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Bessie Rayner Parkes

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I.

INTRODUCTORY.

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IN gathering together the data afforded by the movement of the last ten years, it will be well to prefix a chapter on the reasons which have dictated the effort to improve the condition of women in our time and country. These reasons, drawn out in detail, would probably prove to be as various as the mind and characters of those engaged in the work. Questions which involve the education, employment, morals, and manners of one sex, are, of course, subordinate to those deeper philosophical and religious questions which concern the whole of humanity; and they will be judged according to the general intellectual cast, and, in great measure, according to the religious belief, of each individual. The very first point which every human being has to settle, and which every one does settle in some sort of

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rough way, is, what is admirable and desirable,— what is the *beau-ideal* for the human creature? The catechism supplies a very definite answer in regard to the end for which we were created. Nevertheless it is not one in our time universally accepted; and a great many other theories have either superseded, or so far mixed themselves up with that old-fashioned answer, as materially to change its practical effect.

Goethe, for instance, considered that self-culture and full development of the body and brain, with the decent and moderate enjoyment of all faculties of the same, constituted the *beau-ideal*; and Margaret Fuller Ossoli was largely influenced by his general theory of life, when she wrote of “Women in the Nineteenth Century,” though her affectionate nature redeemed its refined selfishness. Fifty years earlier the world was full of political theories, and of the semi-scientific, semi-moral ideas which showed their best in Miss Edgeworth's books. It followed as a matter of course that Mary Wollstonecraft's volume on the “Rights of Woman” was coloured by the solemn, sententious, and intensely reasoning element which prevailed

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in her generation. At the very same time, however, the master mind of John Wesley had planted in English society the seeds of evangelical reform ; and another theory of female excellence, nobly illustrated by Mrs Fletcher of Madeley and Hannah More, began to appear in literature. Again, in the early part of our own generation, the great legal agitations of the Reform Bill, and of the Repeal of the Corn-Laws, excited the public mind in the direction of legal improvements ; and those who were interested in the welfare of women began to turn their attention to the innumerable cases in which they suffered from the law of property as affected by marriage. Lastly, during the whole of this century a strong humanitarian element has prevailed, compassionating poverty, hunger and cold ; and women having shared the benefit, the late industrial movement has been the result.

Here, then, we have five different ideas, each of which has been prolific in results ; five different theories which said—

Let women be thoroughly developed.

Let women be thoroughly rational.

Let women be pious and charitable.

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Let women be properly protected by law.

Let women have fair chances of a livelihood.

And lastly, a sixth demand is now being actively pressed, namely, let women have ample access to all stores of learning,—a demand for education, which, though it has something of the same sound, is, in reality, different from Goethe's culture or Mary Wollstonecraft's rationality; for the male thinker required a large admixture of the artistic and emotional experiences, and the authoress laid much greater stress upon a kind of broad common sense and right reason than upon acquired knowledge,—while the desire of imparting an ample measure of education, and of being permitted to test the result by authoritative examinations, is part of the general effect of the schoolmaster being abroad.

As in the theoretic, so in the practical part of every social movement, the measures taken in regard to any given subject will be found to vary with the deeper belief of those who act. In politics, the reliance on universal suffrage accompanies a highly favourable view of the sense and virtue of average human nature, and the reliance on des-

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potism, a hopelessly low view of the same ; in education, a broadcast method of instruction implies a fond belief that the child has every chance of distinguishing good from evil, and a very narrow training denies any such expectation ; and in the bringing up of girls, a very unrestricted liberty argues a belief in the mind of the guardian that the chances are eminently in favour of their going right, and an incessant watchfulness implies just the reverse. Again, the different methods of training both boys and girls are, in reality, divided by a different aim as to the kind of man and woman to be achieved. Are we to care most about the body and brain, all that comes under the head of natural organisation, or are we to be particularly anxious about that mysterious part of us which all Christians recognise as being different from either—the soul ? Are we to think most of virtue and innocence, or are we to take every pains towards securing liberty and opportunities of action ? Are we to trouble ourselves chiefly about the duties which boys and girls will in future have to fulfil, or about the advantages they have a right to enjoy ? Does it very much matter if, in securing these advantages to the

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greater number, a certain percentage suffer grievous loss? Many people of excellent intention are found in this generation to hold extremely opposite views on such questions as these ; and therefore it is no wonder that, on the subordinate questions affecting women alone, their judgments should also differ ; and we must not be surprised to find that a marked diversity of practical aims has existed among the supporters of what has been generally known as the woman's movement, or that it should be quite impossible to draw up any definite programme of what they wanted or strove to attain. There is, however, one point upon which every one has combined, and that is, the industrial movement ; for here the need was glaring, and the remedy simple, though difficult of attainment,—more work, and more wages to purchase more food and more clothing ; that everybody can understand, and nobody can well differ about.

My own opinion upon the general question of the position, treatment, and value of women in modern society may be briefly stated ; and I am aware that it differs almost equally from what may be called the radical and the conservative points of

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view. I believe that now, as in all ages of the world, the substantial equality of nature renders the two sexes of equal weight and value in the moral world, and that their action upon each other in every relation of life is far too complex to admit of any great difference between them in any given rank. I do not believe in the accuracy of the observations of any woman who says that English women are at this moment inferior to English men in general sense and intelligence, and ought *not* to remain so ; any more than I believe in the accuracy of the observation of any man who comes to a similar opinion, with this difference, that he thinks they *ought* so to remain. I believe that, in both cases, the false judgment arises from an enormous overrating of the value of acquired education, as compared to general intellectual and moral power. I have never seen families, in any rank, where the brothers were good and clever, and the sisters frivolous fools. There are bad men and bad women, foolish men and foolish women, ignorant men and ignorant women ; but I believe the average of the two halves of humanity to be at any given time much the same. Men get more school

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knowledge, and, of course, they get more professional training; and if I wanted a technical judgment of any kind, of course I should apply to a man, but if I wanted a good honest judgment on a question of conduct, I should go to a good man or woman indifferently; and if it were a matter requiring wholesome knowledge of the world, I would as soon go to an old woman as to an old man, and should expect to get as sensible an opinion. It appears to me that men and women are both apt to be warped in their minds, but from opposite causes; and I do not think the chances of a false bias greater in the one than in the other. Taken together, they make up the mass of sinning, suffering, striving humanity; and if I wish to work especially for women, it is because I am a woman myself, and so able to appreciate their particular troubles.

It is very good for all who habitually dwell in the atmosphere of any social question to go for awhile into scenes where its large proportions assume the likeness of a dream, standing, it may be, in mountainous reality upon the horizon, yet so softened by distance, and rendered delicate by

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II

intervening air, that its size and importance, its difficult heights and dangerous chasms, are lost in the fair, faint lines of its form, as it rises afar off in the pale depths of the sky. Some years ago I left London, where for many months I had been intensely engaged in work pertaining to the *English Woman's Journal*, and spent a couple of months in Rome. It was then that, having ascended, as travellers are wont to do, to the top of the enormous arches of the Baths of Caracalla, and seeing on either hand the distant mountain-ranges which encircle the Eternal City, this simile came home to me with a living and peculiar force. There was a world beyond the mountains, a world of activities and reforms; but its murmur was there unheard. There is a life of the conscience, as distinguished from the purely spiritual life; and here it seemed as if the practical mundane conscience had retreated into the background, and the soul had it all her own way. I never had felt in Italy the want of those particular ideas of social and moral activity which form the daily portion of every English or American man, woman, and child, any more than I now believe in the