

ZENANA WORK IN MADRAS CITY.*

(Extract from a paper read by Miss Grace Stephens, of the Episcopal Methodist Mission, at Missionary Conference, Madras, India.

I MUST confess to having felt a great deal of hesitation when I was asked to read a paper on Zenana Work in Madras City before this Missionary Conference. The subject being a very large and important one I was doubtful whether I could do full justice to it. But remembering that we are workers together, and that the little I can give may be of some use, I consented.

Zenana work is woman's work for women in this large field of India. It is as extensive and as varied as the land itself, for there is no part of India where this work may not be undertaken. The work is the going from house to house among the upper and middle classes of Hindu and Mohammedan women, who from custom and caste are obliged to live secluded lives, and have not the privileges of our Christian religion. Zenana work is the means of giving them Bible instruction, and if necessary, teaching them secular subjects. True zenana work is the *open sesame* to many hearts and doors in Hindu Society. It is indeed a great work to go into these darkened homes. Only those with the love of Jesus in their hearts, and believing him to be the true Emancipator of women, can do this work satisfactorily.

The Master of Missions has exalted woman and given her a most honorable place in the world; but let us turn to look at the conditions of our heathen sisters in Madras, for whom Jesus died and our zenana work is being done. It is almost hard to believe that while the men are being educated, and are proud of their degrees, the women in most cases do not know a single letter in the alphabet. They are mostly uneducated and spiritually blind. It is a common saying among the men that the more uneducated the women are the better wives they will make. A Hindu once told me he could beat his wife and abuse her, and she would know no better than to suffer and endure and get a worse beating if she did not do better. A Hindu gentleman of high standing and good education said, "To give women education is like giving wings to a bird. It always tries to use its wings and often flies away: so," he said, "as we do not want to loose our women we will clip their wings, or give them none at all!" According to their custom most of the Hindu women, as you all know, are

their husband's slaves. Think of them having to wait hours sometimes without food because their lord and master has not taken his! In most cases he eats first and what he condescends to leave is her meal. She is by no means his companion or helpmeet in the house. When he entertains his companions and friends she is generally in the backyard or closed in a dark room. We have often seen that she must not sit down before him unless with special permission, and then seldom when the mother-in-law is nigh, unless that individual is an angel compared to most of them. A mother-in-law! Who can tell what that word means in a Hindu home? Have we not seen the bruises and marks of blows on the person of a young wife given by the hands of a mother-in-law? Before such the wife is filled with dread. We have sometimes heard the low whisper, "My mother-in-law is near, don't speak to me now." A woman struck her daughter-in-law such a blow on her mouth that she lost several of her teeth by it. To make amends for this cruel treatment she went to the bazaar and brought the daughter-in-law a small bundle of sweetmeats. "But," said the daughter-in-law "tho she was kind to me afterwards, can I forgive her?" Often the mother-in-law is supreme in the house, and the husband dare not interfere.

The Hindu widow, what is she like? I take from a paper the following which is a true picture: "The inhumanity with which the widows are treated is one of the foulest blots upon the Hindu character. A poor girl is given by her father in marriage. She may never have set her eyes on her husband except on the wedding day. But if the man who calls her wife dies, she is his widow, and a widow for life. She is stripped of her ornaments, her dress is changed, and among some classes her head is shaved, and her rich black hair is taken from her. Then begins a cry of bitterness and degradation. She is charged with her husband's death. He is taken from her, they say, to punish her sin in her former birth. The younger she is the greater sinner she must have been to be overtaken so soon. Her presence is a curse and a blight to any social festivity. The house is cursed for her sake. No accident or misfortune occurs, but it is her fault. She is the drudge and curse of the family." Is not all this very sad? But sadder still is the spiritual blindness of the women. We are told that a Hindu woman must have no religion at all, or if any, it is to be the religion of her husband. That is, he is her god. If she worships him all her