

WOMEN AND THEIR WORK

Published @ 2017 Trieste Publishing Pty Ltd

ISBN 9780649735440

Women and Their Work by Mrs. Arthur Lyttleton

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Cover @ 2017

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MRS. ARTHUR LYTTLETON

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1901

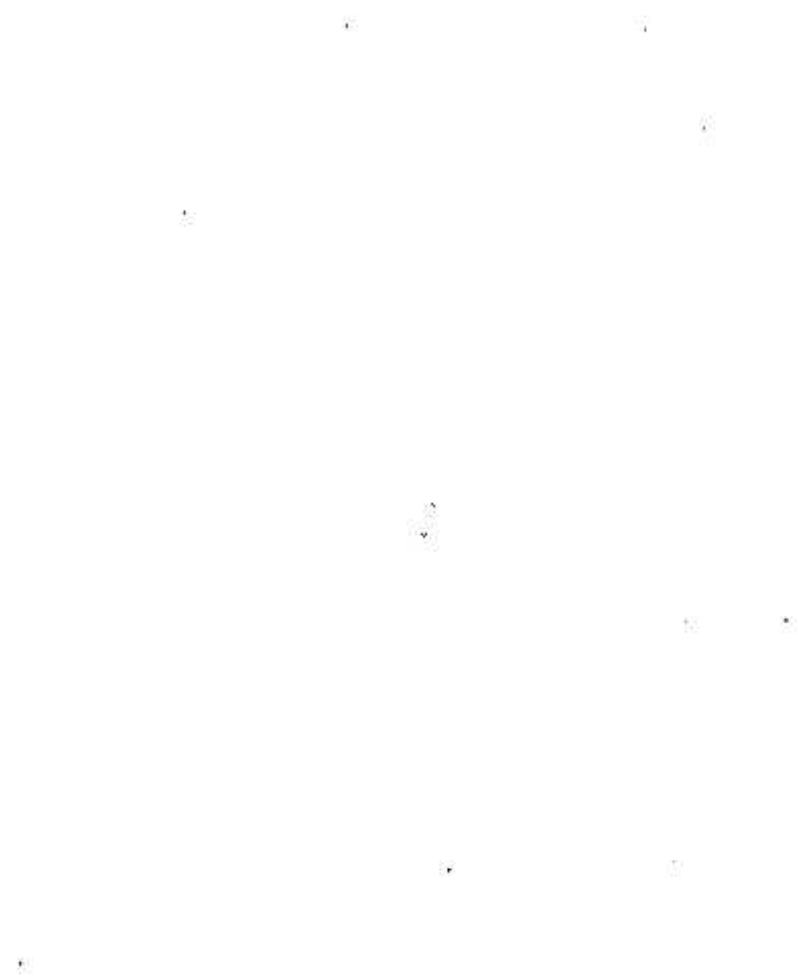
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CONTENTS

	CHAPTER I	PAGE
INTRODUCTORY		1
	CHAPTER II	
THE FAMILY		27
	CHAPTER III	
THE HOUSEHOLD		59
	CHAPTER IV	
PHILANTHROPIC AND SOCIAL WORK		78
	CHAPTER V	
PROFESSIONS		101
	CHAPTER VI	
RECREATION		115
	CHAPTER VII	
FRIENDSHIP		131



WOMEN AND THEIR WORK

CHAPTER I.

INTRODUCTORY

IT is a truism to talk of the change that has taken place in the position of women during the nineteenth century, and, like other truisms, this one also is somewhat of a neglected truth. People assume the fact, and they rejoice at it or bewail it, and comment on the inconveniences or the advantages which accompany it; but they hardly realize what it means. It has been said that there is more difference between the England of the present day and that of the beginning of the nineteenth century, than there was between the England of 1800 and the England of Charles I. And if this is true of the whole state, it is certainly true of the position of women. At the beginning of the nineteenth century, speaking generally, only two of the occupations which women now practise were open to them, and those were domestic life and society. There were, it is

true, a few literary women and 'blue-stockings'; but, as a rule, the interests of women were restricted to pleasing men, to the family, and to the household. No professions were open to them; social and philanthropic work in any organized sense was unknown; games, save of the feeblest sort, would have been deemed unsuitable; and the light French sandalled shoes of our grandmothers would not permit of their walking in the muddy lanes which did duty for roads. Nearly all the outdoor occupations and amusements which play so large a part in the lives of women now were unknown. The ideal woman was delicate in health, retiring, and weak. She fainted frequently—at any rate, in books—and her one aim was to get married, because there was no other possible career which would not stamp her as a failure. She differed markedly in many ways from her descendants.

Now, the change which has taken place has been brought about less by pioneers and preachers and reformers than by the gradual increase of general enlightenment and civilization. The facilities for moving about, the safety of our streets, the macadamized roads, have been the causes on the one hand which have made it possible for women to act and move independently, just as on the other the advance in medical science has prescribed both physical and mental activity, and has made impossible the old view that physical and mental vigour was a thing which should be avoided, or if by chance it was possessed, should, at

any rate, be elegantly concealed. There were master-minds in the past, as there have been during the last century, who saw that in the greater equality of men and women, and in the development of all the powers of the latter, lay the true progress of the race, but till the circumstances of life changed their task was well-nigh impossible. Here and there throughout history occur instances of women who have been received as equals by men, but for the mass of women equality could only be produced by civilization.

But what does this equality mean? and what change of thought does it involve? There is no doubt that the whole tendency of the present condition of things is to modify gravely the idea of the relation of men and women which formerly existed, and which still lingers on in various ways. Rousseau stated the relation bluntly: 'For this reason the education of women should always be relative to that of men. To please, to be useful to us, to make us love and esteem them, to educate us when young and take care of us when grown up, to advise, to console us, to render our lives easy and agreeable—these are the duties of women at all times, and what they should be taught in infancy.* The misfortune is, that to aim at pleasing men is like aiming at being happy—we only attain to it by trying for something else. To bring up women in the idea that their only object in the world should be to please

* See Mrs. Fawcett's preface to *Mary Wollstonecraft's Introduction to the 'Rights of Women,'* p. 15.

and be of use to men, is almost to disable them from fulfilling the relation in its higher aspects. A woman may possibly please a man, she may conceivably educate him when quite young, and look after him when he is old, she may even render his life easy and agreeable; but she will not make him esteem or love her, neither will she advise him or be useful to him in any real sense, unless the inspiring motive of her life be not to please men, but, as the Shorter Catechism has it, 'To glorify God, and to enjoy Him for ever.' Now, when Mrs. Fawcett contrasts, as she rightly contrasts, this great religious ideal for all mankind with the ideal which Rousseau holds up for women, one cannot but ask, Is civilization taking us nearer to the one and further from the other? Is the change in the position of women a gradual development of civilization, and more, a steady unfolding of the Christian ideal of life? or is it merely a side result of the great social changes of the nineteenth century, requiring watching and stemming, as some think even strenuously resisting; on the whole a regrettable phase, and one which it is hoped will soon be followed by a salutary reaction? That is the question which is before us to-day.

'If a great change is to be made in human affairs, the minds of men will be fitted to it; the general opinions and feelings will draw that way. Every fear, every hope, will forward it; and then they who persist in opposing this mighty current in human affairs will appear rather to resist the decrees of