

CHAPTER II.

Self-dependence.

"If you want a thing done, go yourself; if not, send."

This pithy axiom, of which most men know the full value, is by no means so well appreciated by women. One of the very last things we learn, often through a course of miserable helplessness, heart-burnings, difficulties, contumelies, and pain, is the lesson, taught to boys from their school-days, of self-dependence.

Its opposite, either plainly or impliedly, has been preached to us all our lives. "An independent young lady" — "a woman who can take care of herself" — and such-like phrases, have become tacitly suggestive of hoydenish-

ness, coarseness, strong-mindedness, down to the lowest depth of bloomerism, cigarette-smoking, and talking slang.

And there are many good reasons, ingrained in the very tenderest core of woman's nature, why this should be. We are "the weaker vessel"—whether acknowledging it or not, most of us feel this: it becomes man's duty and delight to show us honour accordingly. And this honour, dear as it may be to him to give, is still dearer to us to receive.

Dependence is in itself an easy and pleasant thing: dependence upon one we love being perhaps the very sweetest thing in the world. To resign one's self totally and contentedly into the hands of another; to have no longer any need of asserting one's rights or one's personality, knowing that both are as precious to that other as they ever were to ourselves; to cease taking thought about one's self at all, and rest safe, at ease, assured that in great things and small we

shall be guided and cherished, guarded and helped—in fact, thoroughly “taken care of”—how delicious is all this! So delicious, that it seems granted to very few of us, and to fewer still as a permanent condition of being.

Were it our ordinary lot, were every woman living to have either father, brother, or husband, to watch over and protect her, then, indeed, the harsh but salutary doctrine of self-dependence need never be heard of. But it is not so. In spite of the pretty ideals of poets, the easy taken-for-granted truths of old-fashioned educators of female youth, this fact remains patent to any person of common sense and experience, that in the present day, whether voluntarily or not, one-half of our women are *obliged* to take care of themselves—obliged to look solely to themselves for maintenance, position, occupation, amusement, reputation, life.

Of course I refer to the large class for which these Thoughts are meant—the single women;

who, while most needing the exercise of self-dependence, are usually the very last in whom it is inculcated, or even permitted. From babyhood they are given to understand that helplessness is feminine and beautiful; helpfulness,—except in certain received forms of manifestation—unwomanly and ugly. The boys may do a thousand things which are “not proper for little girls.”

And herein, I think, lies the great mistake at the root of most women’s education, that the law of their existence is held to be, not Right, but Propriety; a certain received notion of womanhood, which has descended from certain excellent great-grandmothers, admirably suited for some sorts of their descendants, but totally ignoring the fact that each sex is composed of individuals, differing in character almost as much from one another as from the opposite sex. For do we not continually find womanish men and masculine women? and some of the finest types of character we have known among both sexes,

are they not often those who combine the qualities of both? Therefore, there must be somewhere a standard of abstract right, including manhood and womanhood, and yet superior to either. One of the first of its common laws, or common duties, is this of self-dependence.

We women are, no less than men, each of us a distinct existence. In two out of the three great facts of our life we are certainly independent agents, and all our life long we are accountable only, in the highest sense, to our own souls, and the Maker of them. Is it natural, is it right even, that we should be expected—and be ready enough, too, for it is much the easiest way—to hang our consciences, duties, actions, opinions, upon some one else—some individual, or some aggregate of individuals yecept Society? Is this Society to draw up a code of regulations as to what is proper for us to do, and what not? Which latter is supposed to be done for us; if not done, or there happens to be no one to do

it, is it to be left undone? Alack, most frequently, whether or not it ought to be, it is!

Every one's experience may furnish dozens of cases of poor women suddenly thrown adrift—widows with families, orphan girls, reduced gentlewomen—clinging helplessly to every male relative or friend they have, year after year, sinking deeper in poverty or debt, eating the bitter bread of charity, or compelled to bow an honest pride to the cruellest humiliations, every one of which might have been spared them by the early practice of self-dependence.

I once heard a lady say—a tenderly-reared and tender-hearted woman—that if her riches made themselves wings, as in these times riches will, she did not know anything in the world that she could turn her hand to, to keep herself from starving. A more pitiable, and, in some sense, humbling confession, could hardly have been made; yet it is that not of hundreds, but of thousands, in England.

Sometimes exceptions arise : here is one :—

Two young women, well educated and refined, were left orphans, their father dying just when his business promised to realise a handsome provision for his family. It was essentially a man's business—in many points of view, decidedly an unpleasant one. Of course friends thought "the girls" must give it up, go out as governesses, depend on relatives, or live in what genteel poverty the sale of the good-will might allow. But the "girls" were wiser. They argued: "If we had been boys, it would have been all right; we should have carried on the business, and provided for our mother and the whole family. Being women, we'll try it still. It is nothing wrong; it is simply disagreeable. It needs common sense, activity, diligence, and self-dependence. We have all these; and what we have not, we will learn." So these sensible and well-educated young women laid aside their pretty uselessness and pleasant idleness, and set to work.

Happily, the trade was one that required no personal publicity; but they had to keep the books, manage the stock, choose and superintend fit agents—to do things difficult, not to say distasteful, to most women, and resign enjoyments that, to women of their refinement, must have cost daily self-denial. Yet they did it; they filled their father's place, sustained their delicate mother in ease and luxury, never once compromising their womanhood by their work, but rather ennobling the work by their doing of it.

Another case—different, and yet alike. A young girl, an elder sister, had to receive for step-mother a woman who ought never to have been any honest man's wife. Not waiting to be turned out of her father's house, she did a most daring and "improper" thing—she left it, taking with her the brothers and sisters, whom by this means only she believed she could save from harm. She settled them in a London lodging, and worked for them as a daily governess. "Heaven

helps those who help themselves." From that day this girl never was dependent upon any human being; while during a long life she has helped and protected more than I could count—pupils and pupils' children, friends and their children, besides brothers and sisters-in-law, nephews and nieces, down to the slenderest tie of blood, or even mere strangers. And yet she has never been anything but a poor governess, always independent, always able to assist others—because she never was and never will be indebted to any one, except for love while she lives, and for a grave when she dies. May she long possess the one and want the other!

And herein is answered the "*cui bono?*" of self-dependence, that its advantages end not with the original possessor. In this much-suffering world, a woman who can take care of herself can always take care of other people. She not only ceases to be an unprotected female, a nuisance and a drag upon society, but her working-

value therein is doubled and trebled, and society respects her accordingly. Even her kindly male friends, no longer afraid that when the charm to their vanity of "being of use to a lady" has died out, they shall be saddled with a perpetual claimant for all manner of advice and assistance; the first not always followed, and the second often accepted without gratitude—even they yield an involuntary consideration to a lady who gives them no more trouble than she can avoid, and is always capable of thinking and acting for herself, so far as the natural restrictions and decorums of her sex allow. True, these have their limits, which it would be folly, if not worse, for her to attempt to pass; but a certain fine instinct, which, we flatter ourselves, is native to us women, will generally indicate the division between brave self-reliance and bold assumption.

Perhaps the line is most easily drawn, as in most difficulties, at that point where duty ends

and pleasure begins. Thus, we should respect one who, on a mission of mercy or necessity, went through the lowest portions of St. Giles' or the Gallowgate; we should be rather disgusted if she did it for mere amusement or bravado. All honour to the poor sempstress or governess who traverses London streets alone, at all hours of day or night, unguarded except by her own modesty; but the strong-minded female who would venture on a solitary expedition to investigate the humours of Cremorne Gardens or Greenwich fair, though perfectly "respectable," would be an exceedingly condemnable sort of personage. There are many things at which, as mere pleasures, a woman has a right to hesitate; there is no single duty, whether or not it lies in the ordinary line of her sex, from which she ought to shrink, if it be plainly set before her.

Those who are the strongest advocates for the passive character of our sex, its claims, proprieties, and restrictions, are, I have often

noticed, if the most sensitive, not always the justest or most generous. I have seen ladies, no longer either young or pretty, shocked at the idea of traversing a street's length at night, yet never hesitate at being "fetched" by some female servant, who was both young and pretty, and to whom the danger of the expedition, or of the late return alone, was by far the greater of the two. I have known anxious mothers, who would not for worlds be guilty of the indecorum of sending their daughters unchaperoned to the theatre or a ball—and very right, too!—yet send out some other woman's young daughter, at eleven P.M., to the stand for a cab, or to the public-house for a supply for beer. It never strikes them that the doctrine of female dependence extends beyond themselves, whom it suits so easily, and to whom it saves so much trouble; that either every woman, be she servant or mistress, sempstress or fine lady, should receive the "protection" suitable to her degree; or that

each ought to be educated into equal self-dependence. Let us, at least, hold the balance of justice even, nor allow an over-consideration for the delicacy of one woman to trench on the rights, conveniences, and honest feelings of another.

We *must* help ourselves. In this curious phase of social history, when marriage is apparently ceasing to become the common lot, and a happy marriage the most uncommon lot of all, we must educate our maidens into what is far better than any blind clamour for ill-defined "rights"—into what ought always to be the foundation of rights—duties. And there is one, the silent practice of which will secure to them almost every right they can fairly need—the duty of self-dependence. Not after any Amazonian fashion; no mutilating of fair womanhood in order to assume the unnatural armour of men; but simply by the full exercise of every faculty, physical, moral, and intellectual, with which Heaven has endowed us all, severally and col-

lectively, in different degrees; allowing no one to rust or lie idle, merely because their owner is a woman. And, above all, let us lay the foundation of all real womanliness by teaching our girls from their cradle that the priceless pearl of decorous beauty, chastity of mind as well as body, exists in themselves alone; that a single-hearted and pure-minded woman may go through the world, like Spenser's Una, suffering, indeed, but never defenceless; foot-sore and smirched, but never tainted; exposed, doubtless, to many trials, yet never either degraded or humiliated, unless by her own act she humiliates herself.

For heaven's sake—for the sake of "woman-hede," the most heavenly thing next angelhood, (as men tell us when they are courting us, and which it depends upon ourselves to make them believe in all their lives)—young girls, trust yourselves; rely on yourselves! Be assured that no outward circumstances will harm you while you keep the jewel of purity in your bosom,

and are ever ready with the steadfast, clean right hand, of which, till you use it, you never know the strength, though it be only a woman's hand.

Fear not the world: it is often juster to us than we are to ourselves. If in its harsh jostlings the "weaker goes to the wall"—as so many allege is sure to happen to a woman—you will almost always find that this is not merely because of her sex, but from some inherent qualities in herself, which, existing either in woman or man, would produce just the same result, pitiful and blameable, but usually more pitiful than blameable. The world is hard enough, for two-thirds of it are struggling for the dear life—"each for himself, and de'il tak the hindmost;" but it has a rough sense of moral justice after all. And whosoever denies that, spite of all hindrances from individual wickedness, *the right* shall not ultimately prevail, impugns not alone human justice, but the justice of God.

The age of chivalry, with all its benefits and harmfulnesses, is gone by, for us women. We cannot now have men for our knights-errant, expending blood and life for our sake, while we have nothing to do but sit idle on balconies, and drop flowers on half-dead victors at tilt and tourney. Nor, on the other hand, are we dressed-up dolls, pretty playthings, to be fought and scrambled for—petted, caressed, or flung out of window, as our several lords and masters may please. Life is much more equally divided between us and them. We are neither goddesses nor slaves; they are neither heroes nor semi-demons: we just plod on together, men and women alike, on the same road, where daily experience illustrates Hudibras's keen truth, that

"The value of a thing
Is just as much as it will bring."

And our value is—exactly what we choose to make it.

Perhaps at no age since Eve's were women rated so exclusively at their own personal worth, apart from poetic flattery or tyrannical depreciation; at no time in the world's history judged so entirely by their individual merits, and respected according to the respect which they earn for themselves. And shall we value ourselves so meanly as to consider this unjust? Shall we not rather accept our position, difficult indeed, and requiring from us more than the world ever required before, but from its very difficulty rendered the more honourable?

Let us not be afraid of men; for that, I suppose, lies at the root of all these amiable hesitations. "Gentlemen don't like such and such things." "Gentlemen fancy so and so unfeminine." My dear little foolish cowards, do you think a man—a *good* man, in any relation of life, ever loves a woman the more for reverencing her the less? or likes her better for

transferring all her burdens to his shoulders, and pinning her conscience to his sleeve? Or, even supposing he did like it, is a woman's divinity to be man—or God?

And here, piercing to the Foundation of all truth—I think we may find the truth concerning self-dependence, which is only real and only valuable when its root is not in self at all; when its strength is drawn not from man, but from that Higher and Diviner Source whence every individual soul proceeds, and to which alone it is accountable. As soon as any woman, old or young, once feels *that*, not as a vague sentimental belief, but as a tangible, practical law of life, all weakness ends, all doubt departs: she recognises the glory, honour, and beauty of her existence; she is no longer afraid of its pains; she desires not to shift one atom of its responsibilities to another. She is content to take it just as it is, from the hands of the All-Father; her only care being so to fulfil it, that while the world

at large may recognise and profit by her self-dependence, she herself, knowing that the utmost strength lies in the deepest humility, recognises, solely and above all, her dependence upon God.

CHAPTER III.

Female Professions.

GRANTED the necessity of something to do, and the self-dependence required for its achievement, we may go on to the very obvious question—*what* is a woman to do?

A question more easily asked than answered; and the numerous replies to which, now current in book, pamphlet, newspaper, and review, suggesting everything possible and impossible, from compulsory wifehood in Australia to voluntary watchmaking at home, do at present rather confuse the matter than otherwise. No doubt, out of these “many words,” which “darken speech,” some plain word or two will one day take shape