A WOMAN'S THOUGHTS ABOUT WOMEN.

BY THE AUTHOR OF
"JOHN HALFPAX, GENTLEMAN."

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a world, but in that which is equally marvellous,
the birth and development of every human soul,
there is a divine rarity symbolised by the one
line.

"And God said, Let there be light! and there was light."

CHAPTER XI.

Lost Women.

I enter on this subject with a hesitation strong
enough to have prevented my entering on it at
all, did I not believe that to write for or con-
cerning women, and avoid entirely that deplor-
able phase of womanhood which, in country
cottages as in city streets, in books, newspapers,
and daily talk, meets us so continually that
no young girl can long be kept ignorant of
it, is to give a one-sided and garbled view
of life, which, however pretty and pleasant,
would be false, and being false, useless. We
have not to construct human nature afresh, but
to take it as we find it, and make the best of
it: we have no right, not even the most sensitive of us women, mercifully constituted with less temptation to evil than men, to treat as impure what God has not made impure, or to shrink with sanctimonious ultra-delicacy from the barest mention of things which, though happy circumstances of temperament or education have shielded us from ever being touched or harmed thereby, we must know to exist. If we do not know it, our ignorance—quite a different thing from innocence—is at once both helpless and dangerous: narrows our judgment, exposes us to a thousand painful mistakes, and greatly limits our power of usefulness in the world.

On the other hand, a woman who is for ever paddling needlessly in the filthy puddles of human nature, just as a child delights in walking up a dirty gutter when there is a clean pavement alongside, deserves, like the child, whatever mud she gets. And there is even a worse kind of woman still, only too common among respectable matrons, talkative old maids, and even worldly, fascinating young ones, who is ready to rake up every scandalous tale, and titter over every vile double entendre, who degrades the most solemn mysteries of holy Nature into vehicles for disgraceful jokes, whose mind, instead of being a decent dwelling-house, is a perfect Augean stable of uncleanness. Such a one cannot be too fiercely reprobed, too utterly despised. However intact her reputation, she is as great a slur upon womanhood, as great a bane to all true modesty, as the most unchaste Messalina who ever disgraced her sex.

I beg to warn these foul grubbers in the dark places of the earth—not for purposes of cleansing, but merely because it amuses them—that they will not find anything entertaining in this article. They will only find one woman's indignant protest against a tone of
thought and conversation which, as their consciences will tell them, many other women think it no shame to pursue when among their own sex; and which, did the other sex know it, would be as harmful, as fatal, as any open vice, by making men disbelieve in virtue—disbelieve in us. For its vileness in the sight of Heaven—truly, if we think of that, many a well-reputed British lady is as much a "lost" woman as any poor, seduced creature whose child is born in a workhouse, or strangled at a ditchside.

It is to the latter class, who have fallen out of the ranks of honest women, without sinking to a lower depth still, that I chiefly refer: because with them, those for whom this book is meant—namely, the ordinary middle ranks of unmarried females—are more likely to have to do. That other class, awful in its extent and universality, of women who make a trade of sin, whom philanthropists and political economists are for ever discussing, and can come to no conclusion about—I leave to the wise and generous of both sexes who devote their lives to the subject; to the examination and amelioration of a fact so terrible that, were it not a fact, one would hardly be justified in alluding to it here. Wretched ones! whom even to think of turns any woman's heart cold, with shame for her own sex, and horror at the other: outcasts to whom happiness and love are things unknown, God and heaven mere words to swear with, and to whom this earth must be a daily hell:

"Non ragionam di lor, ma guarda, e passa."

But the others cross our path continually. No one can have taken any interest in the working-classes without being aware how frightfully common among them is what they term "a misfortune"—how few young women come to the marriage-altar at all, or come there just
a week or two before maternity; or having already had several children, often only half brothers and sisters, whom no ceremony has ever legalised. Whatever be the causes of this—and I merely skim over the surface of a state of things which the Times and Sanitary Commissioners have plumbed to sickening depths—it undoubtedly exists; and no single woman who takes any thought of what is going on around her, no mistress or mother who requires constantly servants for her house, and nursemaids for her children, can or dare blind herself to the fact. It is easy for tenderly reared young ladies, who study human passions through Miss Austen or Miss Edgeworth, or the Loves of the Angels, to say: "How shocking! Oh, it can't be true!" But it is true; and they will not live many more years without finding it to be true. Better face truth at once, in all its bareness, than be swaddled up for ever in the folds of a silken falsehood.

Another fact, stranger still to account for, is, that the women who thus fall are by no means the worst of their station. I have heard it affirmed by more than one lady—by one in particular, whose experience is as large as her benevolence—that many of them are of the very best; refined, intelligent, truthful, and affectionate.

"I don't know how it is," she would say—"whether their very superiority makes them dissatisfied with their own rank—such brutes or clowns as labouring men often are!—so that they fall easier victims to the rank above them; or whether, though this theory will shock many people, other virtues can exist and flourish, entirely distinct from, and after the loss of, that which we are accustomed to believe the indispensable prime virtue of our sex—chastity. I cannot explain it; I can only say that it is so: that some of my most promising village-girls have been the first to come
to harm; and some of the best and most faithful servants I ever had, have been girls who have fallen into shame, and who, had I not gone to the rescue, and put them on the way to do well, would infallibly have become ‘lost’ women.”

There, perhaps, is one clue caught. Had she not “come to the rescue.” Rescue, then, is possible; and they were capable of being rescued.

I read lately an essay, and from a pure and good woman's pen, too, arguing, what licentious materialists are now-a-days unblushingly asserting, that chastity is not indispensable in our sex; that the old chivalrous boast of families — “all their men were brave, and all their women virtuous”—was, to say the least, a mistake, which led people into worse ills than it remedied, by causing an extravagant terror at the loss of these good qualities, and a corresponding indifference to evil ones much more important.

While widely differing from this writer—for God forbid that our Englishwomen should ever come to regard with less horror than now the loss of personal chastity,—I think it cannot be doubted that even this loss does not indicate total corruption or entail permanent degradation; that after it, and in spite of it, many estimable and womanly qualities may be found existing, not only in our picturesque Nell Gwynnes and Peg Woffingtons, but our poor every-day sinners: the servant obliged to be dismissed without a character and with a baby; the sempstress quitting starvation for elegant infamy; the illiterate village lass, who thinks it so grand to be made a lady of—so much better to be a rich man's mistress than a working-man's ill-used wife, or rather slave.

Till we allow that no one sin, not even this sin, necessarily corrupts the entire character, we shall scarcely be able to judge it with that fairness which gives hope of our remedying it, or trying
to lessen in ever so minute a degree, by our individual dealing with any individual case that comes in our way, the enormous aggregate of misery that it entails. This it behoves us to do, even on selfish grounds, for it touches us closer than many of us are aware—ay, in our hearths and homes—in the sons and brothers that we have to send out to struggle in a world of which we at the fireside know absolutely nothing; if we marry, in the fathers we give to our innocent children, the servants we trust their infancy to, and the influences to which we are obliged to expose them daily and hourly, unless we were to bring them up in a sort of domestic Happy Valley, which their first effort would be to get out of as fast as ever they could. And supposing we are saved from all this; that our position is one peculiarly exempt from evil; that if pollution in any form comes nigh us, we just sweep it hastily and noiselessly away from our doors, and think we are all right and safe. Alas!

we forget that a refuse-heap outside her gate may breed a plague even in a queen's palace.

One word, before continuing this subject. Many of us will not investigate it because they are afraid: afraid, not so much of being, as of being thought to be, especially by the other sex, incorrect, indecent, unfeeminine; of being supposed to know more than they ought to know, or than the present refinement of society—a good and beautiful thing when real—concludes that they do know.

O women! women! why have you not more faith in yourselves—in that strong inner purity which alone can make a woman brave! which, if she knows herself to be clean in heart and desire, in body and soul, loving cleanliness for its own sake, and not for the credit that it brings, will give her a freedom of action and a fearlessness of consequences which are to her a greater safeguard than any external decorum.
To be, and not to seem, is the amulet of her innocence.

Young women, who look forward to marriage and motherhood, in all its peace and dignity, as your natural lot, have you ever thought for a moment what it must be to feel that you have lost innocence, that no power on earth can ever make you innocent any more, or give you back that jewel of glory and strength, having which, as the old superstition says,

"Even the lion will turn and flee
From a maid in the pride of her purity?"

That, whether the world knows it or not, you know yourself to be—not this? The free, happy ignorance of maidenhood is gone forever; the sacred dignity and honour of matronhood is not, and never can be attained. Surely this consciousness alone must be the most awful punishment to any woman; and from it no kindness, no sympathy, no concealment of shame, or even restoration to good repute, can entirely free her. She must bear her burden, lighter or heavier as it may seem at different times, and she must bear it to the day of her death. I think this fact alone is enough to make a chaste woman's first feeling towards an unchaste that of unqualified, unmitigated pity.

This, not in the form of exaggerated sentimentalism, with which it has of late been the fashion to treat such subjects, laying all the blame upon the seducer, and exalting the seduced into a paragon of injured simplicity, whom society ought to pet, and soothe, and treat with far more interest and consideration than those who have not erred. Never, as it seems to me, was there a greater mistake than that into which some writers have fallen, in fact and fiction, but especially in fiction, through their generous over-eagerness to redeem the lost. These are painted—one heroine
I call to mind now—as such patterns of excellence, that we wonder, first, how they ever could have been led astray, and secondly, whether this exceeding helplessness and simplicity of theirs did not make the sin so venial, that it seems as wrong to blame them for it as to scold a child for tumbling into an open well. Consequently, their penitence becomes unnecessary and unnatural; their suffering disproportionately unjust. You close the book, inclined to arraign society, morality, and, what is worse, Providence; but for all else, feeling that the question is left much as you found it; that angelic sinners such as these, if they do exist, are such exceptions to the generality of their class, that their example is of very little practical service to the rest.

To refine away error till it is hardly error at all, to place vice under such extenuating circumstances that we cannot condemn it for sheer pity, is a fault so dangerous that Charity herself ought to steel her heart against it. Far better and safer to call Crime by its right name, and paint it in its true colours—treating it even as the Ragged Schools did the young vagabonds of our streets—not by persuading them and society that they were clean, respectable, ill-used, and maligne[d] individuals; or by waiting for them to grow decent before they dealt with them at all, but by simply saying: "Come, just as you are—ragged, dirty, dishonest. Only come, and we will do our best to make you what you ought to be."

Allowing the pity, which, as I said, ought to be a woman's primary sentiment towards her lost sisterhood, what is the next thing to be done? Surely there must be some light beyond that of mere compassion to guide her in her after-conduct towards them?

Where shall we find this light? In the world and its ordinary code of social morality, suited to social convenience? I fear not. The
general opinion, even among good men, seems to be that this great question is a very sad thing, but a sort of unconquerable necessity; there is no use in talking about it, and indeed the less it is talked of the better. Good women are much of the same mind. The laxer-minded of both sexes treat the matter with philosophical indifference, or with the kind of laugh that makes the blood boil in any truly virtuous heart.

Then, where are we to look?—

"I came not to call the righteous, but sinners to repentance."

"Neither do I condemn thee; go and sin no more."

"Her sins, which are many, are forgiven; because she loved much."

These words, thus quoted here, may raise a sneer on the lips of some, and shock others who are accustomed to put on religion with their Sunday clothes, and take it off on Monday, as quite too fine, maybe too useless for every-day wear. But I must write them, because I believe them. I believe there is no other light on this difficult question than that given by the New Testament. There, clear and plain, and everywhere repeated, shines the doctrine—of which, until then, there was little or no trace, either in external or revealed religion—that for every crime, being repented of and forsaken, there is forgiveness with Heaven; and if with Heaven, there ought to be with men. This, without entering at all into the doctrinal question of atonement, but simply taking the basis of Christian morality, is, pardon, full and free, for all transgressors, on condition that they "sin no more."

All who have had any experience among criminals—from the poor little "black sheep" of the family, who is always getting into trouble, and is told continually by everybody that, strive as he will, he never can be a good
boy, like brother Tommy, down to the lowest, most reprobate convict, who is shipped off to the colonies because the mother-country cannot exactly hang him, and does not know what else to do with him—unite in stating that, when you shut the door of hope on any human soul, you may at once give up all chance of its reformation. As well bid a man eat without food, see without light, or breathe without air, as bid him mend his ways, while at the same time you tell him that, however he amends, he will be in just the same position—the same hopelessly degraded, unpardoned, miserable sinner.

Yet this is practically the language used to fallen women, and chiefly by their own sex: "God may forgive you, but we never can!"—a declaration which, however common, in spirit if not in substance, is, when one comes to analyse it, unparalleled in its arrogance of blasphemy.

That for a single offence, however grave, a whole life should be blasted, is a doctrine repugnant even to Nature's own dealings in the visible world. There, her voice clearly says—"Let all these wonderful powers of vital renewal have free play: let the soul flesh slough itself away; lop off the gangrened limb; enter into life maimed, if it must be:" but never, till the last moment of total dissolution, does she say: "Thou shalt not enter into life at all."

Therefore, once let a woman feel that, in moral as in physical disease, "while there is life there is hope"—dependent on the one only condition that she shall sin no more, and what a future you open for her! what a weight you lift off from her poor miserable spirit, which might otherwise be crushed down to the lowest deep, to that which is far worse than any bodily pollution, ineradicable corruption of soul!

The next thing to be set before her is courage. That intolerable dread of shame, which
is the last token of departing modesty, to what will it not drive some women! To what self-control and ingenuity, what resistance of weakness and endurance of bodily pain, which, in another cause, would be called heroic—blunting every natural instinct, and goading them on the last refuge of mortal fear—infanticide.

Surely, even by this means, many a woman might be saved, if there were any one to save her, any one to say plainly: "What are you afraid of—God or man? your sin or its results?" Alas! it will be found almost invariably the latter: loss of position, of character, and consequently of the means of livelihood. Respectability shuts the door upon her; mothers will not let their young folks come into contact with her; mistresses will not take her as a servant. Nor can one wonder at this, even while believing that in many cases the fear is much more selfish than virtuous, and continued long after its cause has entirely ceased to exist.

It is one of the few cases in which—at least at first—the sufferers cannot help themselves; they must suffer for a season; they must bear patiently the working out of that immutable law which makes sin, sooner or later, its own Nemesis.

But not for ever—and it is worth while, in considering this insane terror of worldly opinion, to ask: "Which half of the world are you afraid of, the good or the bad?" For it may often be noticed, the less virtuous people are, the more they shrink away from the slightest whiff of the odour of un-sanctity. The good are ever the most charitable, the pure are the most brave. I believe there are hundreds and thousands of Englishwomen who would willingly throw the shelter of their stainless repute around any poor creature who came to them and said honestly: "I have sinned—help me that I may sin no more." But the unfortunates will not believe this. They are like the poor Indians, who think it necessary to pacify the evil
principle by a greater worship than that which they offer to the Good Spirit; because, they say, the Bad Spirit is the stronger. Have we not, even in this Britain, far too many such tacit devil-worshippers?

Given a chance, the smallest chance, and a woman's redemption lies in her own hands. She cannot be too strongly impressed with this fact, or too soon. No human power could have degraded her against her will; no human power can keep her in degradation unless by her will. Granted the sin, howsoever incurred, wilfully or blindly, or under circumstances of desperate temptation; capable of some palliations, or with no palliation at all—take it just as it stands, in its whole enormity, and—there leave it. Set it aside, at once and altogether, and begin anew. Better beg, or hunger, or die in a ditch—except that the people who die in ditches are not usually the best of even this world's children—than live a day in voluntary unchastity.

This may sound fine and romantic—far too romantic, forsooth, to be applied to any of the cases that we are likely to meet with. And yet it is the plain truth: as true of a king's mistress as of a ruined servant-maid. No help from without can rescue either, unless she wishes to save herself.

She has more power to do this than at first appears; but it must be by the prime agent, Truth.

After the first false step, the principal cause of women's further downfall is their being afraid of truth—truth, which must of necessity be the beginning and end of all attempts at restoration to honour. For the wretched girl, who, in terror of losing a place, or of being turned from an angry father's door, fabricates tale after tale, denies and denies till she can deny no longer, till all ends in a jail and a charge of child-murder; for the fashionable lady whose life is a long deceit, exposed to constant fear lest a breath should tear
her flimsy reputation to rags; and for all the innumerable cases between these two poles of society, there is but one warning—No virtue ever was founded on a lie.

The truth, then, at all risks and costs— the truth from the beginning. Make a clean breast to whomsoever you need to make it, and then— face the world.

This must be terrible enough—no denying that; but it must be done: there is no help for it. Perhaps, in many a case, if it were done at once, it would save much after-misery, especially the perpetual dread and danger of exposure, which makes the sin itself quite a secondary consideration compared with the fear of its discovery. This once over, with all its paralysing effects, the worst has come to the worst, and there is a chance of hope.

Begin again. Put the whole past life aside as if it had never been, and try what you can do with the future. This, I think, should be,

the counsel given to all erring women not irretrievably "lost."

It would be a blessed thing if our honourable women, mothers and matrons, would consider a little more what could be done with such persons: any openings for useful employment; any positions sufficiently guarded to be safe, and yet free enough to afford trial, without drawing too harshly the line—always harsh enough— between these, and those who are of unblemished reputation. Reformatory, Magdalen Institutions, and the like, are admirable in their way; but there are numberless cases in which individual judgment and help alone are possible. It is this—the train of thought that shall result in act, and which I desire to suggest to individual minds, in the hope of arousing that imperceptibly small influence of the many, which forms the strongest lever of universal opinion.

I said in a former paper, that the only way to make people good, is to make them happy.
Strange that this truth should apply to circumstances like these now written of; and yet it does; and it would be vain to deny it. Bid a woman lift up her head and live; tell her that she can and ought to live, and you must give her something to live for. You must put into her poor sore heart, if you can, a little more than peace—comfort. And where is she to find it?

Heterodox as the doctrine may appear to some, it seems to me that Heaven always leaves its sign of hope and redemption on any woman when she is left with a child. Some taste of the ineffable joy, the solemn consecration of maternity, must come even to the most wretched and guilty creature thinking of the double life she bears, or the helpless life to which she has given birth—that life for which she is as responsible to God, to itself, and to the world, as any married mother of them all.

And the sense of responsibility alone conveys a certain amount of comfort and hope. One can imagine many a sinful mother, who, for the very child’s sake, would learn to hate the sin, and to make to the poor innocent the only atonement possible, by giving it what is better even than stainless birth—a virtuous bringing-up. One can conceive such a woman taking her baby in her arms, and starting afresh to face the world—made bold by a love which has no taint in it, and cheered by the knowledge that no human being can take from her either this love, or its duties, or its rewards.

For it rests with herself alone, the comfort she may derive from, and the honour in which she may be held by, her child. A mother’s subsequent conduct and character might give a son as much pride in her, and in the nameless parentage which he owes her, as in any long lawful line.

"Whose ignoble blood
Has crept through scoundrels ever since the flood."

Even a daughter might live to say: "Mother,
do not grieve; I had rather have had you, just as you are, than any mother I know. It has been better, for me at least, than if you had married my father."

I have written thus much, and yet, after all, it seems but "words, words, words." Everywhere around us we see women falling, fallen, and we cannot help them; we cannot make them feel the hideousness of sin, the peace and strength of that clearness of soul which is not afraid of anything in earth or heaven; we cannot force upon their minds the possibility of return, after ever so long wanderings, to those pleasant paths out of which there is no peace and no strength for either man or woman; and in order to this return is needed—for both alike—not so much outside help, as inward repentance.

All I can do—all, I fear, that any one can do by mere speech—is to impress upon every woman, and chiefly on those who, reared innocently in safe homes, view the wicked world without, somewhat like gazers at a show or spectators at a battle—shocked, wondering, perhaps pitying a little, but not understanding at all—that this repentance is possible. Also, that once having returned to a chaste life, a woman's former life should never once be "cast up" against her; that she should be allowed to resume, if not her pristine position, at least one that is full of usefulness, pleasantness, and respect—a respect, the amount of which must be determined by her own daily conduct. She should be judged—as, indeed, human wisdom alone has a right to judge, in all cases—solely by what she is now, and not by what she has been. That judgment may be, ought to be, stern and fixed as justice itself with regard to her present, and even her past, so far as concerns the crime committed; but it ought never to take the law into its own hands towards the criminal, who, for all it knows, may have long since become less a criminal than a sufferer. Virtue degrades herself, and loses every vestige of
her power, when her dealings with Vice sink into a mere matter of individual opinion, personal dislike, or selfish fear of harm. For all offences, punishment, retributive and inevitable, must come; but punishment is one thing, revenge is another. One only, who is Omniscient as well as Omnipotent, can declare, "Vengeance is Mine."

**CHAPTER XII.**

Growing Old.

"Do ye think of the days that are gone, Jennie,  
As ye sit by your fire at night?  
Do ye wish that the morn would bring back the time,  
When your heart and your step were so light?  
I think of the days that are gone, Robin,  
And of all that I joyed in then;  
But the brightest that ever arose on me,  
I have never wished back again."

Growing old! A time we talk of, and jest or moralise over, but find almost impossible to realise—at least to ourselves. In others, we can see its approach clearer; yet even then we are slow to recognise it. "What, Miss So-and-so looking old, did you say? Impossible! she is