

V.—*Employment of Women in Ireland.*—By Edward Gibson, A. M.,
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[Read on Tuesday, 24th December 1861.]

THE subject of the employment of women has been so long and so frequently discussed, and all its arguments have been so recently considered at the meeting of the Social Science Association in this city, August, 1861, that I shall not occupy the time of the meeting in proving facts which are no longer denied, and demonstrating what are now admitted to be truisms. I shall assume the advisability of not limiting educated women to obtaining subsistence by the one overstocked profession of governess; and also that the sex of a woman, though it may be a misfortune, is not a crime. With these humble assumptions I shall briefly lay before the Society what has been done in Ireland with regard to women's employment. In last August, at the Social Science Association held in Dublin, there were several most important papers on the subject of the employment of women read. Those, however, probably which attracted the most notice were two contributed and read by Miss Bessie R. Parkes and Miss Emily Faithfull, and that notice is to be ascribed not so much to the undoubted ability of these ladies, as to the *character* of the information they conveyed. They assumed that their claims were recognized, and told us the practical results which had ensued. One told, with singular modesty, her own establishment of the Victoria Press, where women are exclusively employed; the other told us of the thousands of educated women in England, who have thronged with a new wild hope to the registry of the society in Langham-place, London, and how their strong systematized efforts have placed many above both famine and temptation, as law copiers, lithographers, superintendants, &c.; whilst, by an admirable organization, others have been sent to some of our colonies. These papers showed that the movement was not, what many thought, all talk; that silently they had "acted in the living present," and that they had good results to tell of. Facts are stubborn and provocative. An immense meeting was convened in the Solicitors' Room, in the Four Courts, on the 20th of August; the result of that meeting was the establishment of the Irish branch of the Society for promoting the Employment of Educated Women, under the presidency of Lord Brougham; and one of my principal objects this evening is to tell you what this branch society has been doing. It has just issued its first quarterly report from its offices, 43, Grafton-street, and on its perusal few will be disposed to deny that it has, at all events, got into good working order. It must be remembered that the movement had been hitherto altogether confined to England; that it was little known, and less liked in Ireland; and that in Ireland, probably more than in any other country, sympathetic associations and prejudices regard with greater favour and compassion a starving than a struggling woman. We worship those we martyr; those who decline

the privilege we ridicule. In the teeth of all these difficulties the Irish branch society entered on its labours, and an extract from the report will best explain them :—

“At the first meeting of the committee it was proposed that the society should chiefly constitute a training society, as the main hindrance to the employment of women in business-life, as earners, arises from the unfitness of their education as a preparatory training, and from the habit of waiting until misfortune overtakes them to turn their attention to working for themselves.

“In pursuance of the plan then adopted, the committee determined to deviate so far from the system of the London society as to endeavour to concentrate the operations of the society, so that the training classes should be brought under the immediate care of the committee. . . . The committee felt that by setting earnestly to work they would enlist public sympathy, and that by having some tangible result to show for their labours they would best deserve it. On the 14th of October a book-keeping and arithmetic class was opened, with twelve pupils, now increased to sixteen ; some of these ladies, already engaged in business, desirous of improvement ; some of them, working in the establishments of fathers and husbands ; some, seeking the necessary training preparatory to entering situations. A writing class has been formed to enable ladies to write a clerk-like hand.

“On the 1st of November an overseers' class was opened, the committee finding a demand to exist for women competent to undertake the superintendance of workrooms where women are employed ; in this class the cutting out of work, giving it out, and keeping the accounts of a workroom with correctness and regularity are taught. The sewing machine, as a necessary element, has been introduced, and machines of the best description have been purchased for the workroom.

“The present accommodation being insufficient to carry out so considerable a branch, the class has been divided into morning and evening classes ; sixteen commenced with the opening, and daily applications are made for admittance into each. . . . Believing the trade branches of art peculiarly suitable occupations for Irishwomen, arrangements have been made for a class in which the art of engraving in gold, silver, ivory, &c., is taught ; and the committee hope a few ladies of working ability may find this a desirable trade, and one capable of being conducted at home, which, as a rule, the operations of business in other trades rarely permit.”

“A class of lithographers has been placed in the Art School of the Royal Dublin Society, for preliminary teaching, previous to introducing the pupils into the regular work of the trade, this course appearing to be a prudent precaution needed as a test of the fitness of the pupils.

“Desirous to secure for the ladies who are about to adopt law copying as a profession, respectable and regular employment, this class will be placed with a leading law stationer.

“The manufacture of *artificial flowers* having been suggested as a suitable trade in which educated women might be employed, the

Managing Committee are engaged in prosecuting inquiries into the prospects existing for such business.

“The operations of the London society with regard to emigration have been so successful, and their arrangements of so advantageous an order, that the committee of the Irish branch have availed themselves of the first opportunity presented by the parent society, and have determined to send two ladies with the emigrants to proceed from London to Port Natal, on the 3rd of January.”

This extract from the report I cannot but regard as most satisfactory, telling of successes already obtained in opening *some* suitable employments; and also the existence of an organization which, if even passively supported by the public, will soon enable Irishwomen to earn their bread under happier conditions than at present. The spirit breathed through the report is noteworthy; it is firm, energetic, hopeful, inspired by the “chivalry of labour;” and there is none of that little eager, inquisitive, prying, bustling mind so generally charged against woman’s efforts. It might have been well if the word “educated” had been left out of the title, as it apparently narrows too much the sphere of its usefulness; but a ready excuse for the assumption of this special character may be found in the peculiarly wretched condition of that class. A sounder objection, however, it is conceived, can be taken to the mention made of emigration. Although it is eminently desirable that there should be a suitable organization by which women of the better classes could emigrate; although when young girls are forced by necessity to emigrate *alone*, the name of some such society affords a much-needed protection; still, what should be the very first principles of women’s employment societies oppose its adoption amongst even its indirect objects. In the common arguments in favour of the emigration efforts of such societies there is a two-fold fallacy, at all events, as regards Ireland:—First, it is said that as the colonies have thousands of men too many, and we have thousands of women too many, for once economic science might obtain a beautiful triumph, and demand and supply join hands in indissoluble wedlock. Emigration has a double aspect, as the colony or the mother country is regarded. It is obvious that the colonies would be socially and economically advantaged by an extensive female immigration, and it is this one aspect of the question, this one concentrated gain, that has exclusively rivetted attention. As regards Ireland emigration has been already overdone; but were it not so, it is surely not an adequate remedy for the parent society in London, or the branch one here, to strain their energies to send out some half-dozen ladies each year, at an expense of some £25 each. The colonies cry out for thousands; they are sent unites, and educated ones too. But 2ndly, for an employment society to take up emigration is at once to acknowledge weakness. It is formed and supported as a means of elevating the condition of women at home, to get them some suitable employment. Emigration, on the other hand, would ship them away to the colonies, not for the sake of new occupations, but to enable them, at great expense, to follow the old ones of wives and mothers. Thus, in reality, the primal object of the society, the employment

of women in England and Ireland, is lost sight of ; and on this account I think emigration should be altogether expunged from the objects of the society,—not because it is undesirable, but because it is foreign and alien to them. I acknowledge freely and fully the advantages of emigration *generally*, and only deny that it is an appropriate object for an employment society.* Before I conclude, I would wish to state clearly what class of women demand employment, and what class of work they seek. Women are divisible into classes : those in families, wives, mothers, and also the daughters of affluent fathers ; secondly, those not wives, not mothers, who feel either a liking for work or a necessity for work. As to the first class, they need not the efforts of any society to procure them employment ; if a woman is a wife or a mother, her first, her chiefest, her most natural duty is to her family and home. The family principle is so deeply rooted in our nature, so supported by our sympathies and our memories, that we may and do confidently rely on its permanence. But these objections which overwhelmingly apply to the employment of wives, and women at the head of families, cannot at all weaken the claim of all other women to earn their bread at whatever pursuits they can. When a woman is cast upon the world by change of fortune or the death of relatives, every honest livelihood should be thrown open to aid her in her struggle. What really happens ? All employments are closed to her, except two or three, which are thoroughly overstocked, and far from desirable.

Sometimes this question of the employment of women is looked on as a very narrow one, while in reality there are in Great Britain (I do not know the Irish numbers) some 2,000,000 women dependant for their subsistence on their exertions. The strongest and bitterest opponent of this movement cannot say that their condition is such as it should be. "It is a terrible incident of our social existence," says the *Times*, "that the resources for gaining a livelihood left open to women are so few. At present, the language practically held by modern society to destitute women may be resolved into, marry—stitch—die—or do worse." This should not be so. My contention is very narrow, and I submit it is unanswerable. The market for woman's labour is confined, by tradition and fashion, within such limits that the supply is altogether superabundant, and to give this immense supply a healthy circulation more employment should be thrown open. As to what employments should give this liberty, that must, more or less, be proved experimentally. Some, which I shall mention, are obviously suitable, while others do not appear so appropriate ; but an authoritative judgment cannot be pronounced one way or the other, as to suitability, propriety, or capacity, till they have been given a trial. Let it not be forgotten that this is an infant movement, gradually developing and shaping ; that, though having for an object the condition of one-half the human race, a vast and great responsibility, it speaks modestly, and its first demand is most humble ; "If you will not help us, at all

* *Vide* "The Emigration of Educated Women," by Maria S. Rye, a paper read at the Social Science Congress in Dublin, 1861.

events give us a trial, and we will speedily prove whether we are what *you* say, or what *we* say."

On the subject of professions I am well aware how many are closed to them, but I cannot see any objection to the society lately formed in London, under the Bishop of London, for giving them some clerical employment, and instituting an order of deaconesses, —a class like the *beguinage* of the continent, whose character is not indelible, and who can, if they wish, after a time return to secular pursuits. As to the medical profession, I decline to enter into the controversy as to whether some of its largest special branches are not peculiarly suited for women; the eminent success of Dr. Elizabeth Blackwell, the only registered female physician, however, shows that they are not decidedly incapable. There is, however, an opening for a large class of women in the minor departments of general medical practice; skilled nurses, dressers, &c., specially trained, would find ready and ample employment either in our public, civil, or military hospitals. But it is not to the church or the medical profession that women must, in the main, look for employment. Law clerks and accountants, they have in London shown, they can readily become. They are obtaining an entrance into telegraph offices, and into the watchmaking and otherscientific and more refined trades. Flower making, porcelain painting, and generally all branches of decorative art seem most appropriate; while it is hoped that a better mercantile education, a sounder knowledge of the elements of arithmetic and book-keeping, will soon prevent ignorance being reckoned among the strong barriers to the movement—thus women might act as superintendents in women's shops, or in factory rooms where women are employed; as ticket issuers (as on the French lines of railway) and a host of other posts. At present their difficulty is want of education, and women will require to be trained in their youth for these pursuits, just as boys are, for whatever profession or trade they are destined to, and it is very unreasonable to expect great success in the present generation of women, who have not had the advantage of a special training and education.

The greatest obstacle to a more extended range of employment for women is a fear, more felt than experienced, that it would, by increasing competition in the labour market, lower the wages of men. This is an unfair, one-sided, and ungenerous way of looking at the question. It is so palpably unjust to urge that men's wages should be kept up by keeping women's down, that it is rarely mentioned without wordy qualifications. If there is a burden to be borne it should not be all placed on the woman's shoulders. The labour fund belongs to all labourers, male as well as female; and the labour market should be thrown open to all comers. If women are inefficient workers, they won't be employed; while, if they are capable, it would be a crying injustice to bid them be idle and starve because they are not men.

Women who have raised themselves to eminence have done so *not* by our institutions, but in spite of them. The education which fashion imperiously accords to women is narrow and *uniform*. The daughters of a rich gentleman and the daughter of a poor gentleman receive an education similar in kind, differing only in degree. A

girl—a gentleman's daughter in particular—is never given any special education to fit her for any one trade or occupation. The father, with a narrow income, very often dependent on his life, hugs the idea that he can support his daughters in a good position (which means an idle one) during his life, and that, very probably, they will be settled or married before he dies. He is afraid to ask himself the question, What if they are not settled? It is a question that often arises, and always in the hour of the sorest distress and the bitterest need. The good of a society like that lately introduced into Ireland is to bring fathers seriously to ask themselves, are they justified in staking their daughters' welfare on the chance of a marriage, when a moderate special education and an industrial turn given to their minds would not only increase that chance, but also give them a permanent security against distress? I cannot better support my statement than by reading the closing paragraph of the report already alluded to:—"A little familiarity with the registry work has proved that until want is actual and present, but few young women are wise enough to prepare for the future; when the struggle for subsistence is so fierce that they cannot give the time required for sufficient training, they present themselves and ask *immediate* employment. The inevitable result of this is the failure of women's efforts to maintain themselves, the disappointment of employers, and their final distrust and doubt of the possibility of rendering women available assistants in trade. If parents will be persuaded to consider the subject deeply, much reform must arise. But it is with public opinion the remedy for this state of things rests, and the society is confident that to the sensible and far-sighted portion of the public the appeal will not be made in vain."

VI.—*Some Remarks upon Mrs. Hannah Archer's Scheme for befriending Orphan Pauper Girls.* By Mark S. O'Shaughnessy, (Barrister-at-Law.)

[Read Friday, February 21st, 1862.]

It is one of the happiest features of our social condition that men are daily more and more acknowledging the advantages of women's co-operation in active public work, and that the number is daily increasing of educated women, who seek out the means of exercising their peculiar gifts and qualifications in schemes of practical utility. The value of the communion of labour is being acknowledged; woman's true place in the economy of society is more justly defined; and the strength and support which simplicity of design, sincerity of purpose, and aptitude for detail give to every work, are sure to be found in the earnest co-operation which intelligent, and active-minded, and benevolent women can give. Our literature is sensibly affected by their influence. Fiction, the great popular educator of modern times, has acquired, since women have taken their places in the front rank of its writers, a healthy, practical tone; and the novel of the