

INTRODUCTION

IN ancient and modern Syria—that land of historic and sacred memories—the name of "lady" is unknown, and is only expressed by the term "a virtuous woman"; and yet what truer and nobler definition can be given, for, as Solomon tells us, a virtuous woman "is far above rubies."

And so, from time to time, on our little world-stage there enters, one by one, some representative living personality to play her part in the great life-drama.

It is the old, the ever new, parable of the talents over again,— "to whom much is given, of him shall much be required;" and yet how various are the gifts, how diversified and unequal the *role*, the *repertoire*!

Rich indeed is our record in the Victorian era, when our crowned Lady leads the van,—when a saintly Elizabeth Fry trod the murky purlieus of Newgate, and raised fallen and degraded woman-kind by her angel message of pity and love. And not far behind her moved that dear "Lady with the Lamp," revered and beloved by every English

heart—Florence Nightingale; and following them a noble little band of workers.

And it is the parable again—the many, the few. Not all are called to be pioneers, or to go down into the heat of the battle. There are some that must watch beside the tents, faithful in little, faithful in much; and yet we may believe that their recording angels have written their names in letters of gold.

"Write me as one who loves his fellow-men," said Abu Ben Adhem; and surely it might be written of the leal-hearted Scotch lassie who manned the lifeboat when the ship was sinking, or of Agnes Weston working year after year amongst her beloved blue-jackets; and so on with each one of our notable good women. "There is none good," said the Master; but the term is only used here in a relative sense, to express the idea of those who have discharged their duty, redeemed their pledge, fought the good fight, and kept in the right path,—true-hearted and virtuous women in the noble Syriac sense, which is far nobler than the old Saxon definition of lady—" *hlâfweardige* "—bread-keeper.

There are some of us who think there is too little reticence and reserve at the present day, too much publicity,—as though one lived with open doors, in Japanese fashion. There is nothing kept sacred; everywhere there is the beat of drums, the flourish of trumpets; from the favoured housetops a herald seems perpetually crying, "Oyez! good people, this

is to give notice!" and so on. And through the length and breadth of the land it passes, from mouth to mouth, spreads like wildfire—tittle-tattle, canard, topic of the day—interviewer and journalist all are tiptoe and agog for the latest tit-bit; and Mercury wears his fool's cap and bells, and has a suit of motley.

This, too, is true, and cannot be repudiated; but notwithstanding, there is one saving clause in this document of human infatuation—the strength and power of example, the light that shines from the unhidden candlestick—and this we must not deny. There is no such anomaly in nature as isolated good deeds; one might as well throw stones into a pond and expect no eddies or circles, as believe that good works may be done without influencing that generation. If "their works do follow the blessed dead" into the unseen life, most assuredly their potency and force are wide-spreading here, and the circles overlap each other and widen out, as they do on the watery bosom of the stream.

So, as men place finger-posts where intersecting roads meet, to point the way clearly, may these sketches of twelve noble and useful lives be read and studied by the women of this generation, and "go and do thou likewise" be written upon some true heart.

Her Majesty the Queen