

SLANDER.

SOME excellent concrete examples, which recently forced themselves upon my attention, have set me considering this vice; and truly, it seems the most despicable, as well as the worst of all evils. It has the element of falsehood; and falsehood is extremely common in this world. It has the element of malice—of devilish malice; and malice is also common; and it has the added curse of cowardice and unutterable meanness. Your slanderer stabs in the dark; he (or *she*) is a true rat, loving darkness in all things, biting with venomous tooth, and tainting with his own evil taint everything he touches. No open and above-board fighting with him; unless, indeed, it happens as it did in dungeons of old. A wretched prisoner was strapped to the floor, and the rats made a meal of him with impunity and glee. Under similar circumstances even now our slanderer is heroic; he revels in the victim's anguish, and rejoices in the foul pollution he bespreads.

It was in the days of the Inquisition that such tortures were practised, and truly the "days of the Inquisition" is established in every city, in every town, in every village; and the Father Confessors, the august and ingenious engineers of the torture, are women. Strange; for women are the worst sufferers from the vice they propagate so well. A cruel word may pierce the skin of a man, but it drives deep into the soul of a woman. His heart may burn with fury; her's bleeds with anguish, with shame unutterable, incommunicable. His business may suffer; her life is blackened. She may die—she may hide the wound and go through life uttering at times that saddest of laughter, the laughter that weighs heavy upon a wrung and throbbing heart; or she may survive it, feel a mannish anger, overcome it, and go through life conquering and to conquer, slandering and to slander, lying and to lie. Other women than these last are arch fiends in this fiendish, thriving business. They have skins that feel no blow except a physical one. They know when they are insulted, and they feel a deadly hatred; but no real emotion, no holy though heartrending shame, no intense but virtuous indignation, no sense of wrong, no sense of meanness. Not because a thing is wrong, not because it is mean, not because it is shameful, not because it touches them; but *because* it outrages their selfishness, do they find a bitter and rancorous resentment. For sentiments of justice, of honor and of mercy, they can feel an enlightened contempt; for sins against their own well-being, they can hate, and hate fiercely. Even when not intentionally malign do these do harm incalculable. Their sport is deadly. A cat's play is the rehearsal of a mouse-hunt. These people's amusement is the prying into of private affairs, and the utter misreading of all that is above them—that is, of *everything*. Fancy a delicate refined nature at the mercy of these creatures' tongues! Fancy a humming-bird in the web of a monstrous spider!

There is a third kind of slander—the school-girl. This one has not the malignity that a course of careful devotion to the art gives one of the other kind; but she has a happy carelessness of mischief, an astonishing ignorance of results, a precocious knowledge of what should be unknown, and a truly wonderful gift of enlarging, exaggerating and inventing. These innocent children start the game for the older bloodhounds to run down. "Only a school-girl," is a proverb, and shields the tale-tellers while their elder sisters in the trade make deadly use of the fictions thus obtained. The school is thus by a beautiful economy turned to double use. Not only are their minds benefited and enlarged by the instruction given, but they receive an admirably effective training for the sterner and more practical duties of life. Even when detection does follow and punishment come, it is so slight as merely to teach the need for circumspectness. In future they are more careful; and when they leave the sheltering walls, they carry with them a thorough elementary training, which needs only practice to make them adepts at the deadly game.

But there is still another kind of slander—the male. Nature seems to have decreed that, when a man assumes a woman's faults, he out-woman's the women; and when a man becomes a gossip and slanderer, he is far fouler tongued. He lacks the admirable intensive perception of the sorest spot, the weakest point, that the coarsest woman has. But though the poisoned needle may leave a rankling wound, yet the clumsy broadax gives a hideous gash, and the slimy poison of a—*man's*, shall I say?—of a mangossip's mouth leaves a trail nothing can clean away, nothing efface.

And then this vice is so common! Everywhere there is the informal court with its hellish docket. Everywhere are innocent deeds, frank looks, free-hearted words read through the malice-smeared spectacles of evil minds. Everywhere does Envy stimulate her devotees to their grateful task of carping at what they do not understand, of beslaivering what is too pure for them to comprehend.

From courts, to camps, to cottages it strays,

And all are taught an avarice of—

Of what? Of sweet morsels of perdition, of the sight of human anguish, of the news of human sin. Every schoolroom has its complement of prying girlish eyes, and alas! of biting girlish tongues; it has its knots of callow youths, whose eyes can see only evil, and whose tongues can only repeat it. Every village has its circle of censorious women, and its parliament of gossiping men. Every town, every city, every church, every society, pays court to this sin,—this scum which condenses all that is low and cowardly and mean in human nature. And it will be always so. Never while humankind is human will men believe good rather than evil; never will they take other than the bad meaning from an ambiguous sentence; never will they view others with one hundredth part of the same charity with which they view themselves. As the fathers, so the sons!

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