

VENUS ANNODOMINI.

And the years went on as the years must do;  
But our great Diana was always new--  
Fresh, and blooming, and blonde, and fair,  
With azure eyes and with aureate hair;  
And all the folk, as they came or went,  
Offered her praise to her heart's content.

Diana of Ephesus.

She had nothing to do with Number Eighteen in the Braccio Nuovo of the Vatican, between Visconti's Ceres and the God of the Nile. She was purely an Indian deity--an Anglo-Indian deity, that is to say--and we called her THE Venus Annodomini, to distinguish her from other Annodomini of the same everlasting order. There was a legend among the Hills that she had once been young; but no living man was prepared to come forward and say boldly that the legend was true. Men rode up to Simla, and stayed, and went away and made their name and did their life's work, and returned again to find the Venus Annodomini exactly as they had left her. She was as immutable as the Hills. But not quite so green. All that a girl of eighteen could do in the way of riding, walking, dancing, picnicking and over-exertion generally, the Venus Annodomini did, and showed no sign of fatigue or trace of weariness.

Besides perpetual youth, she had discovered, men said, the secret of perpetual health; and her fame spread about the land. From a mere woman, she grew to be an Institution, insomuch that no young man could be said to be properly formed, who had not, at some time or another, worshipped at the shrine of the Venus Annodomini. There was no one like her, though there were many imitations. Six years in her eyes were no more than six months to ordinary women; and ten made less visible impression on her than does a week's fever on an ordinary woman. Every one adored her, and in return she was pleasant and courteous to nearly every one. Youth had been a habit of hers for so long, that she could not part with it--never realized, in fact, the necessity of parting with it--and took for her more chosen associates young people.

Among the worshippers of the Venus Annodomini was young Gayerson. "Very Young" Gayerson, he was called to distinguish him from his father "Young" Gayerson, a Bengal Civilian, who affected the customs--as he had the heart--of youth. "Very Young" Gayerson was not content to worship placidly and for form's sake, as the other young men did, or to accept a ride or a dance, or a talk from the Venus Annodomini in a properly humble and thankful spirit. He was exacting, and, therefore, the Venus Annodomini repressed him. He worried himself nearly sick in a futile sort of way over her; and his devotion and earnestness made him appear either shy or boisterous or rude, as his mood might vary, by the side of the older men who, with him, bowed before the Venus Annodomini. She was sorry for him. He reminded her of a lad who, three-and-twenty years ago, had professed a boundless devotion for her, and for whom in return she

had felt something more than a week's weakness. But that lad had fallen away and married another woman less than a year after he had worshipped her; and the Venus Annodomini had almost--not quite--forgotten his name. "Very Young" Gayerson had the same big blue eyes and the same way of pouting his underlip when he was excited or troubled. But the Venus Annodomini checked him sternly none the less. Too much zeal was a thing that she did not approve of; preferring instead, a tempered and sober tenderness.

"Very Young" Gayerson was miserable, and took no trouble to conceal his wretchedness. He was in the Army--a Line regiment I think, but am not certain--and, since his face was a looking-glass and his forehead an open book, by reason of his innocence, his brothers in arms made his life a burden to him and embittered his naturally sweet disposition. No one except "Very Young" Gayerson, and he never told his views, knew how old "Very Young" Gayerson believed the Venus Annodomini to be. Perhaps he thought her five and twenty, or perhaps she told him that she was this age. "Very Young" Gayerson would have forded the Guggen in flood to carry her lightest word, and had implicit faith in her. Every one liked him, and every one was sorry when they saw him so bound a slave of the Venus Annodomini. Every one, too, admitted that it was not her fault; for the Venus Annodomini differed from Mrs. Hauksbee and Mrs. Reiver in this particular--she never moved a finger to attract any one; but, like Ninon de l'Enclos, all men were attracted to her. One could admire and respect Mrs. Hauksbee, despise and avoid Mrs. Reiver, but one was forced to adore the Venus Annodomini.

"Very Young" Gayerson's papa held a Division or a Collectorate or something administrative in a particularly unpleasant part of Bengal--full of Babus who edited newspapers proving that "Young" Gayerson was a "Nero" and a "Scylla" and a "Charybdis"; and, in addition to the Babus, there was a good deal of dysentery and cholera abroad for nine months of the year. "Young" Gayerson--he was about five and forty--rather liked Babus, they amused him, but he objects to dysentery, and when he could get away, went to Darjilling for the most part. This particular season he fancied that he would come up to Simla, and see his boy. The boy was not altogether pleased. He told the Venus Annodomini that his father was coming up, and she flushed a little and said that she should be delighted to make his acquaintance. Then she looked long and thoughtfully at "Very Young" Gayerson; because she was very, very sorry for him, and he was a very, very big idiot.

"My daughter is coming out in a fortnight, Mr. Gayerson," she said.

"Your WHAT?" said he.

"Daughter," said the Venus Annodomini. "She's been out for a year at Home already, and I want her to see a little of India. She is nineteen and a very sensible, nice girl I believe."

"Very Young" Gayerson, who was a short twenty-two years old, nearly fell out of his chair with astonishment; for he had persisted in believing,

against all belief, in the youth of the Venus Annodomini. She, with her back to the curtained window, watched the effect of her sentences and smiled.

"Very Young" Gayerson's papa came up twelve days later, and had not been in Simla four and twenty hours, before two men, old acquaintances of his, had told him how "Very Young" Gayerson had been conducting himself.

"Young" Gayerson laughed a good deal, and inquired who the Venus Annodomini might be. Which proves that he had been living in Bengal where nobody knows anything except the rate of Exchange. Then he said "boys will be boys," and spoke to his son about the matter. "Very Young" Gayerson said that he felt wretched and unhappy; and "Young" Gayerson said that he repented of having helped to bring a fool into the world. He suggested that his son had better cut his leave short and go down to his duties. This led to an unfilial answer, and relations were strained, until "Young" Gayerson demanded that they should call on the Venus Annodomini. "Very Young" Gayerson went with his papa, feeling, somehow, uncomfortable and small.

The Venus Annodomini received them graciously and "Young" Gayerson said:--"By Jove! It's Kitty!" "Very Young" Gayerson would have listened for an explanation, if his time had not been taken up with trying to talk to a large, handsome, quiet, well-dressed girl--introduced to him by the Venus Annodomini as her daughter. She was far older in manners, style and repose than "Very Young" Gayerson; and, as he realized this

thing, he felt sick.

Presently, he heard the Venus Annodomini saying:--"Do you know that your son is one of my most devoted admirers?"

"I don't wonder," said "Young" Gayerson. Here he raised his voice:--"He follows his father's footsteps. Didn't I worship the ground you trod on, ever so long ago, Kitty--and you haven't changed since then. How strange it all seems!"

"Very Young" Gayerson said nothing. His conversation with the daughter of the Venus Annodomini was, through the rest of the call, fragmentary and disjointed.

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"At five, to-morrow then," said the Venus Annodomini. "And mind you are punctual."

"At five punctual," said "Young" Gayerson. "You can lend your old father a horse I dare say, youngster, can't you? I'm going for a ride tomorrow afternoon."

"Certainly," said "Very Young" Gayerson. "I am going down to-morrow morning. My ponies are at your service, Sir."

The Venus Annodomini looked at him across the half-light of the room, and her big gray eyes filled with moisture. She rose and shook hands with him.

"Good-bye, Tom," whispered the Venus Annodomini.