

A close-up photograph of a person's back, showing the skin texture and a dark strap or bandage across the middle. The image is slightly blurred, focusing on the texture of the skin.

***OLIVE  
SCHREINER***

***WOMAN  
AND  
LABOUR***

**Olive Schreiner**

# **Woman and Labour**

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# Introduction.

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It is necessary to say a few words to explain this book. The original title of the book was "Musings on Woman and Labour."

It is, what its name implies, a collection of musings on some of the points connected with woman's work.

In my early youth I began a book on Woman. I continued the work till ten years ago. It necessarily touched on most matters in which sex has a part, however incompletely.

It began by tracing the differences of sex function to their earliest appearances in life on the globe; not only as when in the animal world, two amoeboid globules coalesce, and the process of sexual generation almost unconsciously begins; but to its yet more primitive manifestations in plant life. In the first three chapters I traced, as far as I was able, the evolution of sex in different branches of non-human life. Many large facts surprised me in following this line of thought by their bearing on the whole modern sex problem. Such facts as this; that, in the great majority of species on the earth the female form exceeds the male in size and strength and often in predatory instinct; and that sex relationships may assume almost any form on earth as the conditions of life vary; and that, even in their sexual relations towards offspring, those differences which we, conventionally, are apt to suppose are inherent in the paternal or the maternal sex form, are not inherent—as when one studies the lives of certain toads, where the female deposits her eggs in cavities on the back of the

male, where the eggs are preserved and hatched; or, of certain sea animals, in which the male carries the young about with him and rears them in a pouch formed of his own substance; and countless other such. And above all, this important fact, which had first impressed me when as a child I wandered alone in the African bush and watched cock-o-veets singing their inter-knit love-songs, and small singing birds building their nests together, and caring for and watching over, not only their young, but each other, and which has powerfully influenced all I have thought and felt on sex matters since;—the fact that, along the line of bird life and among certain of its species sex has attained its highest and aesthetic, and one might almost say intellectual, development on earth: a point of development to which no human race as a whole has yet reached, and which represents the realisation of the highest sexual ideal which haunts humanity.

When these three chapters we ended I went on to deal, as far as possible, with woman's condition in the most primitive, in the savage and in the semi-savage states. I had always been strangely interested from childhood in watching the condition of the native African women in their primitive society about me. When I was eighteen I had a conversation with a Kafir woman still in her untouched primitive condition, a conversation which made a more profound impression on my mind than any but one other incident connected with the position of woman has ever done. She was a woman whom I cannot think of otherwise than as a person of genius. In language more eloquent and intense than I have ever heard from the lips of any other

woman, she painted the condition of the women of her race; the labour of women, the anguish of woman as she grew older, and the limitations of her life closed in about her, her sufferings under the condition of polygamy and subjection; all this she painted with a passion and intensity I have not known equalled; and yet, and this was the interesting point, when I went on to question her, combined with a deep and almost fierce bitterness against life and the unseen powers which had shaped woman and her conditions as they were, there was not one word of bitterness against the individual man, nor any will or intention to revolt; rather, there was a stern and almost majestic attitude of acceptance of the inevitable; life and the conditions of her race being what they were. It was this conversation which first forced upon me a truth, which I have since come to regard as almost axiomatic, that, the women of no race or class will ever rise in revolt or attempt to bring about a revolutionary readjustment of their relation to their society, however intense their suffering and however clear their perception of it, while the welfare and persistence of their society requires their submission: that, wherever there is a general attempt on the part of the women of any society to readjust their position in it, a close analysis will always show that the changed or changing conditions of that society have made woman's acquiescence no longer necessary or desirable.

Another point which it was attempted to deal with in this division of the book was the probability, amounting almost to a certainty, that woman's physical suffering and weakness in childbirth and certain other directions was the price which woman has been compelled to pay for the

passing of the race from the quadrupedal and four-handed state to the erect; and which was essential if humanity as we know it was to exist (this of course was dealt with by a physiological study of woman's structure); and also, to deal with the highly probable, though unproved and perhaps unprovable, suggestion, that it was largely the necessity which woman was under of bearing her helpless young in her arms while procuring food for them and herself, and of carrying them when escaping from enemies, that led to the entirely erect position being forced on developing humanity.

These and many other points throwing an interesting light on the later development of women (such as the relation between agriculture and the subjection of women) were gone into in this division of the book dealing with primitive and semi-barbarous womanhood.

When this division was ended, I had them type-written, and with the first three chapters bound in one volume about the year 1888; and then went on to work at the last division, which I had already begun.

This dealt with what is more popularly known as the women's question: with the causes which in modern European societies are leading women to attempt readjustment in their relation to their social organism; with the direction in which such readjustments are taking place; and with the results which in the future it appears likely such readjustments will produce.

After eleven years, 1899, these chapters were finished and bound in a large volume with the first two divisions. There then only remained to revise the book and write a preface. In addition to the prose argument I had in each

chapter one or more allegories; because while it is easy clearly to express abstract thoughts in argumentative prose, whatever emotion those thoughts awaken I have not felt myself able adequately to express except in the other form. (The allegory "Three Dreams in a Desert" which I published about nineteen years ago was taken from this book; and I have felt that perhaps being taken from its context it was not quite clear to every one.) I had also tried throughout to illustrate the subject with exactly those particular facts in the animal and human world, with which I had come into personal contact and which had helped to form the conclusions which were given; as it has always seemed to me that in dealing with sociological questions a knowledge of the exact manner in which any writer has arrived at his view is necessary in measuring its worth. The work had occupied a large part of my life, and I had hoped, whatever its deficiencies, that it might at least stimulate other minds, perhaps more happily situated, to an enlarged study of the question.

In 1899 I was living in Johannesburg, when, owing to ill-health, I was ordered suddenly to spend some time at a lower level. At the end of two months the Boer War broke out. Two days after war was proclaimed I arrived at De Aar on my way back to the Transvaal; but Martial Law had already been proclaimed there, and the military authorities refused to allow my return to my home in Johannesburg and sent me to the Colony; nor was I allowed to send any communication through, to any person, who might have extended some care over my possessions. Some eight months after, when the British troops had taken and entered



Johannesburg; a friend, who, being on the British side, had been allowed to go up, wrote me that he had visited my house and found it looted, that all that was of value had been taken or destroyed; that my desk had been forced open and broken up, and its contents set on fire in the centre of the room, so that the roof was blackened over the pile of burnt papers. He added that there was little in the remnants of paper of which I could make any use, but that he had gathered and stored the fragments till such time as I might be allowed to come and see them. I thus knew my book had been destroyed.

Some months later in the war when confined in a little up-country hamlet, many hundreds of miles from the coast and from Johannesburg; with the brunt of the war at that time breaking around us, de Wet having crossed the Orange River and being said to have been within a few miles of us, and the British columns moving hither and thither, I was living in a little house on the outskirts of the village, in a single room, with a stretcher and two packing-cases as furniture, and with my little dog for company. Thirty-six armed African natives were set to guard night and day at the doors and windows of the house; and I was only allowed to go out during certain hours in the middle of the day to fetch water from the fountain, or to buy what I needed, and I was allowed to receive no books, newspapers or magazines. A high barbed wire fence, guarded by armed natives, surrounded the village, through which it would have been death to try to escape. All day the pompoms from the armoured trains, that paraded on the railway line nine miles distant, could be heard at intervals; and at night the talk of

the armed natives as they pressed against the windows, and the tramp of the watch with the endless "Who goes there?" as they walked round the wire fence through the long, dark hours, when one was allowed neither to light a candle nor strike a match. When a conflict was fought near by, the dying and wounded were brought in; three men belonging to our little village were led out to execution; death sentences were read in our little market-place; our prison was filled with our fellow-countrymen; and we did not know from hour to hour what the next would bring to any of us. Under these conditions I felt it necessary I should resolutely force my thought at times from the horror of the world around me, to dwell on some abstract question, and it was under these circumstances that this little book was written; being a remembrance mainly drawn from one chapter of the larger book. The armed native guards standing against the uncurtained windows, it was impossible to open the shutters, and the room was therefore always so dark that even the physical act of writing was difficult.

A year and a half after, when the war was over and peace had been proclaimed for above four months, I with difficulty obtained a permit to visit the Transvaal. I found among the burnt fragments the leathern back of my book intact, the front half of the leaves burnt away; the back half of the leaves next to the cover still all there, but so browned and scorched with the flames that they broke as you touched them; and there was nothing left but to destroy it. I even then felt a hope that at some future time I might yet rewrite the entire book. But life is short; and I have found that not only shall I never rewrite the book, but I shall not

have the health even to fill out and harmonise this little remembrance from it.

It is therefore with considerable pain that I give out this fragment. I am only comforted by the thought that perhaps, all sincere and earnest search after truth, even where it fails to reach it, yet, often comes so near to it, that other minds more happily situated may be led, by pointing out its very limitations and errors, to obtain a larger view.

I have dared to give this long and very uninteresting explanation, not at all because I have wished by giving the conditions under which this little book was written, to make excuse for any repetitions or lack of literary perfection, for these things matter very little; but, because (and this matters very much) it might lead to misconception on the subject-matter itself if its genesis were not exactly understood.

Not only is this book not a general view of the whole vast body of phenomena connected with woman's position; but it is not even a bird's-eye view of the whole question of woman's relation to labour.

In the original book the matter of the parasitism of woman filled only one chapter out of twelve, and it was mainly from this chapter that this book was drawn. The question of the parasitism of woman is, I think, very vital, very important; it explains many phenomena which nothing else explains; and it will be of increasing importance. But for the moment there are other aspects of woman's relation to labour practically quite as pressing. In the larger book I had devoted one chapter entirely to an examination of the work woman has done and still does in the modern world, and the

gigantic evils which arise from the fact that her labour, especially domestic labour, often the most wearisome and unending known to any section of the human race, is not adequately recognised or recompensed. Especially on this point I have feared this book might lead to a misconception, if by its great insistence on the problem of sex parasitism, and the lighter dealing with other aspects, it should lead to the impression that woman's domestic labour at the present day (something quite distinct from, though indirectly connected with, the sexual relation between man and woman) should not be highly and most highly recognised and recompensed. I believe it will be in the future, and then when woman gives up her independent field of labour for domestic or marital duty of any kind, she will not receive her share of the earnings of the man as a more or less eleemosynary benefaction, placing her in a position of subjection, but an equal share, as the fair division, in an equal partnership. (It may be objected that where a man and woman have valued each other sufficiently to select one another from all other humans for a lifelong physical union, it is an impertinence to suppose there could be any necessity to adjust economic relations. In love there is no first nor last! And that the desire of each must be to excel the other in service. That this should be so is true; that it is so now, in the case of union between two perfectly morally developed humans, is also true, and that this condition may in a distant future be almost universal is certainly true. But dealing with this matter as a practical question today, we have to consider not what should be, or what may be, but what, given traditions and institutions of our societies, is,

today.) Especially I have feared that the points dealt with in this little book, when taken apart from other aspects of the question, might lead to the conception that it was intended to express the thought, that it was possible or desirable that woman in addition to her child-bearing should take from man his share in the support and care of his offspring or of the woman who fulfilled with regard to himself domestic duties of any kind. In that chapter in the original book devoted to the consideration of man's labour in connection with woman and with his offspring more than one hundred pages were devoted to illustrating how essential to the humanising and civilising of man, and therefore of the whole race, was an increased sense of sexual and paternal responsibility, and an increased justice towards woman as a domestic labourer. In the last half of the same chapter I dealt at great length with what seems to me an even more pressing practical sex question at this moment—man's attitude towards those women who are not engaged in domestic labour; toward that vast and always increasing body of women, who as modern conditions develop are thrown out into the stream of modern economic life to sustain themselves and often others by their own labour; and who yet are there bound hand and foot, not by the intellectual or physical limitations of their nature, but by artificial constrictions and conventions, the remnants of a past condition of society. It is largely this maladjustment, which, deeply studied in all its ramifications, will be found to lie as the taproot and central source of the most terrible of the social diseases that afflict us.

The fact that for equal work equally well performed by a man and by a woman, it is ordained that the woman on the ground of her sex alone shall receive a less recompense, is the nearest approach to a wilful and unqualified “wrong” in the whole relation of woman to society today. That males of enlightenment and equity can for an hour tolerate the existence of this inequality has seemed to me always incomprehensible; and it is only explainable when one regards it as a result of the blinding effects of custom and habit. Personally, I have felt so profoundly on this subject, that this, with one other point connected with woman’s sexual relation to man, are the only matters connected with woman’s position, in thinking of which I have always felt it necessary almost fiercely to crush down indignation and to restrain it, if I would maintain an impartiality of outlook. I should therefore much regret if the light and passing manner in which this question has been touched on in this little book made it seem of less vital importance than I hold it.

In the last chapter of the original book, the longest, and I believe the most important, I dealt with the problems connected with marriage and the personal relations of men and women in the modern world. In it I tried to give expression to that which I hold to be a great truth, and one on which I should not fear to challenge the verdict of long future generations—that, the direction in which the endeavour of woman to readjust herself to the new conditions of life is leading today, is not towards a greater sexual laxity, or promiscuity, or to an increased self-indulgence, but toward a higher appreciation of the

sacredness of all sex relations, and a clearer perception of the sex relation between man and woman as the basis of human society, on whose integrity, beauty and healthfulness depend the health and beauty of human life, as a whole. Above all, that it will lead to a closer, more permanent, more emotionally and intellectually complete and intimate relation between the individual man and woman. And if in the present disco-ordinate transitional stage of our social growth it is found necessary to allow of readjustment by means of divorce, it will not be because such readjustments will be regarded lightly, but rather, as when, in a complex and delicate mechanism moved by a central spring, we allow in the structure for the readjustment and regulation of that spring, because on its absolute perfection of action depends the movement of the whole mechanism. In the last pages of the book, I tried to express what seems to me a most profound truth often overlooked—that as humanity and human societies pass on slowly from their present barbarous and semi-savage condition in matters of sex into a higher, it will be found increasingly, that over and above its function in producing and sending onward the physical stream of life (a function which humanity shares with the most lowly animal and vegetable forms of life, and which even by some noted thinkers of the present day seems to be regarded as its only possible function,) that sex and the sexual relation between man and woman have distinct aesthetic, intellectual, and spiritual functions and ends, apart entirely from physical reproduction. That noble as is the function of the physical reproduction of humanity by the union of man and woman,

rightly viewed, that union has in it latent, other, and even higher forms, of creative energy and life-dispensing power, and that its history on earth has only begun. As the first wild rose when it hung from its stem with its centre of stamens and pistils and its single whorl of pale petals, had only begun its course, and was destined, as the ages passed, to develop stamen upon stamen and petal upon petal, till it assumed a hundred forms of joy and beauty.

And, it would indeed almost seem, that, on the path toward the higher development of sexual life on earth, as man has so often had to lead in other paths, that here it is perhaps woman, by reason of those very sexual conditions which in the past have crushed and trammelled her, who is bound to lead the way, and man to follow. So that it may be at last, that sexual love—that tired angel who through the ages has presided over the march of humanity, with distraught eyes, and feather-shafts broken, and wings drabbled in the mires of lust and greed, and golden locks caked over with the dust of injustice and oppression—till those looking at him have sometimes cried in terror, “He is the Evil and not the Good of life!” and have sought, if it were not possible, to exterminate him—shall yet, at last, bathed from the mire and dust of ages in the streams of friendship and freedom, leap upwards, with white wings spread, resplendent in the sunshine of a distant future—the essentially Good and Beautiful of human existence.

I have given this long and very wearisome explanation of the scope and origin of this little book, because I feel that it might lead to grave misunderstanding were it not understood how it came to be written.



I have inscribed it to my friend, Lady Constance Lytton; not because I think it worthy of her, nor yet because of the splendid part she has played in the struggle of the women fighting today in England for certain forms of freedom for all women. It is, if I may be allowed without violating the sanctity of a close personal friendship so to say, because she, with one or two other men and women I have known, have embodied for me the highest ideal of human nature, in which intellectual power and strength of will are combined with an infinite tenderness and a wide human sympathy; a combination which, whether in the person of the man or the woman, is essential to the existence of the fully rounded and harmonised human creature; and which an English woman of genius summed in one line when she cried in her invocation of her great French sister:—

“Thou large-brained woman and large-hearted man!”

One word more I should like to add, as I may not again speak or write on this subject. I should like to say to the men and women of the generations which will come after us —“You will look back at us with astonishment! You will wonder at passionate struggles that accomplished so little; at the, to you, obvious paths to attain our ends which we did not take; at the intolerable evils before which it will seem to you we sat down passive; at the great truths staring us in the face, which we failed to see; at the truths we grasped at, but could never quite get our fingers round. You will marvel at the labour that ended in so little—but, what you will never know is how it was thinking of you and for you, that we struggled as we did and accomplished the little which we have done; that it was in the thought of your

larger realisation and fuller life, that we found consolation for the futilities of our own.”

“What I aspired to be, and was not, comforts me.”

O.S.

# Chapter I. Parasitism.

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In that clamour which has arisen in the modern world, where now this, and then that, is demanded for and by large bodies of modern women, he who listens carefully may detect as a keynote, beneath all the clamour, a demand which may be embodied in such a cry as this: Give us labour and the training which fits for labour! We demand this, not for ourselves alone, but for the race.

If this demand be logically expanded, it will take such form as this: Give us labour! For countless ages, for thousands, millions it may be, we have laboured. When first man wandered, the naked, newly-erected savage, and hunted and fought, we wandered with him: each step of his was ours. Within our bodies we bore the race, on our shoulders we carried it; we sought the roots and plants for its food; and, when man's barbed arrow or hook brought the game, our hands dressed it. Side by side, the savage man and the savage woman, we wandered free together and laboured free together. And we were contented!

Then a change came.

We ceased from our wanderings, and, camping upon one spot of earth, again the labours of life were divided between us. While man went forth to hunt, or to battle with the foe who would have dispossessed us of all, we laboured on the land. We hoed the earth, we reaped the grain, we shaped the dwellings, we wove the clothing, we modelled the earthen vessels and drew the lines upon them, which were humanity's first attempt at domestic art; we studied the

properties and uses of plants, and our old women were the first physicians of the race, as, often, its first priests and prophets.

We fed the race at our breast, we bore it on our shoulders; through us it was shaped, fed, and clothed. Labour more toilsome and unending than that of man was ours; yet did we never cry out that it was too heavy for us. While savage man lay in the sunshine on his skins, resting, that he might be fitted for war or the chase, or while he shaped his weapons of death, he ate and drank that which our hands had provided for him; and while we knelt over our grindstone, or hoed in the fields, with one child in our womb, perhaps, and one on our back, toiling till the young body was old before its time—did we ever cry out that the labour allotted to us was too hard for us? Did we not know that the woman who threw down her burden was as a man who cast away his shield in battle—a coward and a traitor to his race? Man fought—that was his work; we fed and nurtured the race—that was ours. We knew that upon our labours, even as upon man's, depended the life and well-being of the people whom we bore. We endured our toil, as man bore his wounds, silently; and we were content.

Then again a change came.

Ages passed, and time was when it was no longer necessary that all men should go to the hunt or the field of war; and when only one in five, or one in ten, or but one in twenty, was needed continually for these labours. Then our fellow-man, having no longer full occupation in his old fields of labour, began to take his share in ours. He too began to cultivate the field, to build the house, to grind the corn (or