not understandingly like her, but instinctively and unconsciously, like a fly who only knows that somehow or other he is not at freedom. The thing that holds him is as soft and glossy and thin and small as silk; but even while dallying with its smoothness and pleasantness, a misty, indefinite sensation of impending danger creeps over him. Be quiet, little fly! Gently—gently; slip away if you can—but no defiance, no tugging, no floundering, or you are lost!

A mythic story is told of the woman of the world; how in early life she was crossed in love; how she lost faith in feelings that seemed to exist exceptionally only in her own solitary bosom; and how a certain glassy hardness gathered upon her heart, as she sat waiting and waiting for a response to the inner voices she had suffered to burst forth—

The long-lost features of the heart,
That send no answers back again!

But this is a fable. The woman of the world was never young—not while playing with her doll. She grew just as you see her, and will suffer no change till the dissolution of the elements of her body. Love-passages she has indeed had like other women; but the love was all on one side, and that side not hers. It is curious to observe the passion thus lavished in vain. It reminds one of the German story of the Cave of Mirrors, where a fairy damsel, with beckoning hand and beseeching eyes, was reflected from a thousand angles. The pursuing lover, endeavouring to clasp his mistress, flung himself from one illusory image to another, finding only the sharp, polished, glittering glass in his embrace, till faint, breathless, and bleeding, he sank upon the ground.

The woman of the world, though a dangerous mistress, is an agreeable friend. She is partial to the everyday married lady, when presentable in point of dress and manners, and overwhelms her with little condescending kindnesses and caresses. This good lady, on her part, thinks her patroness a remarkably clever woman; not that she understands her, or knows exactly what she is about; but somehow or other she is *sure* she is prodigiously clever. As for the everyday young lady, who has a genius for reverence, she reveres her; and these two, with their male congeners, are the dress-figures the woman of the world places about her rooms like ivory pieces on a chess-board.

This admirable lady is sometimes a mother, and she is devotedly fond of her children, in their future. She may be seen gazing in their faces by the hour, but the picture that is before her mind's eye is the fulfilment of their present promise. An ordinary woman would dawdle