

VI.—*The Extension of the field for the Employment of Women.*
By Professor Houston, LL.D.

[Read, Tuesday, 19th June, 1866.]

It is always wise, and it is generally necessary, to submit to the test of experience the conclusions at which we have arrived by the path of abstract reasoning. This is what I purpose doing on the present occasion, with reference to a subject which has not been before the Society for some years, and upon which, in the interval, much light has, in my opinion, been shed by certain facts that I shall bring under your notice.

In order to bring out clearly the results of the teachings of reason and of experience on the question of extending the field of women's industry, I shall place before you a brief summary of the arguments on both sides, and examine how far they are borne out by the facts alluded to.

To a candid thinker, with no preconceived notions on the subject, it could scarcely appear otherwise than a hardship and an injustice to make an accidental circumstance, such as that of colour, birth, age, or religion, the ground of conferring any peculiar privileges or withholding any generally conceded rights. The accident of *sex* stands on the same footing as that of colour, or birth, or religion; and, *primâ facie*, therefore, it is as unjust to exclude a woman from any employment which she might be disposed to enter, as to deny to a Negro his liberty, to a Jew the right of sitting in parliament, or to a man of humble origin the opportunity of becoming a lawyer or a physician.

A *primâ facie* case being thus made out for the unrestrained admission of women to employments, the burthen of showing cause, to use a legal expression, against such admission is cast upon those who resist it. Accordingly, a great number of grounds have been assigned for continuing the existing restrictions upon female industry, and these I shall briefly indicate and comment upon.

The first argument urged against the admission of women to the employments from which they are now by law or custom excluded is, that to do so would be to take women out of their proper sphere, that is to say, the domestic circle. Now to this the replies are numerous, and in my mind, conclusive. In the first place, as was well said by the late wife of Mr. John Stuart Mill, a woman who appears to have exercised a great influence over the views of that eminent philosopher, "The proper sphere of any rational being is the highest that being is capable of filling." Unless, therefore, the domestic circle affords the highest occupation of which women are capable, which in a great many cases is little more elevated than that laid out for them by the cynical Iago, the domestic circle is not the proper sphere of women. But, furthermore, even granting it to be so, a difficulty arises from the fact that a great many women never get into that sphere at all, and a still larger number are twenty, thirty, or even forty years excluded from it. Now what is

to be done with *them*? Because they are not in their *proper* sphere, are they to be shut out from any sphere whatever? The absurdity of this is so manifest, that I have never heard it seriously proposed except once, when Dr. Hancock in this Society propounded as a solution of the difficulty a scheme at which, but that it came from so high an authority in social science, I am afraid I should have been tempted to smile. It was this:—that after a certain age ladies who had failed to effect an entrance into the domestic circle through the gate of matrimony, should be provided for at the public expense, in asylums presided over by matrons of mature years and approved experience. This plan is the only *logical* solution of the difficulty I have ever heard. Society, however, has given a solution which, if less logical, is more consonant to common sense, namely, that of permitting women whose tastes or opportunities exclude them from the “sphere” deemed proper to their sex, to engage in certain avocations on which no ban is placed. While protesting against women employing themselves in any branch of law, physic, or divinity, for instance, society has not forbidden them becoming novelists, poets, painters, musicians, or teachers; and in thus admitting necessary exceptions to its favourite theory, has sacrificed its logic at the shrine of expediency. The theory, therefore, of a proper sphere for women cannot be maintained in principle, and is not maintained in practice.

The next argument relied on by those who would exclude women from a professional or an industrial career, is that such exclusion is necessary for the purpose of preserving that delicacy and refinement which constitute so great a charm in the sex. Now to this the reply is obvious. Granting for a moment that there is a risk of diminishing the sensibility and refinement of women by admitting them to those employments from which they are now excluded, the question arises, is not this advantage, assuming it to be one, dearly bought? What is the price at which it is purchased? Hundreds and thousands of women reared in affluence are, by accidents against which they cannot provide, reduced to a state of absolute destitution. The father, or husband, or brother dies or becomes insolvent, and in an instant the comforts and luxuries that by habit had come to be regarded as necessaries, and the want of which is perhaps as keenly felt as that of necessaries in a lower rank of life, are swept away in an instant. The gently-nurtured woman upon whom this calamity falls may be deemed fortunate if she is preserved from the pangs of cold and hunger: these are but too often in store for her. I mentioned in the opening paragraph of this paper that I would submit the reasonings on this subject to the test of experience. In doing so, I shall draw freely upon the reports of an institution for the training and employment of women that has been for some years in working in this city. I allude of course to the Queen’s Institute, Molesworth-street. In the first of these reports, published in 1863, will be found the following passage, which fully bears out the statement I have made:—“The ladies who formed the classes.....had looked to domestic thrift and foresight to provide them with means of independence, and, bereft in most instances of

parental support, they came to the Society for advice and direction as well as instruction ; literally placing themselves under its guidance to choose for them an occupation that would be found suitable to their ability and to their circumstances. How much difficulty had to be encountered in furnishing these ladies, inexperienced in the ways of trade, with occupations which would secure to them the probability of self-support, may be estimated when it is stated that, though forced to earn for themselves, *they were the daughters of merchants, lawyers, clergymen, stipendiary magistrates, country gentlemen, professional men, or of men holding civil or military appointments. Thus the majority of these pupils belonged to the most helpless class of women, to whom a reverse of fortune was always poverty, sometimes beggary ; and the misfortune of want fell upon those to whom loss of position was a sorer trial than hunger, and to whom the refinements of life were as much a necessity as its comforts. Many of these ladies were found to be in such impoverished circumstances, that they were totally unable to pay the almost nominal fees charged for the classes.*"

So deeply are those at the head of the Queen's Institute impressed with the reality and the magnitude of the danger which thus impends over the daughters of the professional man, the merchant, and the gentleman of property, that they deem it their duty to urge upon parents the propriety in all cases of providing against a calamity so terrible, by having their daughters taught some useful art, and if this institution effected no other good than that of awakening people to the importance of taking this precaution, it would render a most valuable service to society.

The evil of excluding women from employment by no means ends here, however. It is not those only who (by such unforeseen misfortunes as those to which I have alluded) are plunged into misery, that suffer from the industrial disabilities under which women are placed. Those who are blessed with means are often scarcely less unhappy. Useful occupation is absolutely essential to health of body and mind. The majority of women who have no household to superintend, and are not obliged to labour for their living, have really no such occupation. Their whole life is wasted either in the vain pursuit of pleasure, or in the effort to find a career suited to their tastes. Society has a great deal to answer for in teaching women of this class that industry is unbecoming their position. Of all the lessons which reduced gentlewomen have to learn, this seems the hardest. To hardship and privation they soon learn to submit with laudable resignation, but they cling desperately to that respectability which they have been taught to associate with idleness. They fear to accept even the most genteel employment, lest they should lose their position in the circle in which they have been accustomed to move. When will society learn to regard idleness as a disgrace, and honest industry as the truest claim to respectability ? Of all the legacies of evil that feudalism has bequeathed to modern Europe this is the worst. It was that selfish and arrogant system which first robbed labour of its native dignity, and even now, though dead and buried, keeps the plunder in its tomb.

The point to which it seems most important that attention should

be directed in connection with this branch of the subject is this. The alternative is not, as is commonly assumed, between the employment and the non-employment of women, for until Dr. Hancock's plan of asylums for "unprotected females" is carried out, employment of some kind or other a very large number of women must have. The true alternative is between restricting their choice to a few laborious and underpaid employments, and allowing them to enter more easy and better remunerated ones. If the alternative were, for instance, between supporting women in independence, and suffering them to become seamstresses, there would be some force in the argument that the delicacy and refinement so charming in women would be best ensured by relieving them of the disagreeable necessity of toiling at the needle for twelve or fourteen hours a day, in a heated atmosphere, without sufficient food, as is the case with seamstresses at the present day. But the argument becomes strongly in favour of admitting women to new fields of industry when the alternative is not that just supposed, but that of forcing women to become seamstresses, or of allowing them to become wood-engravers, book-keepers, or watchmakers.

The next argument against the admission of women to any but the comparatively underpaid employments to which they are now restricted is, that they are not competent to engage in any others: that as the experiment would inevitably be a failure, it would be only a useless disturbance of the existing framework of society to allow them to try their hands at law or medicine, or the higher mechanical arts.

Now I did not come here to eulogise the sex, and therefore I shall say as little on this subject as possible, merely appealing to a few facts which will enable you to judge of the soundness of this objection.

In the first place it would strike one as a singular anomaly, that if this objection be sound, the most exalted position in the empire should be filled by a woman, and filled in a manner that, without allowing our loyalty to get the better of our judgment, we may safely say contrasts most favourably with that in which many of her predecessors discharged the duties of that high calling. Another fact which argues strongly against the soundness of this objection is that the education of the rising generation is very largely entrusted to women. I do not mean only those who choose that as their profession, but those also who seek to impress their views on society through the medium of the press. A very considerable number of the most successful novelists of the day are women, and a more powerful instrument of education, whether for good or evil, than the novel, does not exist. A very considerable portion of the contributions to the reviews are made by women, and not a few of the articles on political and civil questions in the daily papers are from the female pen. It can hardly be said that a sex which furnishes persons capable of performing tasks requiring qualities so exceptional could not turn out an average clerk and book-keeper, or even a tolerable lawyer or doctor at a pinch.

Turning now for information on this point to the reports from which I have already quoted, I find some very significant facts.

Among the employments selected by the managers of the Queen's Institute, as suitable to the circumstances of the class of women for whose benefit it had been founded, was that of telegraph clerks. A class for instruction in Telegraphy was opened in February, 1862. Fourteen pupils joined it: of these, ten were trained during the course of the year, of whom eight at once found employment. The Irish Magnetic Telegraph Company were so pleased with the efficiency of their female clerks, that they placed at the disposal of the Queen's Institute a sum of money to be paid to those pupils in the class who were sufficiently advanced to promise a speedy mastery of the difficulties of the work, and whom they nominated to stations then about to become vacant. In the following year, therefore, six more women were appointed telegraph clerks. Up to the close of the year 1864 twenty had been appointed to stations, and eight more were added in the following year. The manager of the company above referred to bears striking testimony to their efficiency, not a single complaint having ever been lodged against them; and he has been requested by the traffic managers on several Irish railways to appoint female clerks to all stations suitable for them.

Now here is an occupation in which, before the opening of the Queen's Institute, the employment of women was never dreamt of. Yet the experiment has been tried with such success that their services are, as we have seen, eagerly sought after. It is true that telegraphy is not an art very difficult of acquisition. Three months would appear from the report to be sufficient to train an apt pupil. But then most of the mechanical arts do not demand exceptional abilities. they merely require more or less time, generally indeed, I believe, much less than the seven years now commonly bestowed on them; and there is no reason why a person who has mastered an art that takes but three months to acquire, should not master another that takes three years.

Another branch of business which has been successfully opened up to women by the Queen's Institute is that of scrivenerly. This has given employment, from time to time, to about fifteen ladies on the average. It is not uninteresting to remark that an advertisement, issued by one of the leading law stationers and scriveners in London, offers training and employment in this branch of business to female apprentices. Several have also been trained in the Institute, and provided with employment through its agency, as engravers, draughtswomen, and photograph-colorers. A few have obtained commercial situations; a very large number have learned to use the sewing machine, and have turned their knowledge to profitable account. In short, during the first three years of this Society's existence, 607 pupils have been trained in it, and about 350 of these are *known* to have found employment.

Considering the novelty and difficulty of the experiment made by the founders of the Queen's Institute, I think the facts I have mentioned establish two or three important conclusions. First, they establish the fact that there is a very large number of educated women sorely in need of remunerative employment. Secondly, they prove that women of this class are capable of acquiring any ordinary

mechanical art equally well with men, provided they have the time and will bestow the pains necessary for its acquisition. The difficulties under which the Queen's Institute has laboured in its efforts to train its pupils have been so great, that its success cannot be measured at all by the number of finished workwomen it has turned out. To have succeeded even in the smallest degree is very strong evidence of the soundness of the principle on which it is based. The reports constantly recur to this topic. They dwell upon the fact that the Institute has been dealing with women of mature years, whose education has in most cases been lamentably defective; who have had no training in habits of business; whose fingers have lost the pliancy that belongs to youth; whose minds are drawn off from the art they are endeavouring to master by the cares of the present hour; who can at the utmost snatch but a short time from the pressing business of the day to attend the class in which they are instructed; and who are obliged to accept the first situation that presents itself, whether they are perfect in their trade or not.

If, in the face of these difficulties, three or four hundred women have been even moderately qualified for their respective walks in life by the training provided in the Queen's Institute, may we not safely conclude that if women were educated with the same care as boys, and were early trained in habits of business, and in the practice of some special art, they would exhibit not less skill than men?

A third inference fairly to be drawn from the facts I have adduced is, that where women are properly trained in any branch of industry, and get a fair trial, they generally give satisfaction to those who employ them, and that the difficulty of finding employment for qualified women is not so great as that of finding properly qualified women to fill the employments that offer themselves. I have been repeatedly assured of this fact by the managers of the Queen's Institute. This, however, refers more particularly to those species of employments in which there is no natural disinclination on the part of the public to employ women. In some employments this disinclination is very marked, though why it should be so is not at all clear. I do not speak now of employments attended with publicity, or other circumstances rendering them naturally unsuited to women, but to such easy and appropriate employments as that of clerks or book-keepers, for instance. But time alone can remove the prejudice against employing women in such capacities, which is the commonest practice possible on the continent; and women ought not, I think, to be discouraged from acquiring a knowledge of commercial affairs, which will always be useful in the management of a household, and will no doubt in the end become as usual a part of the education of one sex as it is of the other, seeing that the prejudice I have alluded to can hardly stand its ground against the advantage which the cheapness and efficiency of women's services would hold out to a merchant, or manufacturer, or public company. Unpromising as the prospect may be at present, I look upon this as one of the most extensive fields of industry into which women will hereafter be admitted.

One last objection to the freer admission of women into employ-

ments is all I have to notice. By admitting women into employments, it is said, you throw men out of work, and thereby cause as much distress in one quarter as you prevent in another. Now no doubt the admission of women into employments would affect prejudicially the position of male workers, though not at all to the extent which the above objection supposes. There is scarcely any social reform that does not inflict injury on some one. The shower that lays the dust for the day raises a little cloud as it falls on the dry ground. The slight and temporary inconvenience, however, is a small price to pay for the great and permanent advantage that ensues. Now the effect of a freer admission of women to employments would be as follows. Their competition would lower the wages of artisans in the particular employments to which they were admitted, but would not necessarily deprive any person of employment; for the same capital that employed the smaller number of hands at the previous high rate of wages would suffice to employ the larger number at the reduced rate. The rate of wages being thus lowered, the employer would make a higher profit than previously, and such increase of profit would promote the accumulation of capital; for the more that can be made of money the more of it will be saved for investment. But with every increase in the quantity of capital would come an increase of wages, since the capitalists who saved their money could only invest it by hiring more labour. Thus the fall of wages would only be temporary, the rate gradually rising once more, till men and women alike obtained the same remuneration as the former were accustomed to receive before the admission of the latter took place.

This chain of reasoning does not, of course, apply to the admission of women to professional occupations. In that case the earnings of the male members of the profession to which they were admitted would be reduced, unless their numbers were diminished. But the incomes of professional men are so large that they can well bear such a reduction.

One more observation, and I have done. When advocating the unrestricted admission of women to such employments as they may choose, I am not to be understood as advocating the entrance of women into all employments indiscriminately. While I advocate free choice, I should wish, and I should confidently expect, that it would be exercised with a wise discretion. There are parts of the battle field of life for which women are not by nature fitted. I do not think the inclination of any but a few perverted minds would lead them to thrust themselves into these. But there are other parts of that field from which the rigid rules of society now exclude them, but in which they might take up their position with advantage to the cause of civilization and humanity. These, were their movements left free, they would soon discover, and would shun the rest. The Institution from whose reports I have quoted so largely this evening is helping to ascertain what these departments of industry are, and how women may be best fitted to occupy them. It is quietly and unostentatiously doing great service towards the practical solution of this difficult problem, and, if I may here venture to make

a suggestion not altogether falling within the province of an essayist, that institution is well-deserving of the support of those who prefer to spend their money in giving people the means of helping themselves, than in providing relief which is merely temporary at best, and which is obtained by the recipient at the sacrifice of his or her independence.

DISCUSSION.

Dr. HANCOCK thought it a strange thing that those who entertained the views put forward by Professor Houston should ignore the family system, which was the one which nature pointed out as that upon which society should be organised. The basis of that system was that the men should provide support for the women and the children, and the women manage the domestic economy of the household. This was a proper and natural division of labour. He feared that the existing agitation for a more extended employment of women's labour arose from a selfish desire on the part of men to be relieved from the duty of supporting their female relatives. As to the asylum to which allusion have been made, his views had, no doubt unintentionally, been misrepresented. It was only to women of unexceptionable character, destitute of male relatives, that the resource he proposed was intended to be available. His plan was that any woman left destitute by the death of male relatives who should support her, might get a minimum of support from the state; in the case of the poor, from the poor rates; for all cases not met by the Poor Law, by an extension of the Concordatum Fund. Neither the workhouse test for the poor nor an asylum test for the better classes should be applied to any recipient, unless the charity was abused by misconduct. To those who misconducted themselves no relief should be given except in workhouses or asylums. Those who had near male relatives should be supported by them as a matter of right. Philanthropists, instead of seeking means for extending the field of female industry, should endeavour to obtain the repeal of the laws which prevented so many of the young men of the country, namely, those in the army, navy, police, and constabulary, taking wives. Very many of the unmarried women referred to by Mr. Houston could easily find comfortable homes if this restriction were removed.

Mr. MOWATT considered that the true cause of the surplus female population was the habits of intemperance indulged in by young men. In the gin palaces of the city there were at that moment husbands enough for all the spinsters in Dublin, each spending upon injurious stimulants what would support a wife and keep a comfortable home. If this evil were rooted out, we should hear nothing more of distressed females in search of employment.

Mr. HAUGHTON expressed himself unable to understand how a plan described as a "logical" solution of a difficulty could be inconsistent with the dictates of common sense.

THE CHAIRMAN (Sir Robert Kane, V.P.) having borne testimony to the excellent manner in which the Queen's Institute was worked,

and the amount of good it had already done, called on Professor Houston to close the discussion.

PROFESSOR HOUSTON repudiated any intention of ignoring the family relation, as Dr. Hancock had imputed to him. He was dealing with facts, and while neither admitting nor denying that the family system should be made the basis of society, merely argued that as in many cases women were not placed in that relation, they should be allowed to choose their own means of providing for themselves, and of turning such talents as they had to profitable account. For his part, he thought any woman of right feeling would refuse to become a burthen either on the public or her male relatives, so long as she felt she had the ability to earn an honourable independence.

VII.—*Proceedings of the Statistical and Social Inquiry Society of Ireland.*

NINETEENTH SESSION.—FIFTH MEETING.

[Tuesday, 24th April, 1866]

The Society met at 35, Molesworth-street, James Haughton, Esq., J.P. (V.P.) in the Chair.

Joseph John Murphy, Esq., read a paper "On the Railway Question"

W. Neilson Hancock, Esq., LL.D. read a paper "On Railways in Ireland."

The ballot having been examined, the following gentlemen were declared duly elected members of the Society:—Mr Serjeant Barry, M.P. ; Francis J. Davys, A.B., M.D.

SIXTH MEETING.

[Tuesday, 22nd May, 1866]

The Society met at 35, Molesworth-street, Edward Barrington, Esq. (V.P.) in the Chair.

Mr. David Ross read a paper entitled, "Banking considered with special reference to a strictly limited issue of Government Paper Money.

Mr. J. A. Mowatt read a paper "On Irish Taxation, and how Imperial Taxes might be adjusted so as to bear equally and equitably on all parts of the United Kingdom."

SEVENTH MEETING.

[Tuesday, 19th June, 1866.

The Society met at 35, Molesworth-street, Sir Robert Kane (V.P.) in the Chair.

Mr Alexander McDonnell read a paper entitled, "Notes on the French System of Railways."

Professor Houston read a paper "On the extension of the field or the Employment of Women."