

The Women of India.

Their Life Is Severe, and They Barely Know Pleasure.

They Are Forced by Custom to Live in the Closest Retiracy Denied Even Medical Assistance.

In our own free country where the rights and privileges of women are daily becoming more widely recognized, it is almost incomprehensible to grasp the fact of the complete isolation in which the women of India—among the highest castes—are living. To hear of the seclusion into which the poor little wives and widows are thrust makes one imagine that fables of long years ago are being told to us, and that we are listening to facts which happened in periods so remote that ancient folk lore alone is responsible for the recapitulation of tales which must have traveled through generations and generations ere they reached our ears.

But it is modern times that the terrible restriction of women in India exists, when, from the marriage day, the child-wives are taken from school, often at the early age of nine and ten years, and closely kept in zenanas for the rest of their days—never being allowed to see a man save the husband. It is only to his younger brother that the wife is allowed to speak, and even to him she shields her face. Closely caged in the zenana—which is the room in a gentleman's house where in the women of the family are kept, and which also is the furthest apartment from the entrance to the house, access only being attainable through the husband's suite of rooms—the India wives, and widows spend their lives in solitude and ignorance, for the poor little creatures can scarcely be said to have received any education whatever, being taken from school at a period when they should practically be at the commencement of their education. Many of them cannot even read, and have therefore no resource but to plait their hair, thread their beads and cook their husband's food.

The zenanas are barely furnished, containing a single bed, one or two round, flat stools of plain wood, apparatus for cooking, a pitcher for water, a tray containing one or two gilt cups and plates, and in the niches of the wall the idols which are worshiped. In the small court-yard adjoining is a tank which serves as a morning bath, and to wash the hands later in the day the young wife tucks the pitcher under her arm and pours water on to her outstretched palms, letting it run upon the whitewashed floor. The windows are purposely placed at a distance beyond her reach, and are purposely barred.

Lady visitors may come to see these desolate women, but a man other than the husband is forbidden to cross the threshold, and should his footstep be heard outside, the wife turns her face to the wall and covers it quickly with her veil. Even the privilege of calling her husband by his first name is denied her. She may not sit nor eat in his presence, and is only allowed the scraps which he rejects by way of food.

In the case of a widow she may only partake of one meal a day for the rest of her life, and that must be of the plainest kind, no sweet being permitted. She also fasts for one whole day at the end of each nine or ten days, and clothes herself in coarse cloth for evermore, never wearing a jewel or a bit of color, white being her

invariable garb. This distinguishes the widow from the wife. The latter wears colored drapery, or, maybe, white bordered with color, and a band of jewell round her forehead, but from purdah she is never released.

It is the custom upon the arrival of a guest to offer the box of spices, from which a piece of cinnamon or betel nut is taken and chewed as a sign of good will. On some occasions a coin is offered, which, however, is always returned; and another symbol of welcome is the crust of water and gilt dish into which the visitors dips her fingers.

Until lately all medical assistance was denied to the women of India, who are restricted from seeing a physician of the opposite sex, and it was not until bands of English missionary ladies went forth and founded hospitals that help in time of sickness was yielded them. If exception was ever made to the rule, the patient was concealed behind the folds of a heavy curtain, through an aperture in which the tongue was exhibited and the pulse felt.

Dolls are very much appreciated by the little woman of India, but the hair must be black; otherwise all interest in the toy is lost since fair hair is associated with age and sorrow.

To be a widow is considered a great disgrace, as it is supposed to have brought such a calamity upon her the wife must have committed some great sin in a previous existence, for which she is now suffering. It is also considered disgraceful if a daughter of India at the age of twelve years is unmarried.—States.

Disturbed Conditions.

One spot alone on the earth's broad chart is free from strife at this time—Asia. The oldest of old worlds stands out solitary and alone in its enjoyment of that peace which is so dear to most hearts, and to which philosophers, poets and historians point as the scene of human blessing.

True, the Russian bear to the west of it is sometimes heard to growl, and makes things lively in his direction; but he is either honeyed or induced to go away. Europe is in a disturbed condition. There is no imminent danger of war, but the spirit of discontent prevails, and there is no telling where it will end. There is talk now of a general disarmament, but this is the hope of optimists and will not be realized. France will not disarm, nor will Germany. The Czar believes in holding rifle in hand, and Crispien, despite his professed desire to conciliate, will keep his kingdom on as good a war footing as he can.

Africa is a perpetual battle ground, the massacre of the Wilson party furnishing the latest scarlet page in the history of the Dark Continent.

In South America we have an active war going on, not noted for the shedding of vast quantities of blood, it is true, but still a war, and other Republics are likely, at any time, to be in the same condition as Brazil.

Central America is keeping up its record for strike, allied forces under Bonilla waging warfare against Vasquez, president of the republic of Honduras.

South of us we have Mexico, which is contending with revolutionists, whom they call bandits, but who show a disposition to play for bigger game than travelers, the seizure of the government being their object.

The United States is not plunging in any sanguinary conflict, but

a paper war, on an enormous scale, is in full blast, and it may be a good thing that a mighty space gapes between us and Hawaii. Then the contention of political parties has reached a stage far from pleasant, opponents being disposed to resort to almost any means to attain their ends.

Altogether considered, the world is not in that happy frame of mind which bespeaks the greatest comfort. It may be that it is too big for harmony; or that these disturbances are necessary to the ultimate good of the whole. At all events, things are not such as most people should like them to be. What is in store, the "cocoon of time" only can develop.—Item.

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