

FLIRTS AND FLIRTING.



WHAT is a flirt? One might answer, a girl who does not know her own mind; some might even say, one who has no mind of her own to know. Perhaps, neither one nor the other of these definitions is strictly correct. Suppose we say a flirt is a pretty girl, who turns things into toys which ought never to be played with. Walpole tells in his letters of a man of title who "flirted away his whole fortune at hazard;" and even in a more disastrous sense this has often been done by a maiden, who has too readily listened to the syren charmer—

"To kiss your hand, or flirt your fan."

The dictionary will tell us that to flirt is to act with giddiness or levity. A politician is said to flirt with those who are not of his own party when he makes advances to them for sinister purposes.

"Ye belles, and ye flirts, and ye pert little things
Who fit in this frolicsome round."

In his *Emblems*, Quarles gives another turn to the meaning of flirt when he says:—

"Must these smiling roses entertain
The blows of scorn, and flirts of base disdain."

To flirt about may mean to move nimbly; in some parts of England it may even signify to derisively snap the fingers at a person; but from our stand-point the meaning corresponds with that given in a great dictionary:—"To play at courtship;" "to practise coquetish diversions;" "to engage in amatory pastime; in general, to make insincere advances of any kind." It has been truly said of flirtation, that it is a propensity which belongs to no age or country, but in all lands, and in all times, it must alike prove disastrous.

One who plays at courtship, then, is the true definition of a flirt, and the paths she treads are the more slippery because such an adventurer will never want for playmates of the opposite sex when her disposition is known. In some instances the flirt will deceive those who on their part are sincere when she wounds as well as wrongs. This is no less mean than foolish; the game is more than hazardous, and the character of one who engages in it will soon be generally known. Apart from this, however, the flirt will continue to attract those who are worthy of such preferences as hers—men who make a recreation of her company, and can deal in the worthless flattery, which though sweet at first, may turn to bitterness. If there is error committed on the one side, there is therefore selfishness on the other, and each will have its penalty. We need not suppose that the flirt's companions are a whit better than herself; oftentimes they are assuredly more to blame, having no valid

excuse to offer for their conduct. That concession does not make the case any the better, however. By indiscretion a girl may injure herself, while she loses the opportunity of being a teaching example to those who would keenly feel her power.

Thus the flirt may become her own victim, as it were; she may be the victim of associates; or she may victimise those who deserve better treatment at her hands. While the ill consequences will be far-reaching, the flirt will herself be the chief sufferer. The sins of the day will come home to roost at night. Ill seeds of whatever kind sown in youth will inevitably bring a harvest after their own kind in future years.

We might, then, further define the flirt as one who sacrifices the substance for the shadow, throwing opportunities away which are regretted without avail when it is too late to save them. This is more especially true of those who seem to trifle with suitors without apparently knowing whether they care for them or not. Once yield to the temptation of over-rating your own attractions, or individual importance, and you will make a pitfall for yourself which may darken all the rest of your earthly pathway. This has often been done, and it is so easy to do it, that it will probably be done as often in the future as in the past. Perhaps there are no middle-class people of mature age whose life-experience has not made them familiar with cases of this kind—girls, who, in their day, were for the time carried away with the attentions and flattery of the unthinking. They had their day, and a short and inglorious day it was. As time would not wait for them, they were hurried forward to be lost sight of, or forgotten amid the great crowd of the rising generation. Such often have their minds soured in the race of life, while mere confirmed spinsters, whose supposed misfortunes are made a butt for wit and banter, show in their features that autumnal grace to which a well-known poet has made fitting reference.

Among the more celebrated flirts of history, I suppose we should have to give a prominent place to Queen Elizabeth. This shows that acquirements, which, according to Dr. Johnson would have given dignity to a bishop, are no sure safeguard against a weakness to which the feminine nature is too often prone. What the great queen's sentiments in regard to marriage really were, it would be impossible for any one to say; but history reveals enough of her private life to prove that regrets and disappointments came as in the case of more humble persons. In her youth Elizabeth Tudor was sprightly and good-looking; and as was perhaps inevitable, she more than sipped of the nectar of flattery, which was offered to her by interested persons. The habit of appropriating adulation as her own and believing it to be the truth, was strengthened, instead of being cured by time. Thus a woman of this temperament turns against herself what was intended to work for her benefit. Though the suitors with whom she toyed in earlier years may subsequently have fallen off, the Queen's vanity in regard to her own personal charms appears never to have waned. When they appeared on the scenes, she does not appear to have seriously intended to favour any of her suitors; she seems never to have wearied of protesting that she preferred a single life, but nevertheless, in her last days, Elizabeth's conscience was not at ease. If youth could have been given back to her she would have done differently. Even a queen is human, she makes mistakes, and has her regrets like more humble people.

It is with our own every-day life and more commonplace surroundings that we have chiefly to do, however; and the social life of

many eminent persons would supply us with illustrations for our purpose. Take the not very widely known case of Philip Doddridge and Catherine Freeman, a little piece of English village history, which belongs to the days of George I. The future commentator was then a minister at Kibworth, and after living in lodgings he became one in the household of a farmer named Freeman. There happened to be a daughter—Catherine or Miss Kitty, as the young preacher called her, and with this maiden he fell deeply in love. Being as "blind" as lovers of an ardent temperament usually are, young Doddridge harboured a very exalted opinion of Catherine, but apart from her undoubted good looks, the farmer's daughter does not appear to have merited such admiration as she called forth. For that age, her lover was one of the ten thousand; but of course it may not have been possible to detect all of his good qualities, nor to possess the eminence to which he would attain. At the same time, a man of genuine worth commonly proclaims his character, and a woman whose own sterling merit helps her to detect the ring of true metal should be a judge in such matters. Miss Kitty saw in young Philip Doddridge nothing more than a devoted lover, however; and she encouraged his advances only in a flirting way, so that her devoted admirer never knew what her mind towards him really was. Now she seemed to favour him, and then to repel him, just as a girl would do who was merely playing at courtship, instead of acting conscientiously. The opinion formed of Miss Catherine was no doubt too high; and her subsequent conduct showed that she was too unstable to merit the confidence that was placed in her. Though she married at last, she appears to have united herself with one of the poorest creatures the country could have supplied. The case of Miss Kitty is typical of many others who have played with life opportunities, and with things too serious to be trifled with, until it has been too late to rectify their errors.

Who is there with any great experience of the world that has not known such cases—girls who through mere giddiness, or lack of decision of character, have hewn out for themselves a hard lot when they might have commanded a position and an influence of very different character. Hence, we may take note of the fact, that from the standpoint of the world, the day may come when it is actually too late to mend; you may flirt with opportunities, as well as with individuals, until the error cannot ever be repaired. The girl who degenerates into a genuine flirt becomes blind to the signs of the times and of her little world. Others may read her characteristics, but carried away by trifles of the hour, she builds on no sure basis. A syren voice may lead her to think she is the queen of the situation; but the disillusion soon comes; and instead of being born to command, and to have a choice of any position she might be disposed to accept, the young adventurer finds that she is the subject of a hard taskmaster, whose service she cannot escape.

The moral to be remembered then, is, Beware of little foxes which spoil the vines. The "little foxes" in your case are defects in character which may seem to be small, or even insignificant, but which will, in the end, be sure to react disastrously upon yourself. Any kind of behaviour which leads people to think that you are fickle, vain, or inconstant, will surely tell against you. There is a prize to win in the world, if you will but strive for it; but in the race that you have to run, you must beware of flirtations of all kinds. Youth is in a sense a time of glorious liberty; but its fatal mistakes may lead to life-long bondage.

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