

The White Ribbon

FOR GOD AND HOME AND HUMANITY

Vol. 27.—No. 313.

WELLINGTON, N.Z. JULY 18, 1921.

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Single Copy, 3d.

OUR INDIAN SISTERS.

India—strange languaged, mystic, and mysterious—our Indian Empire. How proud we are of it! How little we understand it! A history reaching back to the dim shades of antiquity. Sacred books, the most ancient of literature. A continent, not a country. What diversities of language, of customs, of characters, of religions within its borders. Barbaric gems, and wealth of eastern goods attract the greedy eyes of a Trading Company. All its wealth, its trade, eagerly desired by them, but no responsibility of government wanted. The men on the spot, Clive and Hastings, know that to trade successfully they must rule. Then the people rise because their rulers who show such an utter lack of understanding of their point of view. Rebellion is crushed with a strong hand, but rule is taken from a Company and vested in a Nation. Western education, Western progress are confronting the conservatism and grim fatalism of the East, and they are acting and reacting upon each other. What the issue? Who dare prophesy? Devoted missionaries have told us much about our Indian sisters, but like their Master of old, their work is chiefly with the poor and needy. There is another India, embracing the women, almost untouched by European influences, and the following paper upon the Purdah women of India, by one who has lived among them and visited their homes, should prove highly interesting to our readers.

THE LIFE OF THE PURDAH WOMAN OF INDIA.

Much has been said and written from time to time with regard to the conditions of life of the Indian woman; but there still seems to be a good deal of misunderstanding. It is not easy for one nation to understand the social conditions of another whose ideals and customs differ from their own. In order to gain a true understanding of them, the matter should be looked at from the point of view of national ideals, rather than from the actual facts as seen from outside, for it is these ideals which show forth the genius of the nation. It is true that they are very often not lived up to, but how many do live up to their ideals? Yet it is the ideals that show the real man, and not his failure to live up to them.

We have heard a great deal about the miserable lives of Indian women, mostly from those who have taken up missionary work in India, and there is doubtless much truth in what they tell us of the hardships and the cruel treatment they receive, and the way they are looked down upon and neglected. But this is only one side of the question; the class with which the missionary worker mostly comes in contact is the poorest and most uncared for, and to take these as representing the Indian nation would be much the same as judging the family life of England by that of the slums in her great cities—a most unfair judgment. The women of India may be divided into three classes: the poorest and most uneducated, which have just been mentioned, unfortunately

a very numerous class; those who have escaped from or have never been bound by the restrictions of Hindu social life, who have been educated in English schools and universities, and are for the most part living the life of an ordinary European; and there is the third class, composed of those who are living under the *purdah* system. It is this latter class with whom we are here dealing, as most nearly representing the Hindu ideal of womanhood.

A vast amount of pity has been bestowed upon these so-called unfortunate women, who are supposed to be entirely without education, condemned to a life of rigid seclusion, cut off from the life of the world, and having no resources within themselves wherewith to pass away their time, and no sympathy with or knowledge of the more public life of their husbands, who regard them as inferior beings, of no account except as they conduce to their own comfort and pleasure. Yet nothing could be further from the truth. Very little is generally known of the real life of a Hindu middle-class family, partly on account of the *purdah* system, and also from the failure of European women to enter into the lives of their Indian sisters, some of them having hardly ever spoken to an Indian, except to their own servants. Not that they are necessarily to blame for this; it is not an easy matter to penetrate into the seclusion of a Hindu home, especially taking into account the fact that very few of the women know a word of English. The position of the Hindu woman in her home will be better understood if