

LAW FOR THE LADIES.

IN pondering over a bulky tome, which professed to be the Gentoo code of laws, we were, by some natural predilection to the subject, we candidly avow, attracted by the heading of one chapter, which was "of what concerns women." What reader of the masculine gender would not have deviated from the track he was pursuing, had the course of his studies been the most fascinating or the most abstruse, or, what it happened to be with us, genuine Sanscrit, at so delightful a theme, which led him from the object he was arduously seeking, like some brilliant will o' the wisp? Instead of pursuing our erudite investigation into the subject of primogeniture among the Bramins, we renounced the pursuit with a forced resignation: much after the fashion of one who goes to dig for roots of subsistence, and spends his hours in the chase of a butterfly.

But did the learned pundits whose "collected wisdom" compose the Gentoo code, think such gossamer trifles as women worthy of legislation? Ay, marry they did, and exclusively devoted a whole chapter for their especial edification,—not only as concerns their spiritual well-doing, but in respect to the minutest trifles of their dress, deportment, and amusements. Great as the gulf of time is, from that in which the code was written and the one in which *we* legislate—mighty as the difference is between the unsophisticated Hindoo and our stately woman of fashion—we are not still without a suspicion, that the laws of the grave pundits of the early ages might have had a prophetic glance at the foibles of the nineteenth century. But we challenge our fair readers to discover whether there is any applicability in these antediluvian records and the age in which we write and the fair criticise.

The first—our hand trembles while we write and the pen drops from our terrified fingers, as we record it—there is a most republican blow at the aristocracy evidently aimed by the jacobin pundit. There is rank treason against the supremacy of the fair. The sovereignty of woman is actually to be put down by sheer force. Listen, ladies! and while you burn with indignation, remember it was not us who issued the daring edict.

"A man, both by day and night, must keep his wife so much in subjection that she by no means be mistress of her own actions.

If the wife have her own free will, notwithstanding she be sprung from a superior class, she will yet behave amiss."

What house of parliament *now* dare utter so rebellious a sentiment as is conveyed in the last two lines. We can imagine "an honourable gentleman" proposing such a clause, and his reception at Almack's the following Wednesday. Would he not wish he was keeping councils with the reverend pundit who, some few centuries since, suggested this treasonable enactment?

There is a more kindly feeling towards the fair expressed in the next statute, by way of making amends to them, we presume, for the ungallant spirit which pervades the first we have quoted. There is, however, in the following, very little consolation for a hen-pecked husband; and a premium to those Katherines whose Petruchios hint at "separate maintenance."

"If a man, by confinement and threats (!) cannot guard his wife, he shall give her a large sum of money, and make her mistress of her income and expenses, and appoint her (proclaim it from Cavendish Square to Connaught Place!) to dress victuals for the *Devtah*," i. e. the Deity.

The latter provision must operate like soothing syrup to an amiable mind. "Well!" we think we hear some unlucky husband exclaim, "if my wife has her own way, and I am to pay for it, she must turn cook in order to gain her superiority."

But what have next? A most ungallant attack on the character of the fair. Whoever could have ordained such a barbarous law must have been a moody old bachelor—a Solon of a legislator—a disappointed law-giver who had never "popped the question" without a flat refusal. The women no doubt picked out his impertinent eyes with their bodkins.

"Women have six qualities." We cannot offer such a violence to our feelings as to enumerate all the worthy pundit concedes to them; a few will suffice our fair readers. "The first, an inordinate desire for jewels and fine furniture, and nice victuals; violent anger, the fourth; deep resentment, *no person knows the sentiments concealed in their heart*; the fifth; another person's good appears evil in their eyes; (doubtless, the *pundit's* virtues were in this predicament); the sixth, they commit bad actions."

Let our readers form their own reflections on the following injunction :—

“ A woman who always acts according to her husband's pleasure, and speaks no ill of any person, and who can herself do all such things as are necessary for a man, and is of good principles, and who produces a son, and rises from sleep before a husband, such a woman is found only by much and many religious works, and by a peculiarly happy destiny ; such a woman, if any man forsakes of his own accord, the magistrate shall inflict upon that man the punishment of a thief.” Of a thief only, reverend pundit ? why hanging is too good for such a rascal. She must be a paragon of a woman indeed, whose merits you could properly appreciate.

But, softly : what follows ? Treason again, as we live !

“ A woman who always abuses her husband shall be treated with good advice, for the space of one year ; if she does not amend with one year's advice, and does not leave off abusing her husband, he shall no longer hold any communication with her, nor keep her any longer near him, but shall provide her with food and clothes.”

What ! fix a price for abusing her husband—it is depriving the married women of their dearest prerogative. Some of our Benedict acquaintance would, however, see some pith in the law ; but their wives, no doubt, would view it as an encroachment of their privileges. What fashionable exclusive would renounce the exquisite satisfaction of representing her unfortunate help-mate as a most particularly good-for-nothing sort of individual ?

There is an odd jumble of pains and penalties—a curious combination of atrocious crime and whimsical peccadilloes in the next anathema. The same punishment is awarded to each, and all are no doubt equally atrocious in the eyes of the wise Gentoos—all of the same deep dye, and all requiring the same exemplary expiation ! And then, *the punishment*.

“ A woman who dissipates, or spoils her own property, who disappoints her husband's hopes of a family, or who has an intention to murder her husband, and who eats before her husband eats, such a woman shall be”—what ? hanged, drawn, and quartered, or beheaded ; burned as witch, or condemned to the ducking-stool ? no, simply—“ turned out of the

house !” There is certainly a benevolent feeling expressed in the award of the punishment, which must be highly gratifying to such vindictive wives whose intentions towards their husbands happen not to be particularly friendly.

What admirable consistency ! the fair president of the dinner-table, who helps herself, by carving a chicken before her lord and master, is to be mulcted to the same extent as if she treated her husband after the same fashion as the chicken. And then the tenderness for the delightful offence of quarrelling with every body : who would give up such agreeable means of spending her time for an such a trifling penalty ?

The *amende honorable* is at last made to the injured sex, by the following definition of a “ good woman.”

“ A woman who is of a good disposition, and who puts on her jewels and clothes with decorum, and is of good principles, whenever the husband is cheerful, the wife is also cheerful ; and if the husband is sorrowful, the wife also is sorrowful ; and whenever the husband undertakes a journey, the wife puts on a careless dress, and lays aside her jewels and other ornaments, and abuses no person, and does not expend a single *Dàm* without her husband's consent (who would, most probably, expend a considerable number of d—ns if she did), and has a son, and takes proper care of the household goods, and at the times of worship performs her worship to the Deity in a proper manner, and goes not out of the house, and is not unchaste, and makes no quarrels or disturbance, and has no greedy passions, and is always employed in some good work, and pays a proper respect to all persons, SUCH A WOMAN IS A GOOD WOMAN !”

We hope the last extract will avert the punishment our fair friends doubtlessly intended to visit on the head of the unlucky pundit. For, even we find in the days of the most unchivalrous and ungallant spirits, the qualities of a good woman were as well understood as in the present more civilised and refined age, and appreciated with as grateful a feeling of awe and homage as the most imperious of her sex could even now demand from the humblest of her adorers.

We may possibly return to the subject.