Chapter 11 The Path Diverges

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CHAPTER ELEVEN.

The Path Diverges.

It must have been about this time that a man with whom I had been dancing at a party — some casual observation of his having led me to avow my "Feminism" as I always did in private society when occasion seemed to arise — said to me:

"Why,such a pretty girl as you are cannot possibly belong to the 'shrieking sisterhood'".

"Oh,yes I do!" I replied very sweetly and amiably,"and I am going on shrieking as loud as I can till we get more justice for women".

A delightful American "Feminist",Mrs.May Wright Sewall, told me that a petition was once brought to her for her signature by Mrs Zeralda Wallace, the step-mother of the author of "Ben Hur",from whom he avowed that he drew the noble mother in that popular work. Mrs Sewall was quite in accord with the object, whatever it was,of the petition,and took up her pen to sign it, but reading it over before she appended her name she was startled by the phrase,"We do not clamour for the vote", whereupon Mrs Sewall threw down her pen exclaiming:"But I do clamour"! * So did I clamour!

When I saw Dr. Carleton for the first time after we parted in 1873 — which was when I went to the United States in 1902 as the delegate of the British Suffrage Societies to found the "International Woman's Suffrage League" — she said to me:

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* This incident began the conversion to the Suffrage Cause of Mrs. Wallace,who soon became an active worker therein.

"And you are still teaching and preaching what you were talking about thirty years ago?"

"Precisely so," I replied.

Shriek, or clamour, or teach and preach, to gain equal rights for women: that was what was then required! Talk and persuasion and the organisation that these produce must always precede action in matters of social reform, or legislative change. As Thomas Carlyle puts the truth:-

"The lightning -- spark ~~and~~ of Thought, generated or, say, rather, heaven-kindled, in the solitary mind, awakens its express likeness in another mind, in a thousand other minds, and all blaze up together in combined fire, reverberated from mind to mind, fed also with fresh fuel in each, it acquires incalculable new light as Thought, incalculable new heat as converted into Action."

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There are three ways of propagating new ideas, of sowing the seed of opinion in the fresh soil of other minds, and of obtaining that first arrest of thought upon a matter that may be then cogitated to a natural conclusion in the individual's own mind. In the order of value, I think, these three means of propaganda of ideas and of reforming public opinion are:

(1) Written and printed arguments, especially those published in the newspaper press.

(2) The platform.

(3) Private conversation and discussion.

The last-named I came in time to avoid as far as possible, because I found it of little use - unless, indeed, there was an

audience, people who were listening and not intervening in the discussion, in which case the conversation takes on much the same character as a platform debate. Private discussion with one individual is seldom useful because so few persons are sufficiently free from vanity, and logical enough, and fair-minded enough, to allow their opinion to be altered, once they have expressed it, by the most cogent arguments or the most powerful appeals. Pride and self-will are called into activity by the very act of argument, and many people, if they be dialetically silenced or completely answered, are simply made very angry. But hearers, round a dinner-table or in a drawing room, may be convinced, if they do not by interposing engage their own vanity on the other side. Hence, although I never shirked private and personal discussion, I did not court it, after I had gained a certain experience of life and mankind; though in my early girlhood, I always tried to persuade people privately.

The printing press, and especially employed as journalism, I think is the most important means of propagating ideas, were it only because of the large numbers thereby brought within hearing. The printed word in a newspaper may reach perhaps millions, at any rate (unless in a very obscure paper) thousands, whom it comes before; while the most successful public speaker can only attract or reach at most two or three thousand hearers, and even that number of listeners gathered together is quite exceptional.

Another point in favour of written and printed argument, over spoken discussion, is that it admits of being considered at

leisure by the persons to whom it is addressed, if they will grant it the opportunity. The real points of an orator's argument may be missed as they are rapidly spoken, and the force of his conclusions may be overlooked. In reading, facts and arguments can be slowly absorbed, and the mind that so receives the impression retains it, perhaps, more effectually and lastingly.

~~But~~ The platform, on the other hand, has a special importance of its own. Many people who will not consent to read at all, or are actually intellectually unable to read carefully and grasp completely, a written exposition of new ideas, or yield to a plea addressed in cold print to their logical faculties or higher feelings, can follow the same arguments from a living voice, and are carried away by the power of oratory into an agreement that brings them to an active adhesion that they would never give to written appeals.

But platform and pen are both well employed in the same work of persuasion, which is, as Professor Quiller Couch observes - "The aim of all the Arts." He continues - It is what Velasquez attempts in a picture, Euclid in a proposition, the Prime Minister at the Treasury Box, the journalist in a leading article, our Vicar in his Sermon. Persuasion, as Matthew Arnold once said, is the only true intellectual process. The mere cult of it occupied many of the best intellects of the Ancients, such as Longinus and Quintilian, whose writings have been preserved to us just because they were prized. Nor can I imagine an earthly gift

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more covetable by you, gentlemen, (he is speaking to Undergraduates of the University of Cambridge, from whom future leaders of thought and action should in due time stand out) "than that of persuading your fellows to listen to you, and attend to what you have at heart."

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My "coming-out" year, 1873, between my 18th and 19th birthdays, gave me my first openings in both print and platform advocacy of "what I had at heart." I already knew that writing was easy, and even delightful, to me; but the platform was still unknown ground.

I had already "seen myself in print," indeed, a good many times, for my gratuitous contributions and "Letters to the Editor" on women's affairs had been printed in various newspapers. I had written articles on some other subjects too, and offered them to magazines and newspapers, but as yet without success. This year was to give me my first experience of having my literary work "bought and paid for;" professional instead of amateur status was thus achieved; while to the platform I had a "call," quite unexpectedly, in this same year.

The first article signed with my name, and published as a contribution (unpaid) to a periodical, not merely as a "Letter," that I have been able to find, appeared, indeed, a full year earlier than this in date. It was published in "Woman," (edited by Amelia Lewis, who was actually a German lady) one of the various futile attempts to found a "Feminist" weekly periodical that should pay its own way. The date is April 20th. 1872, which is

before I entered on my Hospital work. The title of my essay is "Palmam qui Meruit Ferat," and the subject is the impropriety and unfairness of men in criticising the work of women on a sex basis, condescendingly admitting that the writing or the action was well done - "for a woman." I quote various actual reviews of books, containing such passages as: "An excellent work -- for a lady;" "well-considered -- in a feminine manner;" "characters as ably delineated as we ever met with -- in a woman's novel," and so on. I declare that it is the custom of male reviewers almost invariably either to condemn without any real assigned reason, or to damn with faint praise, or to sneer with affected indulgence, at the writings of women; and I point out that George Eliot, George Sand, Currer Bell, and other women who had assumed masculine names, had done so because they knew that only thus would their work be able to obtain fair and equal criticism. I suggest that many others who published pseudonymously, such as the author of 'Lady Audley's Secret,' the author of 'The Heir of Redcliffe,' and so on, did so "to give themselves at least the chance of being mistaken for members of the opposite sex, till this course was rendered at once unnecessary and impossible by their increasing fame ... All these ladies have proved that they recognize the unfortunate fact that women's acknowledged work is judged with foregone conclusions. Now, the unfairness of this is disgraceful, and too palpable to be denied. 'Chivalry,' the generosity of strength,' 'the laws of politeness,' and such stock phrases, become simple absurdity, when heard side by side with the hard

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facts. John Stuart Mill says very truly:- 'If we rob a woman of the ground on which she ought to stand, it matters little with what grimaces of gallantry we offer her a chair.' ..... Surely now, in these latter days of ours, when women are so rapidly throwing off their hindering clogs, it will be not only fair, but expedient for themselves, if literary critics will candidly avow that books must be judged according to their merits, independently of whether the writer walks in petticoats or trousers. Woman is beginning to assert herself, to show practically that she has mental faculties and energies, and, more important still, that at last she feels that these were not given her to waste by inactivity, but to use for the benefit of mankind - and herself..... Let not the praise drawn forth by the beauties or the genius of a work be marred by the contemptuous addition of the phrase - 'for a woman."[1]

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Think not, oh! gentle, courteous, beloved and valued Reader,

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[1] It may here be remarked that in this protest I was joining, though probably I did not know it at the moment, two of the greatest of the earlier Victorian women writers. Mrs. Browning objects to that sort of insulting and depreciating :

"Praise
Which men give women when they judge a book
Not as mere work, but as mere women's work,
Expressing the comparative respect
Which means the absolute scorn."

In like manner Charlotte Brontë tells that she and Emily determined to use pseudonyms that would probably be mistaken for masculine names, as "We did not like to declare ourselves women, because - without at the time suspecting that our mode of writing and thinking was not what is called 'feminine' - we had a vague impression that authoresses are liable to be looked on with a prejudice; we noticed how critics sometimes used for their chastisement the weapon of personality, and for their reward, a flattery which is not true praise."

that I propose to serve up to you "warmed over" fifty-year old girlish essays in this manner, on a lavish scale! Not at all. But there seems to me some interest, perhaps, in the persistence of my advocacy of woman's cause in the press from that early age.

My first writing "bought and paid for" was a story for children, however - a moral little tale inculcating service to others and kindness to the lower animals - which my diary records that I wrote as my last work in 1872. But I have never seen "Dick Henley's Fairy" in print myself! I offered it to the "Sunday School Union," which corporate body published moral little tales in various forms and in considerable quantity. There soon came along a form for me to sign saying that I accepted two guineas for the copyright, and then arrived the cheque, absolutely my first earnings with the fragile and beloved implement that was to be my staff through life! Doubtless I asked for a copy of the tale to be sent to me when it should be printed, but I never received it.

The second cheque earned by my pen actually came in the very same week as that for the little story. This was a rather curious affair, and makes me wonder if some other of the several MS. that I apparently lost at that period were not actually published on the same basis. An acquaintance quite casually observed to me one day:-

"Oh, I have read your article in 'The Englishwoman's Domestic Magazine,' and thought it so good!"

This journal had never "accepted" my article, nor sent me a proof or copy of it, and obviously the editor was minded to get

it gratis, without even thanks. As it is impossible for anybody who sends out MS. widely to keep an eye on all the publications to which something has been offered, such a policy may succeed pretty often. However, when I wrote and suggested some payment a guinea was sent without further parley. Thus did I receive three guineas in one week for my literary efforts, at the age of eighteen.

The subject of "The Englishwoman's Domestic Magazine" article was the desirability of vigorous exercise for young women, which I explained on physiological grounds. It was a very necessary topic then. Girls had no active games: no bicycles, no tennis, no hockey, no school physical exercises, no gymnasiums! Even walking, if performed alone and fast, was considered unladylike - a little girl who ran and jumped was checked as "a Tomboy". It is very difficult for the girls of to-day to realise at all how things have altered in this respect, and how extremely important it has been for their mental health as well as for their physical development that they have been allowed, and even encouraged, to use their bodily powers in childhood and youth. For not only are women now, as is notorious, less liable to hysteria and chlorosis than formerly, but they have actually increased the average duration of life in the female sex in the last half century considerably beyond that increase which men also have obtained in the same period from generally improved hygienic conditions.

It is difficult, no doubt, for the women of to-day to realise it, but nevertheless it is a fact that previous genera-

tions of girls were brought up to regard poor health and bodily infirmity as positive sex attractions! Every male mentor of our sex endeavoured to impress upon girls that weakness, not only mental but physical, was an attraction to men, and at the same time, that the only proper aim of a woman was to so attract. In brief proof of the way in which our ancestresses were charged, persuaded and exhorted, to be weak in body, and to avoid the exercises that would tend to give them strength, I will quote from two works which had en enormous vogue in the latter part of the eighteenth century.

The Rev. Dr. Fordyce delivered and then wrote "Sermons to Young Women," which, he proudly states, in the preface to the Tenth Edition (1786), the copy that is in my library, had been received with "the most generous approbation" by "persons of both sexes and of different tastes." This book of Sermons was, indeed, as Mary Wolstonecraft tells us, "long a part of a young woman's library; girls at school are allowed to read them." What does he say about exercise? -

"Let it be observed that in your sex manly exercises are never graceful; that in you a tone and figure, as well as an air and deportment, of the masculine kind, are always forbidding; and that men of sensibility desire in <u>every</u> woman, soft features, and a flowing voice, a form <u>not robust</u>, and a <u>demeanour delicate</u> and gentle."

A Doctor of Medicine actually was found to endorse this mischievous advice to women to be as weak in body as possible, or, if they could not be so, at any rate to affect it, in order to excite an unhealthy appetite in the other sex. Dr. Gregory, in his

"Father's Legacy to His Daughters," another book then read by every girl at her elders' desire, assured them that for once in the way a man was going to tell young women the truth about how men regard them. No doubt he sincerely believed what he said, and cannot perhaps be blamed for his counsel, physiologically so inexcusably cruel and indefensible, when he says:-

"But though good health be one of the greatest blessings of life, never make a boast of it, but enjoy it in grateful silence. We (men) so naturally associate the idea of female delicacy and softness with a corresponding delicacy of constitution, that when a woman speaks of her strength, her extraordinary appetite, her ability to bear excessive fatigue, we recoil at the description in a way she is little aware of!"

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This was the sort of degrading and injurious counsel from Divines and Doctors, mark you! The specially appointed spiritual and physical guides of human conduct! It was against such ideas that we revolted, and that article was devoted to counteracting.

The first glimmering of success in writing for publication did not, as might have been expected, lead to my producing immediately many more manuscripts. On the contrary, I wrote but little for the next two or three years, merely because I was too busy otherwise. The wearying, exacting practice, and the pursuit of both professional and wider learning, absorbed too much of both energy and time, to allow of the further exercise of what

journalists call "Free-lance" writing. My pen was not quite "put out of commission." I wrote letters to Editors and a few articles on "Women's Rights," as opportunity arose. I remember conducting a controversy on the subject of women in the Medical profession in one of the medical students' periodicals, called I think "The Students' Journal," the discussion extending over several issues. But writing on general topics now went into abeyance, while I worked to the limit of physical power, and studied the newest Physiology (Michael Foster's work, for instance) and general Biology, and presently, seriously took up Political Economy.

And then, the platform opened to me, and the talent which makes the call was unexpectedly discovered.

Debating was a very popular diversion, with an instructive possibility implied, for young men at that time. Practically every church and chapel had its "Young Men's Mutual Improvement Society," or "Discussion Club," and no subject was more fertile or better enjoyed than the voicing of notions that these poor youths entertained about "Woman;" "her" character and capabilities, "her" rights and "her" duties, and "her" limitations as inexorably fixed whether by the Bible or by Nature. But no young woman ever rose up and intervened. I attended as a listener at a good many of these discussions while in my early 'teens; hearing with grief and scorn much sex-conceit and selfish and self-satisfied folly, so that my soul often burned within me. Yet, although this often made me long to be able to touch men's hearts and consciences, so as to help to amend the ideas, the laws and the

customs that made sex a slavery, before I was brought to speak a more direct appeal had to be made to me; and it came to me from without, in the apparently fortuitous and accidental fashion - the "coincidence" - that has so often intervened in life that it is difficult to avoid feeling more or less definitely under direction and guidance from without.

A discussion at a "Young Men's Society" had been announced for March 27th. 1873, to take place at a school-room in the neighbourhood of my home. The honorary secretary was well known to me — he was Mr. Edwin Boon, who afterwards became a popular Congregational minister in the South of England — for he was the schoolmaster of my young brother Will, and he and I had often discussed the great woman question when he visited at our house. He was, therefore, aware how strong and clear were my eighteen-year-old feminist opinions. The announced opener of the debate failed to appear. Mr. Boon came to me, as I sat amidst the waiting audience by the side of my father, and, in a whisper, asked me if I would not rise up and say something to start a discussion.

I said: "I do not know that I can make a speech."

"You simply stand up and say what you were saying to me the other day," he replied.

I was silent a moment. Though it was a little suburban schoolroom and an audience of perhaps a hundred people, it was a crisis to me. Then I appealed to my father:

"Shall I?" I asked.

"If you think you can," was his reply.

"Coincidence again! It was most unlikely that my father, who was so many more weeks away at sea than he was at home in any year, should be with me on the very night when the announced speaker failed to come, and so the task was pressed upon me. Had my mother been there, she would not have permitted my speaking, I am sure. But my father was a "Feminist" before me, as "Investigator's Laws" reveal.

The announced subject of the debate was "A good Dog Deserves His Bone." Of course I have not the least knowledge on what lines the original announced speaker proposed to develop this idea, but I adapted it impromptu, and based my speech for Women's Rights upon the phrase. While not claiming that women were perfect (alas! I always knew that they were far otherwise) I asked my audience's attention to all that they had done in history, and how much wives and mothers now did daily, usefully and well, while girls' education was neglected, suitable professions like medicine were closed against them, and the marriage laws were cruel and unjust. This, I maintained, was not giving the good dog his bone!

Although I do not pretend to remember exactly what I said on this first occasion of "thinking on my feet," I have no doubt that I here declared -- because I always did so -- that I knew well that individual men in the enormous majority of cases were better than the laws and customs of their mass psychology. I always freely admitted that most men are at least fairly good to women; and that a great many of them do even devote their lives, and the money they earn, to the well-being and happiness of wife and children and home, straining every nerve with this one end in view, counting success in making "a happy fireside clime for weans and wife" as Burns puts it, as the chief object and reward of their laborious and self-sacrificing days. It was precisely to such men that we had to make our appeal to procure better conditions for less fortunate women, single or married.

When I sat down I knew that I had the gift of oratory. I had spoken with perfect ease, without hesitating for a word, and I had found myself able to collect and arrange my thoughts consecutively, and bring them out plainly, without a pause. My speaking was then, as it was always afterwards, apparently without effort. I mean apparently so, as a rule, to myself, as well as, I believe, always to the listeners. The instantaneous clothing of thoughts in words was never a conscious difficulty. I had no self-consciousness, and no more nervousness than in ordinary conversation. My voice "carried" easily to fill a room. In short, public speaking was the exercise of a natural gift. I regarded it thenceforth as a duty to "open my mouth for the dumb."

I had been listened to with absolute attention and interest and other speakers (all men, of course) followed so freely that the proposal was made, and carried by acclamation, that I should formally reopen a discussion at the next Meeting on the same topic; and I then and there consented to "prepare a paper."

I spoke on this second occasion for over an hour, and proposed a resolution that the Chairman should sign a petition to the House of Commons on behalf of the Meeting for Mr. Jacob Bright's Bill giving Woman's Suffrage. This was carried with only one dissentient, as I find it is reported in the "Woman's Suffrage Journal" for May 1873.

The report must have been sent in by the Secretary of the Central Committee of the National Woman's Suffrage Society, a Miss Smith, who was present on this second occasion. In the in-

terval between the two meetings I had written to the office of the Society for a supply of leaflets for distribution. With commendable energy, the Secretary had replied that she would have pleasure in coming down herself and bringing the literature with her. This she did, and, after hearing my prepared speech and impromptu reply to the whole debate, she came up and introduced herself to me, and asked me if I would be willing to speak at some meetings organized by the Society in the following Autumn. I replied that I would gladly do so, and thus I was brought, without my own seeking, on to the Suffrage platform upon which I did much service in coming years.
