

## Chapter IX

### The pernicious effects of the unnatural distinctions established in society

Most of the evils and vices that make this world such a dreary scene to the contemplative mind flow—as from a poisoned fountain—from the respect paid to property. For it is in the most polished society that stinking reptiles and venomous serpents lurk under the nasty foliage; and there is voluptuousness pampered by the still sultry air, slackening every good disposition before it has time to ripen into virtue.

One class presses on another; for they are all aiming to get respect on account of their property; and once they have that it will bring them the respect that is really due only to talents and virtue. Men neglect their human duties, yet are treated like demi-gods; religion is also separated from morality by a ceremonial veil; yet men are surprised that the world is, almost literally speaking, a den of cheats or oppressors.

There's a shrewd truth in the homely proverb that whoever the devil finds idle he will employ. And what can hereditary wealth and titles produce except habitual idleness? Man is so constituted that he can attain a proper use of his faculties only by using them, and he won't use them unless the wheels are first set in motion by some kind of necessity. Virtue also can be acquired only by the performance of one's duties to others; but the importance of these sacred duties will hardly be felt by someone who is cajoled out of his humanity by the flattery of sycophants. There must be more equality established in society, or morality will never gain ground; and this virtuous equality will not rest firmly even when founded on a rock, if one half of mankind are chained to its bottom by fate, for they will be continually undermining it through ignorance or pride.

You can't expect virtue from women until they are to some extent independent of men; indeed, you can't expect the strength of natural affection that would make them good wives and good mothers. While they absolutely depend on their husbands, they will be cunning, mean, and selfish, and the men who can be gratified by the fawning fondness of spaniel-like affection don't have much delicacy—because love is not to be bought. . . .; its silken wings are instantly shrivelled up when anything is sought other than a return in kind. But while wealth enervates men, and women live (so to speak) by their personal charms,

how can we expect them to perform the ennobling duties that equally require exertion and self-denial? Hereditary property perverts the mind, and the unfortunate victims of hereditary property (if I may call them 'victims'), swathed from their birth, seldom get either body or mind moving; so they view everything through one medium, and that a false one; so they can't tell what true merit and happiness consist in. False, indeed, must be the light when the drapery of situation hides the man, and makes him stalk in masquerade, dragging from one scene of dissipation to another the nerveless limbs that hang with stupid listlessness, and rolling round the vacant eye that plainly tells us that there is no mind at home.

My point is that a society isn't properly organized if it doesn't compel men and women to perform their respective duties, by making that performance their only route to being viewed by their fellow creatures in the way that every human being wants to be viewed. The respect that is paid to wealth and mere personal charms is a true north-easterly blast that blights the tender blossoms of affection and virtue. Nature has wisely attached affections to duties, to make the work sweeter and to give to the exertions of reason the vigour that only the heart can give. But when someone who doesn't perform the duties that go with a certain affection nevertheless puts on the affection merely because it is the trade-mark of a certain kind of character, this is one of the empty compliments that vice and folly are obliged to pay to virtue and the real nature of things.

For example: when a woman is admired for her beauty, and allows herself to be so intoxicated by the admiration she receives that she neglects to discharge the indispensable duty of a mother, she sins against herself by neglecting to develop an affection that would equally tend to make her useful and happy. True happiness—I mean all the contentment and virtuous satisfaction that can be snatched in this imperfect state—must arise from well-regulated affections; and an affection includes a duty. Men aren't aware of the misery they cause, and the vicious weakness they encourage, by only inciting women to make themselves pleasing; they don't consider that they are making natural and artificial duties [duties arising in nature and duties arising from social norms] clash by sacrificing the comfort and respectability of a woman's life to voluptuous notions of beauty, when in nature they all harmonize.

It would be a cold-hearted husband, or one made unnatural by early debauchery, who didn't feel more delight at seeing his child breast-fed

by its mother than the most artful wanton tricks could ever raise; yet wealth leads women to spurn this natural way of cementing the matrimonial tie and weaving esteem in with fonder recollections. . . . The maternal care of a reasonable, affectionate woman puts us on her side; and the chastened dignity with which a mother returns the caresses that she and her child receive from a father who has been fulfilling the serious duties of his position is not only worthy of respect but is a beautiful sight. . . . I have viewed with pleasure a woman nursing her children, and performing the duties of her position with, perhaps, merely a servant maid to take off her hands the servile part of the household business. I have seen her prepare herself and children, with only the luxury of cleanliness, to receive her husband who, returning home weary in the evening, found smiling babes and a clean hearth. . . .

While my benevolence has been gratified by contemplating this artless picture, I have thought that a couple of this description. . . . possessed all that life could give. Raised above abject poverty enough not to be obliged to think about every farthing they spend, and having enough to save them from having to manage a frigid system of economy that narrows both heart and mind. In my plain thoughts I don't know what else is needed to make this the happiest as well as the most respectable situation in the world, except for a taste for literature, to throw a little variety and interest into conversation, and some surplus money to give to the needy and to buy books. . . .

Riches and inherited honours are destructive to the human character, and are even worse for women than for men, because men can still to some extent unfold their faculties by becoming soldiers and statesmen. [MW goes on to say that soldiering has lost its glory and been reduced to mere fine-tuning of the balances of power on the European continent. Statesmen can do a little better, moving from gambling to government, and using the same skills for each. Then:] The whole system of British politics—calling it a 'system' is mere politeness—consists in multiplying dependents and contriving taxes that grind the poor to pamper the rich; thus a war or any wild-goose-chase is a bit of good luck for the minister, whose chief merit is the art of keeping himself in place.

[Then a scornful paragraph about how a minister can ply his trade, pretending to care about the poor and unfortunate but doing nothing for them. MW continues:] Let me return to the more specious slavery that

chains the very soul of woman, keeping her for ever under the bondage of ignorance.

The preposterous distinctions of rank that make civilization a curse by dividing the world between voluptuous tyrants and cunning envious dependents corrupt every class of people almost equally; because the respect a person gets depends only on his rank, and not to his performance of his duties to others; and when the duties are neglected the affections can't gain enough strength to fortify the virtue of which they are the natural reward. There are some loop-holes out of which a man may creep, and dare to think and act for himself; but for a woman it is a Herculean task because the female sex faces difficulties of its own that require almost superhuman powers to overcome.

A truly benevolent legislator always tries to make it in the interests of each individual to be virtuous; this makes private virtue become the cement of public happiness, so that an orderly whole is consolidated by the tendency of all the parts towards a common centre. But the private or public virtue of women is very problematic because many male writers, including Rousseau, insist that a woman should throughout her life be subjected to the severe restraint of propriety. Why subject her to propriety—blind propriety—if she is capable of acting from a nobler spring, i.e. if she has inherited immortality? . . .

[MW returns to her theme of women being given the wrong kind of attention by men: 'The laws respecting woman, which I mean to discuss in a future part, make an absurd unit of a man and his wife; and then by the easy transition of considering only him as responsible she is reduced to a mere cipher, a nothing.

[In the course of dealing with Rousseau's statement that women's lower status is shown by the fact that they can't fight in wars, MW remarks in passing that 'defensive war' is 'the only justifiable war'. And she works her way around to a brief consideration of the poor:] What can be a more melancholy sight to a thinking mind than to look into the numerous carriages that drive helter-skelter about London in a morning, full of pale-faced creatures who are flying from themselves. I have often wished, with Dr Johnson, to place some of them in a little shop with half a dozen children looking up to their languid countenances for support. If that happened, I think that some latent vigour would soon give health and spirit to their eyes; and some lines drawn by the use of reason on

the blank cheeks. . . . might restore lost dignity to the character, or rather enable it to attain the true dignity of its nature. . . .

Besides, when poverty is more disgraceful even than vice, isn't morality cut to the quick? Still to avoid misconstruction, though I consider that women in the common walks of life are called by religion and reason to fulfil the duties of wives and mothers, I can't help lamenting that women higher up the social scale don't have a road along which they can pursue more extensive plans of usefulness and independence. . . . I really think (don't laugh!) that women ought to have parliamentary representatives, instead of being arbitrarily governed without being allowed any direct share in the deliberations of government.

But the whole system of 'representation' in this country is at present only a convenient label for despotism; so women needn't complain, because they are as well represented as a numerous class of hard-working mechanics who pay for the support of royalty when they can scarcely put bread in their children's mouths. Men whose very sweat supports the splendid horses of the heir apparent to the throne, or varnishes the chariot of some female favourite of the king's who looks down on shame—how are they represented? Taxes on the very necessities of life enable an endless tribe of idle princes and princesses to pass with stupid pomp before a gaping crowd, who almost worship the very parade that costs them so dear. This is mere barbarous grandeur, something like the useless parade of sentinels on horseback at Whitehall, which I could never see without a mixture of contempt and indignation.

How strangely must the mind be sophisticated when this sort of state impresses it! But until these monuments of folly are levelled by virtue, similar follies will leaven the whole mass. For the same character, in some degree, will prevail in the aggregate of society: and the refinements of luxury, or the vicious repinings of envious poverty, will equally banish virtue from society, considered as the characteristic of that society, or only allow it to appear as one of the stripes of the harlequin coat worn by the 'civilized' man.

In the upper ranks of society every duty is performed by deputies (as though duties could be transferred!), and the pointless pleasures that the resulting idleness forces the rich to pursue appear so enticing to the next rank that the numerous scramblers for wealth sacrifice everything to tread on their heels. . . . Women, in particular, all want to be ladies.

Which is simply to have nothing to do except listlessly to go they hardly care where, for they cannot tell what.

‘But what have women to do in society’ I may be asked ‘but to loiter with easy grace? Surely you wouldn’t condemn them all to breast-feed fools and keep household accounts! No. Women might certainly study the art of healing, and be well paid physicians as well as very poorly paid nurses.

They might also study politics, and settle their benevolence on the broadest basis; for the reading of history will hardly be more useful than the reading of romances if history is read as mere biography and the character of the times, if the political improvements, arts, etc. are not observed. In short, if it be not considered as the history of man, and not of particular men who filled a niche in the temple of fame, and dropped into the black rolling stream of time, that silently sweeps all before it into the shapeless void called - eternity. - For shape, can it be called, “that shape hath none”?

Women might also pursue business of various kinds if they were educated in a more orderly manner, and that might save many from common or legal prostitution [i.e. from actual prostitution or marrying in order to have economic security]. . . .

[MW remarks that an unmarried woman may have had honourable reasons for choosing not to marry, and others may have been unable to marry. She continues:] So it’s a very defective government—one that entirely neglects the happiness of one half of its public—that doesn’t provide for honest, independent women by encouraging them to occupy respectable positions in society. But in order to make their private virtue a public benefit, they must—whether married or single—have a civil existence in the state. . . .

The most respect-worthy women are the most oppressed; this is a melancholy truth about the blessed effects of civilization! Unless they have understandings much above the average for humanity, taking in both sexes, treating them like contemptible beings will make them become contemptible. Many women waste life away, the prey of discontent, when they might have practised as physicians, run a farm, or managed a shop, and stood upright, supported by their own industry, instead of hanging their heads. . . .

The woman who earns her own bread by fulfilling some duty deserves much more respect than the most accomplished beauty! . . . I sigh to think how few women try to attain this respect-worthiness by withdrawing from the giddy whirl of pleasure, or the lazy calm that stupefies the good sort of women it sucks in.

Proud of their weakness, however, they must always be protected, guarded from care and all the rough toils that dignify the mind. If this is what fate ordains—if they choose to make themselves insignificant and contemptible, sweetly wasting life away, let them not expect to be valued when their beauty fades, for the fairest flowers are pulled to pieces by the careless hand that plucked them. . . .

The most useful writers, in my opinion, are the ones who make man feel for man, independent of his social position and of the drapery of false sentiments. So I would like to convince reasonable men of the importance of some of my remarks, and prevail on them to weigh dispassionately the over-all position that I have been defending. I appeal to their understandings; and as a fellow-creature I claim, in the name of my sex, some interest in their hearts. I entreat them to assist to emancipate their companion to make her a helpmate for them!

If only men would generously break our chains and be content with rational fellowship instead of slavish obedience, they would find us more observant daughters, more affectionate sisters, more faithful wives, more reasonable mothers—in a word, better citizens. We would then love them with true affection, because we would learn to respect ourselves; and a worthy man's peace of mind wouldn't be interrupted by the idle vanity of his wife, and his babes wouldn't be sent to nestle in a strange bosom because they never found a home in their mother's.

From Chapter 10:

Obedience, unconditional obedience, is the catch-word of tyrants of every description, and to make 'assurance doubly sure,' one kind of despotism supports another. Tyrants would have cause to tremble if reason were to become the rule of duty in any of the relations of life, for the light might spread until perfect day appeared. And when it did appear, men would smile at the sight of the bugbears that had made them jump during the night of ignorance or the twilight of timid inquiry.