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<THE HABIT OF FEAR.>

<Eliza Lynn Linton>

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The mind, like the body, contracts tricks and habits which in time

become automatic and involuntary--habits of association, tricks of

repetition, of which the excess is monomania, but which, without

attaining to quite that extreme, become more or less masters of the

brain and directors of the thoughts. And, of all these tricks of the

mind, the habit of fear is the most insidious and persistent. It is

seldom that any one who has once given in to it is able to clear

himself of it again. However unreasonable it may be, the trick clings,

and it would take an exceptionally strong intellect to be convinced of

its folly and learn the courage of common-sense. But this is just the

intellect which does not allow itself to contract the habit in the

beginning; a coward being for the most part a washy, weak kind of

being, with very little backbone anyhow. We do not mean by this fear

that which is physical and personal only, though this is generally the

sole idea which people have of the word; but moral and mental

cowardice as well. Personal fear indeed, is common enough, and as

pitiable as it is common; and we are ashamed to say that it is not

confined to women, though naturally it is more predominant with them

than with men.

As for women, the tyranny of fear lies very heavy on them, taking the

flavour out of many a life which else would be perfectly happy; being

often the only bitter drop in a cup full of sweetness. But how bitter

that drop is!--bitter enough to destroy all the sweetness of the rest.

Some women live in the perpetual presence of dread, both mental and

personal. It surrounds them like an atmosphere; it clothes them like a

garment; day by day, and from night to morning, it dogs their steps

and sits like a nightmare on their hearts; it is their very root work

of sensation, and they could as soon live without food as live without

fear.

Ludicrous as many of their terrors are, we still cannot help pitying

these poor self-made martyrs of imaginary danger. Take that most

familiar of all forms of fear among women, the fear of burglars, and

let us imagine for a moment the horror of the life which is haunted by

a nightly dread--by a terror that comes with as unfailing regularity

as the darkness--and measure, if we can, the amount of anguish that

must be endured before death comes to take off the torture. There are

many women to whom night is simply this time of torture, never

varying, never relieved. They dare not lock their doors, because then

they would be at the mercy of the man who sooner or later is to come

in at the window; and if they hear the boards creak or the furniture

crack they are in agonies because of the man who they are sure is in

the house, and who will come in at the door. They cannot sleep if they

have not looked all about the room--under the bed, behind the

curtains, into the closet, where perhaps a dress hanging a little

fantastically gives them a nervous start that lasts for the night.

But though they search so diligently they would probably faint on the

spot if they so much as saw the heels of the housebreaker they are

looking for. Yet you cannot reason with these poor creatures. You

cannot deny the fact that burglars have been found before now secreted

in bedrooms; and you cannot pooh-pooh the murders and housebreakings

which are reported in the newspapers; so you have nothing to say to

their argument that things which have happened once may happen again,

and that there is no reason why they specially should be exempt from a

misfortune to which others have been subjected. But you feel that

their terrors are just so much pith and substance taken out of their

strength; and that if they could banish the fear of burglars from

their minds they would be so much the more valuable members of

society, while the exorcism of their dismal demon would be so much the

better for themselves.

It is the same in everything. If they are living in the country, and

go up to London lodgings, they take the ground floor for fear of fire

and being burnt alive in their beds. If they go from London to the

country they see an escaped convict or a murderer in every ragged

reaper asking for work, or every tramp that begs for broken victuals

at the door. The country to them is full of dangers. In the shooting

season they are sure they will be shot if they go near a wood or a

turnip-field. They think they will be gored to death if they meet a

meek-eyed cow going placidly through the lane to her milking; and you

might as well try to march them up to the cannon's mouth as induce

them to cross a field where cattle are grazing. If they are driving,

and the horses are going at full trot, they say they are running away

and clutch the driver's arm nervously. As travellers they are in a

state of not wholly unreasonable apprehension the whole time the

railway journey lasts. They wait at Folkestone for days for a smooth

crossing; and when they are on board they call a breeze a gale, and

make sure they are bound for the bottom if the sea chops enough to

rock the boat so much as a cradle. If they go over a Swiss pass they

say their prayers and shut their eyes till it is over; and they are

horribly afraid of banditti on every foot of Italian ground, besides

firmly believing in the complicity with brigands of all the innkeepers

and \_vetturini\_.

Their fear extends to all who belong to them, for whom they conjure up

scenes of deadly disaster so soon as they are out of sight. Their

fancy is faceted, like the eyes of a fly, and they worry themselves

and every one else by exaggerating every chance of danger into a

certainty of destruction. When an epidemic is abroad, they are sure

all the children will take it; and if they have taken it, they are

sure they will never get over it. In illness indeed, those people who

have allowed themselves to fall into the habit of fear are especially

full of foreboding; not because they are more loving, more sympathetic

than others, but because they are more timid and less hopeful. If you

believe them, no one will recover who is in any way seriously

attacked; and the smallest ailment in themselves or their friends is

the sure forerunner of a mortal sickness. They make no allowance for

the elastic power of human nature; and they dislike hope and courage

in others, thinking you unfeeling in exact proportion to your

cheerfulness.

Morally this same habit of fear deteriorates, because it weakens and

narrows, the whole nature. So far from following Luther's famous

advice--Sin boldly and leave the rest to God--their sin is their very

fear, their unconquerable distrust. These are the people who regard

our affections as snares and all forms of pleasure as so many waymarks

on the road to perdition--who would narrow the circle of human life to

the smallest point both of feeling and action, because of the sin in

which, according to them, the whole world is steeped. They see guilt

everywhere, but innocence not at all. Their minds are set to the trick

of terror; and fear of the power of the devil and the anger of God

weighs on them like an iron chain from which there is no release.

This is not so much from delicacy of conscience as from simple moral

cowardice; for you seldom find these very timid people lofty-minded or

capable of any great act of heroism. On the contrary, they are

generally peevish and always selfish; self-consideration being the

tap-root of their fears, though the cause is assigned to all sorts of

pretty things, such as acute sensibilities, keen imagination, bad

health, tender conscience, delicate nerves--to anything in fact but

the real cause, a cowardly habit of fear produced by continual moral

selfishness, by incessant thought of and regard for themselves.

Nothing is so depressing as the society of a timid person, and nothing

is so infectious as fear. Live with any one given up to an eternal

dread of possible dangers and disasters, and you can scarcely escape

the contagion, nor, however brave you may be, maintain your

cheerfulness and faculty of faith. Indeed, as timid folks crave for

sympathy in their terrors--that very craving being part of their

malady of fear--you cannot show them a cheerful countenance under pain

of offence, and seeming to be brutal in your disregard of what so

tortures them. Their fears may be simply absurd and irrational, yet

you must sympathize with them if you wish even to soothe; argument or

common-sense demonstration of their futility being so much mental

ingenuity thrown away.

Fear breeds suspicion too, and timid people are always suspecting ill

of some one. The deepest old diplomatist who has probed the folly and

evil of the world from end to end, and who has sharpened his wits at

the expense of his trust, is not more full of suspicion of his kind

than a timid, superstitious, world-withdrawn man or woman given up to

the tyranny of fear. Every one is suspected more or less, but chiefly

lawyers, servants and all strangers. Any demonstration of kindness or

interest at all different from the ordinary jogtrot of society fills

them with undefined suspicion and dread; and, fear being in some

degree the product of a diseased imagination, the 'probable' causes

for anything they do not quite understand would make the fortune of a

novel-writer if given him for plots. If any one wants to hear

thrilling romances in course of actual enactment, let him go down

among remote and quiet-living country people, and listen to what they

have to say of the chance strangers who may have established

themselves in the neighbourhood, and who, having brought no letters of

introduction, are not known by the aborigines. The Newgate Calendar or

Dumas' novels would scarcely match the stories which fear and

ignorance have set afoot.

Fearful folk are always on the brink of ruin. They cannot wait to see

how things will turn before they despair; and they cannot hope for the

best in a bad pass. They are engulfed in abysses which never open, and

they die a thousand deaths before the supreme moment actually arrives.

The smallest difficulties are to them like the straws placed

crosswise over which no witch could pass; the beneficent action of

time, either as a healer of sorrow or a revealer of hidden mercies, is

a word of comfort they cannot accept for themselves, how true soever

it may be for others; the doctrine that chances are equal for good as

well as for bad is what they will not understand; and they know of no

power that can avert the disaster, which perhaps is simply a

possibility not even probable, and which their own fears only have

arranged. If they are professional men, having to make their way, they

are for ever anticipating failure for to-day and absolute destruction

for to-morrow; and they bemoan the fate of the wife and children sure

to be left to poverty by their untimely decease, when the chances are

ten to one in favour of the apportioned threescore and ten years. Life

is a place of suffering here and a place of torment hereafter; yet

they often wish to die, reversing Hamlet's decision by thinking the

mystery of unknown ills preferable to the reality of those they have

on hand.

Over such minds as these the vaticinations of such a prophet as Dr.

Cumming have peculiar power; and they accept his gloomy

interpretations of the Apocalypse with a faith as unquestioning as

that with which they accept the Gospels. They have a predilection

indeed for all terrifying prophecies, and cast the horoscope of the

earth and foretell the destruction of the universe with marvellous

exactitude. Their minds are set to the trick of foreboding, and they

live in the habit of fear, as others live in the habit of hope, of

resignation, or of careless good-humour and indifference. There is

nothing to be done with them. Like drinking, or palsy, or a nervous

headache, or a congenital deformity, the habit is hopeless when once

established; and those who have begun by fear and suspicion and

foreboding will live to the end in the atmosphere they have created

for themselves. The man or woman whose mind is once haunted by the

nightly fear of a secreted burglar will go on looking for his heels so

long as eyesight and the power of locomotion continue; and no failure

in past Apocalyptic interpretations will shake the believer's faith in

those of which the time for fulfilment has not yet arrived. It is a

trick which has rooted, a habit that has crystallized by use into a

formation; and there it must be left, as something beyond the power of

reason to remedy or of experience to destroy.