

SOME TRIUMPHS OF PLAIN WOMEN.



Few women and fewer men would be inclined to undervalue the gift of beauty in the weaker sex. A woman without beauty is deprived of her most potent influence over man, though there may still remain to her the perhaps more enduring powers of fascination of manner, strength

of will, and sweetness of disposition. Yet it is often affirmed, with some appearance of truth, that many of the women who have made the greatest mark in the world have been plain women.

There is, however, such a diversity of opinion with regard to beauty, no two people apparently thinking alike, that it is not an easy matter to decide who really have been plain women. Biographers are naturally chary of so describing a living woman, and history abounds in conflicting opinions on these points; for example, by some Joan of Arc was put down as plain, yet Tennyson mentions her in his "Dream of Fair Women" as "Joan of Arc, a light of ancient France." Mary Powell in one of her charming works speaks of Margaret Roper as a "plain girl, with changeful spirits," but possibly as she grew older she grew in beauty, or her charms may have consisted of expression and grace of movement, for Erasmus considered her beautiful.

As a rule, literary women have not been noted for their personal charms, and amongst the greatest triumphs of plain women are those of the mind. Mrs. Fry, good as she was, had no personal beauty to adorn her successful, honest life; nor had Hannah More, Miss Edgeworth, Miss Mitford, Mrs. Hemans, or Madame Guyon. Of Mrs. Chapone we read from the pen of a contemporary that "she was full of good sense and uncommon ugliness." Charlotte Brontë's pale plain face is often alluded to by her biographers; and Sappho was short of stature, swarthy, and ungraceful.

"Ink," says Le Brun, "ill becomes rosy fingers;" and, justly or not, studious women are supposed to care little for the duties of wives or mothers, or the vanities of dress, and this impression has prevailed for centuries. The least attractive girls in every circle are often the first to marry, probably because they are less difficult to please than their more favoured sisters; but, for all that, the richest fruits of life not seldom come to their share, rather than to the fair ones'. That men, mostly swayed by beauty, have now and then adored ungainly women, is an historical and social fact. Voltaire's favourite niece was as ugly as she was agreeable. Madame d'Houdelot, the only woman Rousseau ever

loved, squinted, and was marked with small-pox, and yet her friends dubbed her "La Parfaite Julie." Ayesha, Mahomet's favourite wife, was no beauty, nor was Swift's Vanissa.

Among women of exalted rank who have been wanting in beauty are Margaret of Sweden; Matilda, Empress of Germany; and Christiana of Sweden. Fulvia, wife of Anthony, had few personal charms; nor had Terentia, wife of Cicero, if one may trust to the majority of historians; but most of these have found some admirers among biographers. Neither Anne of Cleves nor Catherine of Arragon were good-looking, still for awhile they swayed the fickle heart of their Blue-beard husband. Queen Anne was a dowdy, graceless woman in her best days. Cromwell's wife was plain. When Queen Anne of Bohemia came to England as a bride, there was a pageant at Cheapside of a castle with two towers, from both sides of which ran fountains of wine; and we are told that the beautiful girls who blew gold-leaf in the faces of the king and queen caused the plain bride to look plainer; yet she made her way in the good graces of king and people.

In France the gay and pleasure-loving, plain women have gained many laurels. Madame de Staël is a memorable instance, though no one was more conscious of her personal defects. Even her name was a power in itself. The great Napoleon condescended to be so jealous of her influence, that no persuasion would induce him to allow her to return to France. Mademoiselle de Lespinaisse, one of the most fascinating women of her day, who exercised a marvellous influence on those around her, was marked with small-pox. Madame Geoffrin was a plain woman. Madame d'Épinay was neither beautiful nor clever, but most attractive. Madame de Mailly was the plainest woman of the Court. Maria Leczinski, daughter of Stanislaus, King of Poland, wife of Louis XV., was good, but uninteresting; and that famous Palatine princess, second wife of Philip, Duke of Anjou, brother of Louis XIV., and mother of the Duke of Orleans, the regent during Louis XV.'s minority—a woman who exercised more sway than any other of her time—was coarse of feature, and so ungainly that her large hands passed into a proverb. She was of masculine habits, clinging to the customs of Germany, and wore a short close wig, like a man's.

On the stage and in the concert-room many plain women have triumphed; for on the stage, at all events, they can call to their aid costume, paint, and other accessories to repair the defects of nature.

A notable instance of a plain and popular singer occurs at the end of the seventeenth century, when women first appeared on the stage, men having previously taken their parts. Margarita de l'Épine was a Tuscan by birth, and tall, gaunt, and swarthy, with no winning softness of manner to make atonement; yet, in spite of this, she secured unbounded popularity by her singing, and good temper,

though her rival, Katherine Tofts, whom she cordially hated, was exceptionally beautiful. Her ugliness was the theme of many a squib; and in England, where she came with her German teacher, Herr Greber, she was called "Greber's Peg." She led a stainless life, though much courted, the Earl of Nottingham following her about as her shadow. She eventually married Dr. Pepsach, a scientific man, who called her Hecate on account of her ugliness. They were very happy together; she continued her professional career, and he was organist at the Charterhouse. She never mastered the English language, but sang in her own tongue, while the rest of the characters of the opera sang in English. It was through a favourite parrot that she was somewhat cruelly apprised when her voice was going. Threatening the manager to resign on account of some trumpery misunderstanding, he replied that he could well spare her if she would send her feathered pupil.

Margherita Durastante, a singer in Charles II.'s time, was a large, coarse, masculine woman, but popularity itself. Her voice, a soprano, found great favour with the Court—so much so that the king, the princess, and Lady Bruce stood sponsors to her child. The excitement to hear her in the operas of *Radaminto* and *Agrippina* was so great, that £40 was paid for a seat in the gallery.

An admirable instance of mind triumphing over matter is the history of Martha de Rochois, an exceedingly plain woman, both in face and figure, brilliant eyes being her only redeeming point. She was the greatest actress of her day, and on the stage she was a queen. Her every gesture was a study to conceal the defects of nature. Her weak, misshapen body, and deformed arms, hidden by long sleeves, served her in as good stead as those of Venus herself. She earned as much as 1,000 livres a year; and when her health gave way, Louis XIV. granted her a liberal pension. The Abbé de Chaulieu wrote thirteen madrigals in her honour when she died.

Antoinette Clavell, a singer who did much towards abolishing the anachronisms of stage costume, achieved vast triumphs, though small, thin, and fair, with an ungainly mouth, and bad, shy manner. She was a perfect actress, and worshipped by her audience. One night she was crowned on the stage, an honour never before accorded to a singer; and she met with an ovation at Marseilles, the ladies of the town accompanying her to an illuminated pavilion in a gondola, surrounded by hundreds of little boats, she herself wearing a rich costume presented by her Greek admirers. At the pavilion a piece was performed, composed in her honour. A ball was given to her, couplets were sung of her, and the people in their enthusiasm covered her carriage with wreaths of flowers when she departed. She married Count d'Entraissiers, Secretary to the French Embassy in Spain, and afterwards in Russia, and Louis XVIII. gave her the Order of St. Michael for saving an important folio. Thus this plain, shy little woman, daughter of an old soldier, became the queen of the opera, wife of a diplomatist, and *décourée*.

Rosamund Pisaroni was plainness itself, and yet acquired widespread fame. Marked with small-pox, her voice for a time affected by the disease, she fought bravely with misfortune, and to such good purpose that on her recovery she was enthusiastically received in Paris, though her lack of personal charms was so apparent that a wit described the performance as "the Paradise of the ear and the Inferno of the eye." Even at the acme of her fame, when she appeared in *Semiramide*, and with her back to the audience exclaimed, "Eccomi Alfin in Babilonia," the plaudits were deafening, but they stopped instantly as her face was seen, changing to a whisper of disappointment. Happily her wonderful impersonation soon made them forget her personal failings. She was painfully conscious of her defects, and when making her engagement would send her portrait to the several managers, with the intimation that she was even plainer than it portrayed her. Her artistic talent and taste in dress triumphed in the end.

Madame Mara's history proves the adage that truth is stranger than fiction. Of unprepossessing physiognomy, short of stature, with large, unsightly, irregular teeth, and a bad actress, her triumphs were manifold: though she failed in spite of her talents, her devoted affection, and pleasant manner to secure the affection of her profligate, handsome husband.

She was the daughter of Johann Schmalig, a musician. She developed her musical talents early, and became an infant prodigy, playing before the English king and elsewhere. Dr. Harrington had her taught, and the Duchess of Saxony greatly assisted her, as did Frederic the Great, who made her Court singer, with £450 a year. She married, in 1773, Jean Mara, a violinist, against the advice of everybody; and it blighted her life, for he treated her with brutal cruelty. At her native Hesse-Cassel the grand duke sent for her between the parts of the performance, and kissed her forehead; and Pfister the preacher, on his deathbed, said he should die happy, could he once more hear her sing. In London the fashionable world, headed by the Prince of Wales, was at her feet. She was equally honoured in Venice, where a throne was raised on the stage, amidst a sea of clouds, which opened to shower roses upon her. She married a second time after her first husband's death; and her latest triumphs were some complimentary lines written to her by Goethe on her eighty-third birthday.

Among other women who achieved professional fame, in spite of the drawbacks of personal defects, were Anna Selina Storace, Madame Shroder Devrient, and Persiani—who was pale, plain, and anxious-looking, with no taste in dress. A pretty story is told how once Malibran at Naples introduced herself into her dressing-room before a performance, and arranged her abundant tresses so as to develop the few charms she had. Still she, like many others, overcame the defects of person by her character and talents, throwing a brilliant mind into a face that might lack regularity of feature and other transitory charms. What triumphs can a plain woman attain equal to this?

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