

INTRODUCTORY.

IN matrimony "a woman ventures most." Yes, indeed, Jeremy Taylor was right, and that is probably the reason why many of the most venturesome women in all lines of life, and in various countries, have "refused the leap."

In these days, happily or unhappily, women are more a law to themselves than formerly—more self-sufficing, possibly at times more self-sufficient. But the slur upon "Old Maids," as a race, has been quite effaced by those womanly women who, in the splendid motherliness of a self-chosen celibacy, have not kept within the limits of four walls the charms which have characterised their sex from the first, nor narrowed within the barriers of a selfish domesticity the talents which were "meant for mankind."

It is of such women that we propose to write in these papers— a "chosen few," perhaps, but, none the less, fair samples of what women can be and do, under circumstances as varied as are their dispositions.

If it be true that, to every woman, at some

time or other, comes that offer of marriage which is the highest compliment, surely, that any man can make to any woman, then we cannot be too thankful that these "old maids" resisted all blandishments, and, planting themselves in the very front of the world's battle, bore the brunt of a war with prejudice and misunderstanding which, from Eden to Armageddon,

has been, and will be, waged against those whom it took the Devil himself to tempt successfully.

"The third sex," we are told, "is increasing, and the competitor who meets man at every turn is a creature like the working-bee, whose desire to be a wife or mother has been atrophied, and the driving force of that desire is converted into a feverish hunger for work."

Whether or not this be the case it is unnecessary for our present purpose seriously to consider; but surely there can be no question as to the superiority of even such mortals— so pathetically deprecated by Signer Ferrero--- to the "sea-anemone women" with their propensities to hysterics and bursts of amorous sentimentalism, with descriptions of whom the novels of the early part of the nineteenth century abound. All honor be to those who have made the world realize that "woman is the lesser man"--- his fellow-worker, though *not* his rival, in all good things.

Where the physical conditions are so diverse, no equality or rivalry is possible, but let each "grow together" and "the time shall declare it"--- whether

or not the "new woman" (so called) is not to be preferred to the worsted-working, wing-clipped spinster of former days, of whom it might have been written, her "delight is to sit still." "Nous avons change tout cela!" Bicycling has been one of the epoch-making agencies, and the Miss Mores of the eighteenth century, whose Sundays were "as laborious as those of a colonial clergyman of to-day," would have revelled in the liberty of the twentieth.

The rapid development of women is one of those phenomena to which, in this era of surprises, we have been obliged quickly to accommodate ourselves.

From shadowy beings who lived lives of passive usefulness, or uselessness, they have materialised into a contingent of active workers, whose influence knows no circumscription.

Thousands have already benefited by the ardent yet tactful sympathy, the intuitive knowledge of the world's needs, and the patient fertility of resource,

which make the services of a devoted woman so valuable in all schemes either of philanthropy, discovery, or research.

To say that human beings leave "footprints on the sands of time" is altogether to underestimate our own importance. We do vastly more than that. Say rather—*fragments*, imperishable bits of ourselves,

which may be stepping-stones or stumbling-blocks to the generations that follow.

No word of ours can fruitless fall; but how many think of it ? The world is but one huge phonograph, and, borne on waves of sound, far out beyond the reach of mortal hearing, our words go echoing on, either for the blessing or cursing of others.

It is a grim thought that we are responsible to our grandchildren, but the fact remains all the same; and perhaps that is why some of the finest specimens of womanhood have contented themselves with the handling of other people's posterity, and can therefore claim to be numbered among our "Maids of Honour."

In an old magazine, long since extinguished, dovetailed in among minute instructions for making bead mats and pomade, fashion-plates of garments

as worn by our grandmothers, and quaint recipes for pickling and preserving, is the following short article by Charlotte Bronte; full, so it seems to us, of the tense bitterness of an almost breaking heart---

an exceeding bitter cry for the "more life and fuller" that is wanted by every mortal under the sun:—

" Where is my place in the world? That is the question which most old maids are pulled to solve; other people solve it for them by saying, 'Your place is to do good to others, to be helpful whenever help is wanted.' That is right in some measure, and a very convenient doctrine for the people who

hold it; but I perceive that certain sets of human beings are very apt to maintain that other sets should give up their lives to them and their service, and then they requite them by praise; they call them devoted and virtuous. Is this enough? Is it to live? Is there not a terrible hollowness, mockery, want, craving, in that existence which is given away to others, for want of something of your own to bestow it on? I suspect there is. Does virtue lie in abnegation of self? I do not believe it. Undue humility makes tyranny; weak concession creates selfishness. Each human being has his share of rights. I suspect it would conduce to the happiness and welfare of all, if each knew his allotment, and held to it as tenaciously as the martyr to his creed. Queer thoughts these, that surge in my mind; are they right thoughts? I am not certain.

"Well, life is short at the best: seventy years, they say, pass like a vapour, like a dream when one awaketh; and every path trod by human feet terminates

in one bourne—the grave: the little chink in the surface of this great globe—the furrow where the mighty husbandman with the scythe deposits the seed he has shaken from the ripe stem; and there it falls, decays, and thence it springs again, when the world has rolled round a few times more."

Probably, in spite of its incorporation in 'Shirley,' this was originally one of the "bits of mosaic" described by Mrs Gaskell—pencilled on scraps of

paper and afterwards copied into the finished manuscripts—and, as probably, written before that memorable Hegira, in 1848, which first opened up to Charlotte Brontë the delights of literary London, and revealed to the astonished publisher her identity with the mysterious Currer Bell

Deliberately disintegrated from its place in the book, it was evidently intended by the proprietors of the magazine to voice the growing discontent of single women in those days—to plead, with all the effectiveness of a successful author, for a wider outlook and a larger sphere of work than had hitherto been possible to them.

It is hard to realise in this unfettered age the real tragedy of "old maidism" in the days that are past, but if anything would make us do so, it is this bit of flotsam tossed up on an old bookstall; for Charlotte Brontë was no weak neurotic, but a woman whose literary style men have tried in vain to imitate, and whose domestic virtues and accomplishments were as varied as those which amazed the world in 1847. Compare with this the cheery optimism of Frances Power Cobbe, whose life was a fine example of what spinsterhood can be:—

"There must needs be a purpose for the lives of single women in the social order of Providence—a definite share in the general system which they are intended to carry on; not selfishness--- gross to a proverb—but self-sacrifice, more entire than belongs

to the double life of marriage, is the true law of celibacy.

"Until lately the condition of an unmarried woman of the upper classes was so shackled by social prejudices that it was inevitably dreary and monotonous;

but now the old maid's life may be as rich, as blessed, as that of the proudest of mothers with her crown of clustering babes; nay, she feels that, in the power of devoting her whole time and energies to some benevolent task, she is enabled to effect perhaps some greater good than would otherwise have been possible.

"'On n'enfante les grandes oeuvres que dans la virginité."

"The hospital of Scutari was the cradle of a new life for the women of England, and (marvellous to relate) the hospital of Sebastopol served the same noble purpose for the women of Russia.

"Till the cry of agony from the Crimea came to call forth Miss Nightingale's band and their sister nurses in the hospital camp, 'the public function of woman' was still to be sought. A thousand prejudices did that gallant little army break down for ever.

"All faithful work— be it in the fields of art and science or disinterested labour of any kind— is as truly work for God as the toil of the most devoted of philanthropists."

Disinterested public work is not necessarily good work, but inasmuch as a woman has always to take

the initiative, deliberately and from a sheer love of it, unbiassed by the hereditary brow-sweating instinct that distinguishes a man, she is at any rate *likely* to succeed in what she undertakes, while the personal benefit to herself is indisputable.

We wonder what fate would have befallen those of whom these chapters narrate had they not yielded to the overmastering impulse to write and to act as they did.

We are not advocating "single blessedness." This thing be far from us! It is, at best, but as the mad lightnings of Excalibur contrasted with the full radiance of the moon. Not to be compared in relative value of possibility with the "perfect .round" of womanhood so nobly planned as to be a fit instrument for the manifestation to mankind of the mystery of the Incarnation, But we would fain demonstrate in these pages that spinsterhood *has* a "place in the world," a place which is as "honourable" as, nay more honourable than, many a marriage; where life both within and without can be made beautiful with interests philanthropic, literary, and divine.

If by the reading of this volume any inspiration be afforded, or any aspiration encouraged, towards the betterment of this our world, then its purpose will fulfilled, and the pleasure which the writing of it has given will be more than justified.