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<THE SHRIEKING SISTERHOOD.>

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We by no means put it forward as an original remark when we say that

Nature does her grandest works of construction in silence, and that

all great historical reforms have been brought about either by long

and quiet preparation, or by sudden and authoritative action. The

inference from which is, that no great good has ever been done by

shrieking; that much talking necessarily includes a good deal of

dilution; and that fuss is never an attribute of strength nor

coincident with concentration. Whenever there has been a very deep and

sincere desire on the part of a class or an individual to do a thing,

it has been done not talked about; where the desire is only

halfhearted, where the judgment or the conscience is not quite clear

as to the desirableness of the course proposed, where the chief

incentive is love of notoriety and not the intrinsic worth of the

action itself--personal \_kudos\_, and not the good of a cause nor the

advancement of humanity--then there has been talk; much talk;

hysterical excitement; a long and prolonged cackle; and heaven and

earth called to witness that an egg has been laid wherein lies the

germ of a future chick--after proper incubation.

Necessarily there must be much verbal agitation if any measure is to

be carried the fulcrum of which is public opinion. If you have to stir

the dry bones you must prophesy to them in a loud voice, and not leave

off till they have begun to shake. Things which can only be known by

teaching must be spoken of, but things which have to be done are

always better done the less the fuss made about them; and the more

steadfast the action, the less noisy the agent. Purpose is apt to

exhale itself in protestations, and strength is sure to exhaust itself

by a flux of words. But at the present day what Mr. Carlyle called the

Silences are the least honoured of all the minor gods, and the babble

of small beginnings threatens to become intolerable. We all 'think

outside our brains,' and the result is not conducive to mental vigour.

It is as if we were to set a plant to grow with its heels in the air,

and then look for roots, flowers and fruit, by the process of

excitation and disclosure.

One of our quarrels with the Advanced Women of our generation is the

hysterical parade they make about their wants and their intentions. It

never seems to occur to them that the best means of getting what they

want is to take it, when not forbidden by the law--to act, not to

talk; that all this running hither and thither over the face of the

earth, this feverish unrest and loud acclaim are but the dilution of

purpose through much speaking, and not the right way at all; and that

to hold their tongues and do would advance them by as many leagues as

babble puts them back. A small knot of women, 'terribly in earnest,'

could move multitudes by the silent force of example. One woman alone,

quietly taking her life in her own hands and working out the great

problem of self-help and independence practically, not merely stating

it theoretically, is worth a score of shrieking sisters frantically

calling on men and gods to see them make an effort to stand upright

without support, with interludes of reproach to men for the want of

help in their attempt. The silent woman who quietly calculates her

chances and measures her powers with her difficulties so as to avoid

the probability of a fiasco, and who therefore achieves a success

according to her endeavour, does more for the real emancipation of her

sex than any amount of pamphleteering, lecturing, or petitioning by

the shrieking sisterhood can do. Hers is deed not declamation; proof

not theory; and it carries with it the respect always accorded to

success.

And really if we think of it dispassionately, and carefully dissect

the great mosaic of hindrances which women say makes up the pavement

of their lives, there is very little which they may not do if they

like--and can. They have already succeeded in reopening for themselves

the practice of medicine, for one thing; and this is an immense

opportunity if they know how to use it. A few pioneers, unhelped for

the most part, steadily and without shrieking, stormed the barricades

of the hospitals and dissecting-rooms; heroically bearing the shower

of hard-mouthed missiles with which they were pelted, and

successfully forcing their way notwithstanding. But the most

successful of them are those who held on with least excitement and who

strove more than they declaimed; while others, by constitution

belonging to the shrieking sisterhood, have comparatively failed, and

have mainly succeeded in making themselves ridiculous. After some

pressure but very little cackle--for here too the work was wanted, the

desire real, and the workers in earnest--female colleges on a liberal

and extended system of education have been established, and young

women have now an opportunity of showing what they can do in brain

work.

It is no longer by the niggardliness of men and the fault of an

imperfect system if they prove intellectually inferior to the stronger

sex; they have their dynamometer set up for them, and all they have to

do is to register their relative strength--and abide the issue. All

commerce, outside the Stock Exchange, is open to them equally with

men; and there is nothing to prevent their becoming merchants, as they

are now petty traders, or setting up as bill-brokers, commission

agents, or even bankers--which last profession, according to a

contemporary, they have actually adopted in New York, some ladies

there having established a bank, which, so far as they have yet gone,

they are said to conduct with deftness and ready arithmetic.

In literature they have competitors in men, but no monopolists.

Indeed, they themselves have become almost the monopolists of the

whole section of light literature and fiction; while nothing but

absolute physical and mental incapacity prevents their taking the

charge of a journal, and working it with female editor, sub-editor,

manager, reporters, compositors, and even news-girls to sell the

second edition at omnibus doors and railway stations. If a set of

women chose to establish a newspaper and work it amongst themselves,

no law could be brought to bear against them; and if they made it as

philosophical as some, or as gushing as others, they might enter into

a formidable rivalry with the old-established. They would have a fair

hearing, or rather reading; they would not be 'nursed' nor hustled,

and they would get just as much success as they deserved. To be sure,

they do not yet sit on the Bench nor plead at the Bar. They are not in

Parliament, and they are not even voters; while, as married women with

unfriendly husbands and no protection-order, they have something to

complain of, and wrongs which are in a fair way of being righted if

the shrieking sisterhood does not frighten the world prematurely. But,

despite these restrictions, they have a very wide circle wherein they

can display their power, and witch the world with noble deeds, if they

choose--and as some have chosen.

Of the representative 'working-women' in England, we find none who

have shrieked on platforms nor made an hysterical parade of their

work. Quietly, and with the dignity which comes by self-respect and

the consciousness of strength, they have done what it was in their

hearts to do; leaving the world to find out the value of their

labours, and to applaud or deride their independence. Mrs. Somerville

asked no man's leave to study science and make herself a distinguished

name as the result; nor did she find the need of any more special

organization than what the best books, a free press and first-rate

available teaching offered. Miss Martineau dived with more or less

success into the forbidding depths of the 'dismal science,' at a time

when political economy was shirked by men and considered as

essentially unfeminine as top-boots and tobacco; and she was

confessedly an advanced Liberal when to be a high Tory was part of the

whole duty of woman. Miss Nightingale undertook the care of wounded

soldiers without any more publicity than was absolutely necessary for

the organization of her staff, and with not so much as one shriek.

Rosa Bonheur laughed at those who told her that animal painting was

unwomanly, and that she had better restrict herself to flowers and

heads, as became the \_jeune demoiselle\_ of conventional life; but she

did not publish her programme of independence, nor take the world into

her confidence and tell them of her difficulties and defiance. The

Lady Superintendents of our own various sisterhoods have organized

their communities and performed their works of charity with very faint

blare of trumpets indeed; and we might enumerate many more who have

quietly lived the life of action and independence of which others

have only raved, and who have done while their sisters shrieked. These

are the women to be respected, whether we sympathize with their line

of action or not; having shown themselves to be true workers, capable

of sustained effort, and therefore worthy of the honour which belongs

to strength and endurance.

Of one thing women may be very sure, though they invariably deny it;

the world is glad to take good work from any one who will supply it.

The most certain patent of success is to deserve it; and if women will

prove that they can do the world's work as well as men, they will

share with them in the labour and the reward; and if they do it better

they will distance them. The appropriation of fields of labour is not

so much a question of selfishness as of (hitherto) proved fitness; but

if, in times to come, women can show better harvesting than men, can

turn out more finished, more perfected, results of any kind, the

world's custom will flow to them by the force of natural law, and they

will have the most to do of that which they can do the best. If they

wish to educate public opinion to accept them as equals with men, they

can only do so by demonstration, not by shrieks. Even men, who are

supposed to inherit the earth and to possess all the good things of

life, have to do the same thing.

Every young man yet untried is only in the position of every woman;

and, granting that he has not the deadweight of precedent and

prejudice against him, he yet has to win his spurs before he can wear

them. But women want theirs given to them without winning; and

moreover, ask to be taught how to wear them when they have got them.

They want to be received as masters before they have served their

apprenticeship, and to be put into office without passing an

examination or submitting to competition. They scream out for a clear

stage and favour superadded; and they ask men to shackle their own

feet, like Lightfoot in the fairy tale, that they may then be

handicapped to a more equal running. They do not remember that their

very demand for help vitiates their claim to equality; and that if

they were what they assume to be, they would simply take without leave

asked or given, and work out their own social salvation by the

irrepressible force of a concentrated will and in the silence of

conscious strength.

While the shrieking sisterhood remains to the front, the world will

stop its ears; and for every hysterical advocate 'the cause' loses a

rational adherent and gains a disgusted opponent. It is our very

desire to see women happy, noble, fitly employed and well remunerated

for such work as they can do, which makes us so indignant with the

foolish among them who obscure the question they pretend to elucidate,

and put back the cause which they say they advance. The earnest and

practical workers among women are a very different class from the

shriekers; but we wish the world could dissociate them more clearly

than it does at present, and discriminate between them, both in its

censure and its praise.