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978-1-108-02103-6 - The Duties of Women: A Course of Lectures

Frances Power Cobbe

Excerpt

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LECTURE I.

*Introductory.*

THE spectacle of the waste of precious things is always one of the saddest in this mysterious world. We are often called on to regret huge ships sunk in the sea, famous old books burnt or lost, beautiful temples shattered by shot and shell, harvests destroyed by storm or drought, and men with splendid gifts going down to an untimely grave, all their training for a life of usefulness ending in silence and oblivion.

But what are all these forms of waste compared to that which has been going on, in all lands and ages, of the lives of women—waste as regards the purposes either of their own moral growth or natural happiness, and waste of their faculties to make the world happier and better? Think of women's natures as meanly as we may, rank the powers wherewith they are endowed at the lowest possible estimation, still it is deplorable to reflect on the spendthrift recklessness wherewith they have been thrown away for no advantage to any living being, but merely for some

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senseless prejudice. Iphigenia, sacrificed to make the wind blow, was in truth a typical victim of superstitious custom and masculine selfishness. A lark born to sing its joyous little song at leisure far aloft in the blue sky, caught and shut up in a cage in a sordid city lane, scarcely suffers a more grievous wrong than the souls of myriads of our sisters cooped in gynecæums and zenanas, and harems and convents, and in many a home little better than a nunnery or a seraglio.*

There is in all young girls a touching capacity for finding innocent enjoyment in the smallest and simplest things, a capacity which, as we look back on it in later years, fills our old hearts with yearning and regret. But while the similar pleasures of boys are usually amply studied and provided for even at their schools, it is not very often, except in the happiest families and among the wisest parents and teachers, that little girls are encouraged or permitted to take their fill of

* A gentleman, long a missionary in India, has told me that it is not at all an uncommon case for a Hindoo woman of the upper ranks to be carried to her grave, never having put her foot to the ground in the open air in her life. Her entire existence has been spent among the wretched puerilities and sensualities of the zenana. Yet these are the women who, when they have a chance, display (as Mr. Mill witnessed) exceptional powers of statesmanship; and several of whom are now distinguishing themselves as poetesses and novelists. The condition of a woman with such latent faculties cramped into the zenana life under a tyrannical husband or mother-in-law must be miserable beyond conception. Her soul must ache like a Chinese woman's foot in her shoe.

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the delights of air and exercise, while their limbs yet crave, by Nature's beneficent law, for free and incessant motion, and their young hearts can drink in the joys of the sunshine and the flowers in all their May-morning freshness. Probably English girls of the highest classes have at this day more freedom of this kind, more wholesome riding and rowing and tennis-playing and mountain-scrambling than any young ladies ever possessed before in any case or country. But even for them senseless fashions of dress often interfere with health and pleasure; while as they grow older the lesson is too often enforced by their parents and governesses and all their teachers and elder relations, that they must put a curb,—*not* on their vanity and frivolity, *not* on luxurious self-indulgence,—but on their physical and mental energy, their harmless animal spirits, their righteous longing to be of some use in the world in which they find themselves. To be content smilingly to lie on a bed of roses while they know that thousands around them sleep on thorns,—this is represented by all around them as constituting pretty nearly the "Whole Duty of Woman." Thus practising meekly an aimless and unmeaning patience and self-repression, they dwindle down year by year into pettiness and inanity.

Nor is it only *negative* evil, the loss of the potential happiness intended for them, which women thus endure. The positive suffering entailed on our sex by purely artificial restrictions of one kind or other is far worse.

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Among the upper classes there are maladies and weaknesses innumerable directly due to lack of healthful interests in life, and to enforced obedience to hurtful customs of dress ; and among the lower classes of women there are other diseases due to excessive toil under the conditions of their married lives, and to lack of proper nourishment, which their ill-paid labour cannot earn. Hard as poverty often presses on men, it is rare indeed that they ever feel its iron grip as do women, for whom so few fields of industry are open ; and it must never be forgotten that hunger and want for women imply the dread temptation, unknown to men, to earn money only too readily by the sin which leads them down headlong into the abyss of misery and shame. When we think of all this as the outcome in great measure of artificial weights added to their natural inferiority in the race of life, and then of the wives trampled on by husbands whom the law has taught to regard them as inferior beings ; * of the mothers whose children are torn from their arms by the direct behest of the law at the bidding of a dead or living father ;—when we think of these things,

* According to the Returns it appears that there are in England, on an average four, “aggravated assaults” by husbands on wives every day in the year, counting alone the cases brought before magistrates. An “aggravated assault” means a great deal more than a simple blow. It means knocking out an eye, “clogging” with hob-nailed boots (*i.e.* kicking or standing on the woman), setting her on fire, breaking her ribs, throwing a paraffin lamp at her, etc. etc.

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as I have said, our hearts ache with pity and indignation.

But dreadful as they are, I believe that even these again are not the worst evils which women endure in consequence of their false position. I think it is worse to be poor in mind than poor in purse, to be stunted and be-littled in soul, made a coward, made a liar, made mean and slavish, accustomed to fawn and prevaricate, and "manage" by base arts a husband or a father—I think this is worse than to be kicked with hob-nailed shoes.

And yet again, what has not the whole human race lost by the degradation of women?

Of all the precious things in this arid world, love, tenderness, sympathy, are immeasurably the best; and the very fountain of such feelings is in woman's breast. It is the "compassion of a woman for the son of her womb," *the potential Motherhood* in every true woman's heart, which has been the great softening influence gradually through the ages melting the hardness and selfishness of savage humanity. But what narrow bounds have been placed by the claustration of women on the exercise of this divine power, aye, and of many another power, to guide and heal and bless!

At last, after long ages, there seems to be a great change coming over the destiny of women. Looking back to the past we seem dimly to perceive that the lot of our sex has passed through three stages.

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First there was the *Savage Age*, where woman was everywhere (as she is still among Red Indians) a mere beast of burden, the camel or ass of her master, *plus* the endurance, with or without her choice, of the pains of motherhood.

Secondly, out of the early civilizations of India and Greece, of the Teutonic and Scandinavian Nations, and very notably of Judæa, there seems to have arisen strangely enough an *Heroic Age* for women, when they were not only as free as they now are in England, but specially honoured. In the days of the Vedas in India, and many centuries later, when the great Buddhist Topes were built, we find, from the poetry of the former and the bas-reliefs of the latter, that women mixed freely and unveiled at feasts and sacrifices; and the two great Sanscrit epics, the Mahabharata and the Ramayuna, with some of the later tragedies, turn on chivalrous stories wherein women play noble parts and are nobly beloved—stories which it would seem no modern Hindoo, with his degraded ideas of womanhood, can properly understand.

In Greece again, as every one will recollect, the Homeric age saw such women as Penelope, Andromache, Nausicaa, Clytemnestra; and the tradition went down for four centuries, till Sophocles, writing in the time of the poor imprisoned wives of Periclean Athens, yet looked back to the old heroic time, and created such glorious types of womanhood as Alcestis and Antigone. The latter (I must be pardoned for pausing

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for a moment to note), is the embodiment of the very highest moral ideal, masculine or feminine: namely, obedience to a Divine Law when it involves the penalty of death for disobeying a human law. To me it is one of the most wonderful facts in the literature of the world that Sophocles, living when he did, put into the mouth of a *woman* that most magnificent speech of Antigone concerning the "Unwritten Law Divine, immutable, eternal, not like these of yesterday, but made ere Time began." Again, the Hebrews had their Heroic Age of Women, when Miriam and Deborah were the types of that strength and courage which King Lemuel afterwards described as his ideal of a noble woman, "She strengtheneth her arms—she girdeth her loins with strength."*

And lastly, not to dwell too long on this bright gleam, falling on the dreary lot of women in one far-off epoch, there was the well known Heroic Age of Women among the Britons and Germans—the age to which Boadicea belonged, and of which Tacitus wrote when he said that the Germans thought that the minds of women were nearer to the Deity than those of men, and therefore they were always consulted with respect.

But the clouds gathered everywhere over this sunrise—why or wherefore in each country it boots not

* See a most remarkable paper on this subject, "The Hebrew Woman," by Mrs. Cyril Flower (Miss Constance de Rothschild) reprinted from the *New Quarterly Magazine*. (Hazell, Watson and Viney, London and Aylesbury, pp. 48.)

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to inquire. There arose, I suppose, with the growth of luxury, a loss on the woman's side of the sterner virtues, and on that of men an increase of jealous and selfish passion and sense of proprietorship; and then followed throughout all the East and South, the miserable *Claustration* of women, their sequestration in their separate portions of the house, their banishment from all social pleasures of the other sex, the enforcement of veils, the employment of eunuchs as guardians, and in China, the last extremity of all, the deliberate crippling of the feet of every woman belonging to the higher classes.

This degradation of women, as we all know, never prevailed in the West and North to the extent it has done in the East and South. Whether Christianity alone has been the influence which saved women from it, I have my doubts, seeing that the Christian races of the Levant to this day keep their women in almost Mahometan seclusion, while the German races, whose women were free in the heathen days of Tacitus, have been neither more nor less free under Catholic or Protestant Christianity. The *character* of the women of each race seems to have more to do with the matter than any form of religion. The woman who is the slave of her own passions is everywhere the slave of man—the woman whose moral nature is supreme over her passions everywhere obtains a certain modicum of freedom. Nothing, alas! explains a Harem so well as a little acquaintance with the half animal-natured women who are shut up in one of them.

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The Harem has made them what they are, and their ungoverned passions afford an excuse for maintaining the Harem.

But if the women of Europe have never sunk entirely to the *abjection* of the women of the East, they have suffered a *subjection* severe and stringent enough. I shall not dwell on this painful subject. We are come here to think of our Duties, not of our Wrongs. The best and healthiest way to view all the huge injustices of the past, all the many lingering injustices of the present under which our sex has suffered, is to consider that men (even good and generous men) have treated women uniformly as *Minors*—sometimes as petted children, sometimes in the harsh and despotic way in which children were commonly treated in former days, but in any case making *obedience* a virtue in a wife of forty as it is in a child at four or fourteen, and compliance with their masterful wishes pretty nearly the be-all and end-all of the virtue of a woman, as it is of a dog or a baby.

Now it would seem at last we are on the point of attaining our majority! An immense wave is lifting up women all over the world, and if we “survey *woman-kind* from China to Peru” we shall find in almost every country of the globe (by no means excepting Japan) a new demand for education, for domestic freedom, and for civil and political rights, made by women on behalf of their sex.

I need not detain you by citing all the steps which have been already gained, all which we hope to gain

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ere long. When women of my age look back on the state of things which prevailed in our youth, we seem to have passed under a *New Dispensation* *

There can be no doubt that a great change is passing over the condition of women everywhere in the civilized world. That is not our concern at this moment, but it is our most vital concern to consider how far that great change is likely to be a benefit to our sex and to both sexes. That it *will* be an immense benefit I suppose most of us here present are persuaded. But can we close our eyes to the possibility that it may prove otherwise? Is it not a contingency that so much disorder, so many disgraceful failures, such a pitiful fulfilment of our large promises may come, and so many now common womanly virtues be lost without the attainment of any other moral gifts or graces—that, fifty years hence, our epoch will be looked back upon as a disastrous one, and either our reforms be all reformed back again, and the *status quo ante* restored, or else a state of things inaugurated which we should weep to think we had helped to bring about?

* Only seventeen years ago I myself read a paper in Guildhall, at the Social Science Congress, pleading for the admission of women to University Degrees, and every newspaper in London laughed at me (notably our now most friendly *Spectator*), for asking for what would *never* be granted! Two years ago, when I had the honour to go up on a deputation to Lord Granville to thank him for this very admission of women to London University, I placed in his hands, to his amusement, my much ridiculed Address.