

**THE EXCELLENT WOMAN
AS DESCRIBED IN THE
BOOK OF PROVERBS**

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The Excellent Woman as Described in the Book of Proverbs by William B. Sprague

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WITH AN INTRODUCTION

BY

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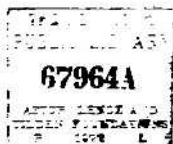
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INTRODUCTION.

We hail it as one of the signs of good, that the female sex have, in these latter years, been gradually coming up to the position of dignity and influence which Providence has evidently designed for them. If we compare woman as she was with woman as she is, or if we view her as she is now under Pagan and under Christian influences, we cannot resist the conviction that Christianity is the wonder-working agent that has produced the change in both her character and her condition. And we have a right to expect that this change will become yet more deep and universal. We anticipate the time when Christianity will dispense to her still brighter glories; when her intellect will act more vigorously, and her heart be lifted up in purer and nobler aspirations; when she will not only better understand, but more faithfully fulfil, her allotted mission; — in short, when her influence shall be felt everywhere, welcomed everywhere, pure as the breath of the morning, and merciful, yet powerful, as the ministry of angels.

But notwithstanding the favorable change that has already taken place, and the yet more favorable change which is

justified to our hopes and expectations, it must be acknowledged that we have little reason to be satisfied with the present standard of female excellence, even in those communities where the standard is the highest. Many examples, indeed, there are of female character, which would seem to us to have been formed after a perfect model, and to leave as little to be desired as consists with the present state of human imperfection; but these examples, instead of indicating the ordinary measure of female attainment and usefulness, are always marked as glorious exceptions; they stand forth from the mass in goodly prominence, showing at once what woman may become, and what every woman ought to aspire to, as she would accomplish her legitimate destiny or attain to the highest dignity of her sex.

There is, perhaps, nothing that stands more radically in the way of female progress than that spirit of self-indulgence which so extensively pervades the higher classes of female society. It cannot be disguised that it seems to have become almost an essential part of the economy of fashionable life, that a lady should have little or nothing to do. She may, indeed, make her own toilet; she may, when it is convenient, and she does not wish to spend the hour in sleep, receive the calls of her friends; she may walk in her garden, and admire the progress of vegetation, and be regaled with the fragrance of flowers; she may occasionally take an airing in pleasant weather, and spend here and there a few moments

of idle chit-chat with some of her acquaintances; she may grace the splendid ball-room or the fashionable party; she may sometimes even sport a little delicate needle-work with which to adorn in a higher degree her own person; — but further than this she does not go, — much further than this she is forbidden to go, by the false code of fashion to which she has subjected herself. Not that all these things which we have mentioned are in themselves worthy of condemnation; — we would allow to a lady her delicate occupations and her innocent amusements, — but we would not allow her to feel as if these were the greater concerns of human life, — in other words, as if she had nothing to do which did not terminate ultimately in self-indulgence. The truth is, that woman, as well as man, is made for activity; she is gifted with the same intellectual and moral faculties; and though Providence has assigned to her a different sphere of action, yet he has in no wise absolved her from the obligation to be active. Let her remember, then, if she settles down into a state of indolent inaction, because either an opulent condition in life or the false maxims of the age permit it, that she offends as well against the claims of Heaven as against the dignity of her own nature.

But it is not enough that woman should be active; her activity must be guided by discretion and animated by benevolence; she must be contented to work within her own sphere, and to occupy her own quiet throne. It is not more

certain that she is endowed with faculties that qualify her for useful exertion, than that she has her own peculiar field of labor indicated to her. But, unhappily, she has not always been satisfied to keep within the bound which the finger of Providence has manifestly drawn around her. She has sometimes forgotten her native modesty, and thrust herself into the rough and tumultuous scenes of life, where her voice has been heard, not to allay, but to swell the tempest. She has talked extravagantly and violently of her own rights, — mistaking a frenzied ambition to be known and heard and talked about, for an honest desire to reform and purify society. And even where she has stopped short of this extreme point, against which all decency and all common sense remonstrate, she has not unfrequently overstepped the bounds of strict decorum, by an interference with matters not appropriately belonging to her. Who, for instance, could hear a lady, at a large dinner-party, making her voice heard above the voices of a dozen professed politicians, in debating some party question, without feeling that she had forgotten her sex and her place, and that no more fitting word of counsel could be addressed to her than that she should remember that she is a woman?

What, then, is woman's peculiar sphere? In what field may her influence be most appropriately and most advantageously exerted?

First of all, surely, in her own dwelling — in the sacred pri-

vacy of home. Here she sustains her most intimate relations; and the duties belonging to them are sufficient to put in requisition the full vigor of her faculties. What important duties devolve upon her in the relation of a *wife*? Not only is she bound to study the happiness of her husband, — to do what she can to alleviate his burdens of care, and prevent the occasions of disquietude, — but she should consider herself pledged to the promotion of his usefulness in the highest possible degree; and the heart of an affectionate and intelligent wife will quickly find out many means of doing this which nothing but experience could suggest. Hence it has almost grown into a proverb, that an individual who has been eminently successful in business, or eminently useful in society, has been blessed with an uncommonly prudent and excellent wife. In respect to no profession, perhaps, is this remark so frequently or so justly made, as the clerical: almost every minister's standing and general influence are affected more or less by the character of his wife; and while many owe to this circumstance a greatly-increased usefulness, many others find in it a mill-stone about their necks, — their efforts are in a great degree paralyzed, and life with them is little more than a protracted and unbroken sickness of the heart. As a *mother*, too, who shall fix a limit to woman's responsibility? In her house, and under her eye, are growing up the component parts of society in the next generation; and, moreover, each of them has an immortal nature, in which