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

Frances Power Cobbe

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The Duties of Women

Frances Power Cobbe (1822–1904) was an Irish writer, social reformer and activist best known for her contributions to Victorian feminism. After the death of her father in 1857, Cobbe travelled extensively across Europe before becoming a leader-writer for the London newspaper *The Echo* in 1868. She continued to publish on the topics of feminism, social problems and theology for the rest of her life. This volume, first published in 1881, contains a series of essays discussing the ethical practice of feminism. Written during a transitional period for the movement, when calls for universal suffrage were becoming the defining feature of feminism, Cobbe advocates the need for women to practice a form of emancipation which does not conform to stereotypical views, in order to avoid a public backlash against universal suffrage. Emphasising the political importance of private behaviours, this volume demonstrates feminist responses to changes in nineteenth century feminism. For more information on this author, see http://orlando.cambridge.org/public/svPeople?person_id=cobbfr

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THE
DUTIES OF WOMEN.

A COURSE OF LECTURES

BY

FRANCES POWER COBBE.

“Whatever any one does or says, I must be good ; just as if the emerald were always saying this ; Whatever any one does or says, I must be emerald and keep my colour.”—*Marcus Aurelius*, vii. 15.

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PREFACE.

THE following Lectures, somewhat differently arranged, were delivered last winter in London to an audience of ladies, and were repeated at Clifton in the ensuing spring. The reader will kindly bear in mind that they were prepared with a view to such *viva voce* use, and not for perusal in a book; and also that the plan of their delivery included many extempore illustrations and lighter remarks. A few of these only have been preserved in the foot-notes of the present volume.

My purpose in delivering these Lectures originally, and now in publishing them, will become sufficiently apparent as the reader proceeds; but to avoid the risk of any possible misconstruction, I shall offer here a short explanation of my *locus standi* as regards the whole subject in question. I have been for many years deeply interested in what is called the "Woman's Movement," and have taken part in pleading for the

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Higher Education of women ; for the admission of women to University Degrees ; for the protection of the property of Married women ; for the Employment of women ; for the protection of women from Aggravated Assaults ; for the entrance of women into the Medical Profession ; and, lastly, for extension of the Parliamentary Suffrage to women possessed of the requisite property qualification. Of the wisdom of many of these demands (so far as they were then formulated) I was not in my earlier life convinced. I was then of opinion that the happy duties of a daughter and mistress of a household which fell to my lot, together with village charities and literary and other pursuits, sufficiently filled up the life of a woman, without adding to them wider social and political aims. It was only after I had laboured for some time with my honoured friend Mary Carpenter, at Bristol, and learned to feel intense interest in the legislation which might possibly mitigate the evils of crime and pauperism, that I seriously asked myself (under the upbraiding of that good old Abolitionist S. J. May), *why* I should not seek for political representation as the direct and natural means of aiding every reform I had at heart? The answer was not long doubtful ; and now for nearly a quarter of a century I have, as I have just said, associated myself to the best of my ability more or less with nearly all the movements

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in England for the advancement of women. Looking back over those years I find I have not lost one jot of faith in the righteousness or expediency of our demands. On the contrary, I have seen every year more reason to regard the part hereafter to be played by women in public affairs, as offering the best hope for the moral, and still more emphatically, for the spiritual, interests of humanity. I think more highly of women since I have watched them with the calm eyes of middle age; and I have more confidence than I had at first, both in their ability and in their stability.

But it would be idle to veil from myself that the path of progress on which women have now entered, and which we have done our best to open for them, is a road which leads up a steep Hill of Difficulty, and from which there are turnings to the right and the left, running down into all manner of quagmires and precipices. So many indeed, and so grave are the dangers on either hand, that I cannot blame those who see more to fear than to hope from the movement in question, and raise around us rather a cry of alarm than a cheer of encouragement. But dangers must be faced whenever any time-honoured evil is to be swept away, or any new good achieved. The woman's movement could not now be stopped if we desired it, nor do we desire to stop it if it lay at our option so to do. What we wish to accomplish, and what it is our imperative duty to

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strive to accomplish with all our might, is to direct aright the great progress in question; to set up sign posts of warning against those wrong turnings in the road which can only lead to destruction; and to point all eyes which we are permitted to direct, up to the straight, clear way before us—the one only safe, true way of progress,—the way of DUTY.

In brief, then, in addressing my countrywomen in this way, I have aimed at inciting them, in the first place, to give deep and well ordered reflection to the subject of morals in general, and of their own duties in particular; trusting that I might help them to see the fallacy of several errors which have hitherto misled us, and to recognize how noble and brave and beautiful is the ideal of womanly virtue to which we are bound to lift ourselves up. And, in the second place, I have striven to warn my hearers against that neglect of social *bienséances*, that adoption of looser and more “Bohemian” manners, and, worst of all, that fatal laxity of judgment regarding grave moral transgressions, which have appeared of late years amongst us as the inevitable extravagance of reaction from earlier strictness. These faults and mistakes constitute, I conceive, deadly perils to the whole movement for the advancement of women, and with all my strength I would implore every woman who sympathizes with that movement to set her face like a flint against them. It is our task to

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make Society *more* pure, *more* free from vice, either masculine or feminine, than it has ever been before, not to allow its law to become one shadow of a shade less rigid.

Men, especially Englishmen and Americans, are, as a rule, wonderfully generous to women. Thousands of them labour for their mothers, their wives, or their daughters all their lives long; and the higher-minded are full of chivalrous indulgence for all women. If we count over with speechless indignation the hundreds of men who in our country yearly beat and trample their wretched wives to death, we must never allow that hideous fact—or any other of the many wrongs of our sex—to blind us to the counterbalancing truth that the average Englishman means well to women, and will make no small sacrifices for them; and that there exist at least as many noble and high-hearted men, genuine champions of our sex, in Parliament and out of it, as there are wife-beating ruffians in the slums of Liverpool and London.

But with all their kindly feelings, their good intentions, their readiness to labour and sacrifice themselves for women, men give us most rarely that which we really want, not favour, but—*Justice*. Nothing is easier than to coax them to pet us like children; nothing more difficult than to persuade them to treat us like responsible human beings. Only a small

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number of them, it would seem, can yet be brought to realize that we have not only mouths to be fed and hearts to be comforted by faithful affection, but also brains to be cultivated, and wills seeking also, like their own, for the free use of whatever powers we may inherit. That a woman should really possess *Public Spirit*, and that its exercise should be as ennobling to her as it is to a man, this is a lesson which it takes most men half a life time to learn.

It is not, then, from men, with all their kindness, that we must look primarily for aid to climb the ascent before us. Even if they were more ready than they now are to help us, they could do very little beyond encouraging us by their sympathy and smoothing a few obstacles out of our way. Ours is the old, old story of every uprising race, or class, or order. The work of elevation must be wrought by ourselves or not at all. At this hour there are, I believe, in England hundreds of women of the highest social and intellectual rank who desire to see better days for their sex, but who are sitting, waiting patiently for some masculine Jupiter to descend and lift our chariot out of the ruts of custom. It is in vain! They may so wait for ever. Even if Jupiter were to come down, women themselves would drive the car into another rut the next moment. Nothing but our own steady and simultaneous labour can really elevate our sex.

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Every woman who works wisely and well for any good public cause (whether that cause directly concern female interests or not), does her share in thus lifting up the womanhood of the nation. And perhaps that other woman does even more for the same end, whose whole time is rightly absorbed in the perfect performance of her duties as daughter, wife, or mother,—but who, from her place of honour, simply avows on all fitting occasions, that she too shares indignation for the wrongs, and sympathy with the aspirations of her sisters.

Finally, I will only add that, greatly as I desire to see the enfranchisement and elevation of women, I consider even that object subordinate to the moral character of each individual woman. If women were to become less *dutiful* by being enfranchized,—less conscientious, less unselfish, less temperate, less chaste,—then I should say “For Heaven’s sake, let us stay where we are! *Nothing* we can ever gain would be worth such a loss.” But I have yet to learn that Freedom, which is the spring of all the nobler virtues in Man, will be less the ground of loftier and purer virtues in Woman. Nay, it is in firm faith that women will be *more* dutiful than they have even been, more conscientious, more unselfish, more temperate, and more chaste, that I have joined my voice to the demand for their emancipation, believing also that

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in a wider sphere they will forget many a fault and folly of the past, and will learn yet other virtues which now they lack or have not enough learned to exercise, — Courage and Truthfulness, Justice and Public Spirit.