"THE ELDERLY LADY."

SPEAKING FROM ANCIENT ORIENT.

IT is always interesting to hear of women who, in far distant lands, among creeds and customs very different from our own, have yet exercised a great influence for good, and won for themselves honour and affection. To make acquaintance with such women across dividing seas, or through the mist of centuries, is to make the world and the past more home-like to us, and to get a new realisation of the strong family likeness existing in the human family of the Divine Father.

We wish to introduce our readers to a famous woman who belongs to India—not to the India of the nineteenth century, but to India in the days long before William the Conqueror had landed in England.

Yet it is quite possible that the remoteness of our heroine's date brings her into more sympathy with us Westerns than if she was the inmate of a zenana to-day. For at the period when she lived the Mahometan power had not overrun India, and by its creeds and customs enjoined and enforced the seclusion and social effacement of the female sex. The ancient Hindu woman, under a simpler and more natural rule of life, possessed privileges and responsibilities which have been lost to her modern sister.

Still, though in earlier times the Hindu woman may have had freer action in a wider circle than she enjoys to-day, at no period have her public utterances been many. In a nation of poets and story-tellers, there have been few women singers. This gives the greater prominence to our heroine, to whom competent judges assign a first rank among her masculine rivals and contemporaries.

It is time to tell you her name; but, alas! she has none! She is known in Hindu literature only by the appellation of "Auvaiyar," which means "the elderly lady," and is evidently only a descriptive title, of special honour and tenderness too, since Orientals have a great regard for advanced years, and the wisdom which they ought to bring with them.

Everything we know about Auvaiyar is mythical. In the absence of records, the most diligent student of Tamil biography admits he has had to fall back upon the vague traditions current among the people.

These traditions say that Auvaiyar's father was a Brahmin, while her mother was a low-caste woman—a combination of divergent sympathies which is by no means uncommon in the heredity of genius. The children of this union were not brought up in their parents' house, but were given into the charge of a man who filled the office of minstrel in the royal Court. From him it is possible that their minds derived the literary basis. It is said that each of the family made a worthy mark in after life. The most distinguished of all, according to tradition, was the brother, Tiruvalluva, who wrote the famous *Cural*, a book whose wisdom and elevation of thought may be best indicated by a few extracts taken from it.

"If a rare opportunity come, let a man do that which is rarely done."

"It is a rare thing to find reverence with those who have not received careful instruction."

"He whose mind and life are free from deceit, has a dwelling in the hearts of all men."

"He will be called the true householder who is a firm support to the virtuous."

"The ground which supports an ignoble body but diminishes its blameless produce."

"If a man inflict suffering, even on those who without cause hate him, it will in the end give him irremovable sorrow."

"If a man in the morning seek sorrow for another, in the evening sorrow will visit him unsought."

"Do the hard-hearted who lay up only the possessions to be lost, know the happiness which springs from giving? The solitary feast and unshared wealth are more joyless than begging."

"Those destitute of love appropriate all they have to themselves; those who possess love consider even their bones to belong to others."

"Forget not the benevolence of the blameless: forsake not the friendship of those who have been your staff in adversity."

"No pious abstinence equals the abstinence of those who overcome injury by patience."

"It is tenfold more injurious to lose the friendship of the good, than to incur the hatred of the many."

"He who destroys the pride which says 'I,' 'mine,' passes into a world which is above the gods."

"Because evil produces evil, therefore should it be feared more than fire."

"The wound burnt in by fire may heal, but a wound burnt in by the tongue will never heal."

"Adverse fate is no disgrace to anyone: to be without exertion, and not to know what should be known—this is disgrace. Although through destiny the end cannot be obtained, the earnest endeavour will yield its reward."

Having thus shown the quality of the great brother's mind, we return to the genius and work of Auvaiyar herself. We know very little about her personal history. There is a pathetic legend that when the low-caste mother was obliged to send away her children, her little daughter strove to comfort her with consoling words. If we would divine anything of this woman's nature, and of the circumstances of her life, we must look for them solely from the convictions wrought in her as manifest in her work. Her translator (the Rev. E. Strutt) presents us with two of her poems—"Wise Words," and "The Good Way." He says modestly, that there is a crisp sententiousness about the original which he fears is faintly reproduced in their English dress. Both poems are long. "Wise Words" contains thirty stanzas, and "The Good Way" forty. What strikes one at once is the total absence of those qualities which are generally called "feminine"—the sentimental, the emotional, the merely fanciful. Every line is strong and practical, with reserves of power. Take this—

"Though year by year you weep and kneel
On graves of friends, they come not back:
Weep not! *That goal is yours;* content,
Give alms and eat till you too die."

Could the simplicity of the real needs of life, and the countless hardships encountered to provide for its imaginary wants, be more tersely summarised than as follows—

"We serve, or beg, or cross the sea,
Revere or rule, sing songs to please,
And thus wear out ourselves to still
The hunger for a seer* of rice.
A seer of rice, two yards of cloth
Suffice; but senseless man still thinks
Of countless things: so keeping house
Is one long care till death ends all."

* Enough for a man's food for one day.

How clearly she could realise the distinction between "the sheep *and the goats*," and the value of virtue even to those who do not make it their own!—

"Two castes I own: and only two:
Who mete to all unerring right,
As truth dictates, these are the high:
Who act not thus are low in caste.

To see the good is good: and good
It is to hear their weighty words:
Good also to recount their worth
Of heart, and good to dwell with them.

To see the bad is naught but bad,
Bad too to hear their worthless words,
Bad to make known their evil heart,
Bad evermore to dwell with them.

The stream that flows to bless the fields
Makes green the grass on either bank:
And if, in this old world, some men
Be good, the rain will fall on all!"

She finds an apt metaphor to convey the truth that a narrow nature cannot receive a great joy, asking—

"Will measured quart a gallon bring
Though plunged *in deepest sea?*"

She makes no confusion between gratitude and ingratitude, but does not allow the latter to deter from duty—

"A favour to the good will show
Like graving in the solid rock:
Good done to loveless souls is but
As letters upon water traced.

The tiger, healed by skilful leech,
Ate him for thanks: the earthen pot
Was shivered by the flinty rock:
'Tis thus with favours to the boor.

The tree, until it falls, grants shade
To him who feils *it*: so the wise
And good, while life shall last, are kind
To those who strive to work them ill."

And again, by two quaint similes, she enforces both a truth which is often bitterly borne in upon us, and also its counter-balancing consolation—

"Kinsfolk sometimes are not best friends:
Disease born with us may result
In death: far hills yield healing herbs,
So strangers may give truest help.

But we must hold our hand, and conclude our quotations with a stanza which, if duly remembered, might cause the antique pagan poetess to be thankfully hailed as a peace promoter in many a modern "Christian" home—

"The thrifty gentle wife recks not
Of comforts not within her means;
But the coarse termagant will make
Her husband's home like tiger's den."

We think we have said enough to show that this old-world Hindu matron merited King Solomon's encomium on her who "openeth her mouth with wisdom, and the law of *kind*ness is on her tongue." It does not signify that her very name is forgotten. While her good words can reach the ears of maidens of a race of whose very existence she never dreamed, surely "her works still praise her *in* the gates."

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