

WOMEN IN FRANCE.

THE position in the social system at present occupied by women is a subject that has been brought rather prominently before public attention of late. It has arisen spontaneously with the idea that has forced itself upwards in the minds of all who have thought on the subject, that any question with regard to the moral and intellectual condition of the world is involved in the question of the moral and intellectual condition of women. And with this has come the conviction that both are at present in an equally unsatisfactory state, but that no real and radical improvement can be hoped for in the one until a corresponding reform has been effected in the other.

This reform has commenced among ourselves, and its progress though slow has been sure enough to satisfy those who possess minds rational enough not to expect to see great changes effected all at once, or at the first effort; especially when the obstacles opposed to them are—as in this case—rooted in what have been the universal, and still are the most generally prevailing, notions of religion and morality, grounded in the ignorance and prejudices of a people.

But while considering the position of women, we have been too apt, with national egotism, to think only of Englishwomen, and have interested ourselves in their improvement and advancement alone. We seem to have forgotten that the social progress of one nation can hardly be effected quite independently of that of others, and that particularly in these days of incessant international intercourse, the conduct of the people of one country in any such matter as this is really a subject of importance, and should be one of interest to those of another, affecting as it may their own for good or evil more deeply than they imagine.

We have indeed given some superficial thought to the condition of women in the East; we have in our own minds drawn some rough distinction between the social status of the wives and mothers and sisters in our English homes, and that of the ladies in Turkish and Indian harems. We have sometimes, too, been roused to transient indignation by tales of women being subjected to the punishment of

the knout under Russian rule, but our interests and our sympathies have stopped here.

And yet we might with some profit and advantage look a little nearer home, and especially to one country whose close neighbourhood renders our intercourse with its people more frequent and familiar than with that of any other—France. France professes the same religion that England does—the Christian—with only the slight difference of denomination; there is not a political party in England to which a corresponding one may not be found in France; with her language and literature many of us are as familiar as we are with our own, and we do our very utmost to imitate or adopt French fashions in dress and habits, in food, with much of French manners and customs in other matters. But at the same time we have regarded with utter indifference, or at least have given but a very cursory share of our interest to, some of the conditions of French life which are far more worthy our attention—though not our imitation—than the shapes of French bonnets or the flavours of French ragoûts, and in consequence the ideas we have formed on them, when we have formed any, have in general been exceedingly erroneous. And this has been more particularly the case on one subject—the position assigned to women in the social system of France, and the influence exercised by women on French society.

In the first place, owing to some of the marriage laws of France—particularly those which relate to the property of married women—being somewhat more equitable than our own, we have been used to consider Frenchwomen as possessing a freedom in all that concerns themselves not enjoyed by the women of other countries, even our own. In the next, on account of the natural quickness of apprehension, readiness of speech, and vivacity of manner of Frenchwomen, which enable them to shine in conversation, we have acquired the notion that their minds are more highly cultivated than other women's who do not make so brilliant a show in society. At the same time, with these advantages, we have been in the habit of ascribing whatever we consider reprehensibly loose in French morals and contemptibly frivolous in French manners mostly or entirely to the women. In this we have but taken the cue from French satirists and quasi-moralists, the English frown and shake of the head always following the suggestion of the unjust sneers and false sentiments of French playwrights, romancers, and journalists. Whatever knowledge of French life we possess, besides that acquired by our own superficial observation, we gather from such productions as 'Frou-frou' and the 'Famille Benoiton,' popular novels of the same type, and sensation paragraphs in newspapers. Thus our most familiar picture of French conjugal infidelity is always the wife with a lover, as our most notable instance of its extravagance is a *modiste's* bill. English newspapers have been wont to reprint for the benefit of their fair readers wonderful accounts of the

toilettes of Madame A. or the Marquise B. at some ball at the Tuileries or *fête* at St. Cloud, and the fabulous sums they cost. It is always the gay and silly wife deceiving the tender and confiding husband, or ruining him with her milliner's and jeweller's bills, or both. In the case of unmarried men it is still the same. Outside the pale of matrimony we have always before our eyes the melancholy tableau of an amiable and generous youth fleeced and deceived by a calculating courtesan. Our popular notions of the seducer and the seduced are quite reversed when contemplating—from the French view—this phase of French society. We see in the *demi-monde* nothing but the incarnation of heartless profligacy trading upon the affection and generosity of ardent youth.

Now our present purpose is to show that all these views are more or less mistaken or incorrect, owing not only to superficial observation of facts, but a general neglect of looking into the causes of things; and in as brief an examination as possible we will endeavour to prove this.

Taking the second instance we adduced, first, the intellectual condition of French women. A very slight examination into the conditions of female education in France, and the nature of the mental training bestowed upon French girls, will show that natural intelligence of mind, liveliness of disposition, and gaiety of manner, conceal, though they cannot supply, deficiencies of real knowledge much greater, and the bad effects of a system infinitely worse even than our own.

In the first place, parental authority has always been carried to its utmost limit in France. Young men, however, have begun to free themselves somewhat from its power, while unmarried women, of all ages from infancy upward, are still subject to its almost unrestricted control; where the law does not support it, the weight of public opinion gives it a moral force, against which resistance is almost impossible.

Next to the authority of parents comes the influence of the Catholic religion, which is still allowed to exercise an enormous power over the minds of Frenchwomen. To keep a human being naturally gifted with reason and intelligence in a condition of slavery to two such powers as these, the most essential thing is to crush the reason and stunt the intellect, parental authority being evidently designed by nature to take the place first and then assist the reason and intellect while in a state of infancy and childhood, but to cease with their full development, as priestly authority had its use in the infancy and youth of civilisation. French parents confide the education of their daughters either entirely to the hands of the Church, or at any rate permit it such a control and supervision as almost entirely to answer the same purpose. Thus, as the priests are permitted to regulate what books shall or shall not be used in girls' schools, even when those schools are not, as they generally are, convents. The consequence is that while they are trained in a few outward graces, and taught a few superficial

accomplishments, they are debarred from all really useful knowledge. Anything that could shake their belief in the dogmas of the Church and so weaken their submission to its authority is studiously kept from them. And above all they are guarded from everything that could give them any sense or appreciation of their own capacities as women and rights as human beings. That this control over the education of women given to the priests does not proceed from any slavish submission on the part of the educated portion of the population generally to the authority of the Church of Rome, is manifest from the fact that in no other country in Europe, nominally Catholic, has the Catholic religion been so completely cast off by the male half of the population. The majority of Frenchmen who possess any education being avowed free-thinkers, it is plain that Frenchmen, while abjuring the control of the Church over their own thoughts and actions, assent to, approve of, and support its sway over the minds and actions of the women of their country, as the most effectual means of securing their mental subjugation to themselves.

Frenchwomen obtain a partial freedom by marriage, but, as we all know, liberty is of very little use to those who have not been taught how to use it. And marriage, as even the advocates of the fullest and freest equality in it admit, involves personal restraints and obligations peculiar to itself. The imposition of these restraints and obligations is generally the last consummating act of French parental tyranny, imposed as they are quite regardless of the wishes or inclinations of one of the principal parties to the contract. The education and training, then, bestowed upon a French girl are but the fitting preparations for securing her submission to this final decree of the infallible authority of her home. Of men she knows nothing in any sense of the word. She has never associated with any beyond the narrowest limits of her home circle, and even in that she is kept as much apart from her brothers as possible, while her father speaks to her and treats her very much as she does her pet canary. Of the man she is to marry she knows as little as of any, possibly even less than of some. She may be somewhat versed in the arts of *coquetterie*, but of the physical conditions of marriage, with such an education as this, it is needless to say she knows nothing. This ignorance explains the willingness with which a French girl of sixteen or seventeen will submit to her father's behests, and contract a marriage that a woman of ripe years and understanding would shrink from with repugnance. But this 'innocence' of the '*jeune personne*' so studiously cultivated and fostered in France, combined as it is with careful teaching both by precept and example of the arts of coquetry, is not innocence at all in the real sense of the word, but simple ignorance. This is plain by the conduct of Frenchwomen as soon as they obtain the partial liberty with the enlightenment and understanding that comes to them through entrance into the marriage state. It is amazing the rapidity with

which the bashful '*jeune fille*,' who scarcely ventured to raise her eyes and never dared to open her lips in company, turns into the gay daring woman of the world, who stretches her license to its utmost limit. It is in this phase of her career that she most generally falls under our notice—and under our disapprobation. But in judging her in this we have not only overlooked, as has been shown, the conditions of her previous preparation by education and training for the state, than which nothing could possibly be worse, but we have been apt to overlook some of what are too often the conditions of the state itself to a Frenchwoman when she enters on it. One is the fact that for the man to whom she has bound herself to be faithful she has not previously contracted any affection, and thus she is deprived of one very powerful incentive to fidelity. Another is, that there are two sides to conjugal fidelity, upon one of which society—particularly French society—looks much more leniently than it does upon the other; thus it is more merciful to a husband keeping a mistress than to a wife having a lover; at the same time that with the charming inconsistency of its inexorable laws it ordains that the mistress shall be kept out of its sight and out of its company, while the wife—if she would hold her position as such at all—must parade her lover before it on every possible occasion—the discovery of a secret amour being social ruin to a woman who, notwithstanding satirists and moralists, may hold her place in the world for a long time, perhaps for ever, if she only make her cavalier and his devotion conspicuous enough. And so to casual observers, those respectable English people who mix a little in French society, a Frenchwoman's levities is the phase of conjugal infidelity the most apparent and most striking. But nevertheless, it is not really the blackest side of the case, and as society is satisfied when the other is not placed in the straight line of her vision, or thrust directly on her company, anyone can ascertain this to be the fact who will take the trouble to glance a little aside or step for a moment out of the beaten track. Love has generally as little to do with a Frenchman's marriage, as it has with a Frenchwoman's; the only difference being that in his case it is a matter of freewill and choice to contract such a marriage, while in hers it is not. A Frenchman, if he be poor, generally marries simply to replenish his purse, if he be rich to beget legitimate children to inherit his fortune and perpetuate his name. That such love as he is capable of is already bestowed upon a woman whose poverty prevented her from satisfying the first condition, and the meanness of whose birth and position would incapacitate her for fulfilling the second with the distinction he would wish, is no barrier to him in the matter. Nor is his marriage when concluded any barrier to his continuing to indulge his passion for the woman who has excited and is able to sustain it. If she at any time ceases to do so, some other is found to supply her place, that other not being at all of necessity, and as a matter of fact being very rarely, the wife who

bears his name, and who is the mother of his heir. That Frenchmen prefer those connections with women which are terminable at their own caprice to the marriage state, and that they enter on the latter generally with reluctance and only late in life, and for the purposes above named, is a notorious fact; though when passing judgment upon Frenchwomen, its connection with the evils we censure, as one of their primary causes, is too often overlooked. And this brings us to the third and last of those instances we brought forward of popular misconception as to the social position and influence of women in France. That Frenchmen prefer unlawful to lawful connections is explainable by the fact that marriage, however weak and slavish a woman may be rendered by education, gives her some legal rights that, howsoever ignorant she may have been kept, she must know and may exercise; while a woman—called by a miserable irony a mistress—whose position is dependent solely on the caprice of her master will be utterly submissive and subservient to him. At the same time these women who sacrifice all personal dignity, freedom, and honour, to become the slaves of men's passions and the toys of their caprice, do obtain a position in France not accorded to them in any other country in Europe. But what is that position at its best? To be a petted, pampered slave, an admired, cherished toy, and nothing more.

And yet, wretched as this position is at its best, it is the one in which in France a woman is at the acme of her glory: she leads the fashion, that highest distinction in France; she is the recipient of all the adoration and affection that a Frenchman is able to spare from himself. And he can spare her a good deal, as she contributes perhaps more than anything else to his personal gratification. There is some dull respectability in the position of a wife, but there is nothing else, unless she manage to assimilate it with that other, unless she combine being the wife of one man with being the mistress of another; under such circumstances, that she does it sometimes is scarcely to be wondered at. For the unmarried woman who chooses to be, or is kept by her parents, chaste, there is no position, no influence, no social recognition whatever. She must serve some man as his wife or his mistress to be of any value or obtain any place whatever in the social system of France. The contempt for 'old maids' is a feeling fast dying out in England before an enlightenment that recognises a place and a work in the world for everyone independently of the condition of their sex or the exercise of its functions; while in France the '*vieille fille*' is still the object of the greatest social obloquy and contempt—an individual whose existence is scarcely tolerated outside the walls of a convent.

That women who have sold their human dignity, their liberty, and their self-respect, to become the mere slaves and toys of other human beings, should be occasionally somewhat greedy and rapacious in exacting payment from the buyer, that they should demand and obtain their highest possible value in the market, is but to be expected when

we consider the nature of the transaction. That they should sometimes cheat too is natural, considering that they have parted with all that is incentive to fair dealing in any bargain, besides that experience has taught them that cheating is their only safeguard against being cheated in this.

And while we condemn women individually whom we see engaged in this degrading traffic, we should remember that in this, as in other branches of trade, there is a law of demand and supply, that the former controls the latter, which increases and decreases in proportion with it. We have shown some causes to prove that the demand in this respect is very great in France; until it decreases we surely cannot lay all the blame at the door of those whom an inexorable law compels to supply it.

The French have long boasted themselves the most civilised people on the face of the earth, and too long has the assertion received from the rest of the world at least a tacit assent. But the recognition by the state and by society of the born equality of every human being, the combination of national prosperity with perfect personal liberty, is beginning now to be established as a truer test of civilisation than perfection in the arts of sensuous enjoyment and sensual indulgence which has been arrived at before by nations whose existence is now blotted out from the history of the world.

To the fulfilment of this test France can lay no claim so long as her whole social system designedly subjugates and degrades one sex to the other. A subjugation and degradation that, though concealed under a specious show of flattery and indulgence, is nearly as complete as if the harem were a recognised domestic institution, and the knout a recognised public punishment for women in France.

The consideration of this topic may not be unworthy the attention of those who see in the equality of women with men in education and independence, and consequently in social influence, the only true basis for the establishment of improved moral relations between the sexes.

A. P.
