

The Woman's Missionary Society.

[This Department is in the interests of the W. M. Society. All communications for it should be addressed to Mrs. Jos. McLeod, Fredericton.]

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RAMABAI.

AND THE LITTLE CHILD WIDOWS OF INDIA.

On a remote plateau of the Western Ghats, in the forest of Gungamul, there lived a rich Brahman priest. He had climbed this mountain with his little child wife. He married her on the banks of the sacred river Godavari, while on a religious pilgrimage. When he was a boy he overheard a queen in a palace reciting verses from the Sanskrit language, and he resolved to educate his own wife, who was only nine years old. But when he began to teach her those same verses from the Sanskrit, his friends and relatives objected, and, in order to carry out his plans, he was obliged to leave his home.

He made his way up the mountain to the source of one of the sacred rivers, where the jungle rustled with fierce untamed beasts. The little bride would wrap herself up in a blanket, trembling with terror, when the tigers came with the darkness, and howled around their dwelling. Students from many provinces gathered here to study with this learned Brahman, and he became very wealthy and a rich land owner. In 1858 Ramabai was born, and she remembers that "while the forest birds chirped their morning songs in the early twilight hours, before the toilsome day had dawned, her mother taught her little ones."

For several years the shadow of a terrible famine had been hovering over India. It reached its climax in the year 1877. The day came when this little family had eaten their last grain of rice. They had sold their jewels, their costly garments, silverware, land, in fact, everything, to keep from starvation. They left their home and entered the great forest.

Ramabai says: "It took us nearly two days to come out of the forest into a village. In the ruins of an old temple, where no one dwelt, but wild animals, we stayed four days. A young Brahman gave us some food. My father, who was old and infirm and blind, was attacked by fever, and soon died. I shall never forget his last injunctions to me. He held me tight in his arms and, stroking my head and cheeks, he told me in a few words, broken with emotion, to remember how he loved me and how he taught me to do right and never

depart from the ways of righteousness. He did not know the only true God, but served the unknown god, with all his heart and strength, and he was very desirous that his children should serve him to the last. 'Remember, my child,' he said, 'you are my youngest, my most beloved child. I have given you into the hands of our god; you are his, and to him alone you must belong, and serve all your life.' He could speak no more."

They wandered on in search of food, but the mother and sister soon died of starvation. Ramabai and her brother continued their sad journey looking for work. They passed through many villages, but the houses were empty. Instead of the hurrying, laughing crowds that one meets on the highway, there was only the hushed silence which follows death. It was in vain to look for men, women or children. They had wandered off to find food and starved to death. Their bones lay scattered by the roadside. Ramabai says: "We had no blankets or thick garments to cover ourselves, and when travelling we had to walk barefoot without umbrellas and to rest in the night, either under the trees on the roadside or under the arches of bridges or on the ground. Once on the banks of a river in the Punjab we tried to keep off the intense cold by digging two graves and putting ourselves into them, covering ourselves with the dry sand from the river bank. We were without food for many days."

After great hardship and suffering they reached Calcutta and soon afterwards her brother died. Ramabai married a Bengali lawyer, but he died in eighteen months. Gifted, learned, admired by everyone, tracing her noble Brahman ancestry back a thousand years, she suddenly found herself a widow, one of that despised class, for whose wrongs there seemed no redress.

The Hindus believe that the wife, by some crime in a preceding existence, has caused the death of her husband, and, until the British abolished the cruel custom, they were burned alive on the funeral pyres with their dead husbands. No matter of what rank or caste, the life of the widow is sad beyond description. The poor little child widows, all their lives accursed, because death took away the boys to whom they were betrothed in infancy, and they are held to be the cause of the death of persons that they never saw. There are thousands of baby widows under 4 years of age. Ill-treated, ill-fed, many of them not old enough to know why they are beaten, kept in a corner and almost starved. Nowhere else in the world is woman so oppressed and cruelly treated as in India.

A novel thought came to Ramabai in her sorrow. She resolved to establish a work in India which would

elevate and ennoble woman. She planned to take little child widows into her own home, and work out their deliverance from cruel pagan customs by means of a Christian education; and in order to enlist the sympathies and help of good people in other lands she sailed for England, where she obtained a position in the Cheltenham College as professor of Sanskrit. There she taught and studied for three years, and then she came to America and lectured in our principal cities, and wrote a book, "The High Caste Hindu Woman." The proceeds of the book were for her support in her work.

Ramabai opened her school in India for child widows in 1889. A missionary who visited the home in Poona amid sweltering heat, over dizzy heights and through the scorches of tunnels by which our locomotive pursued its zigzag journey, witnessing a gorgeous sunset, such as can be seen only in tropical countries, and reaching Ramabai's home in the cool of the evening. The "Sharada Sadan" is only a few steps from the station and we passed under its vine-wreathed veranda and into the spacious, uncarpeted reception rooms. There was a piano in the room and a few chairs; this was all. Anyone who has been in a hot country will realize the comfort of such spaciousness and simplicity. In an apartment just beyond we heard the hum of voices, and caught a glimpse of dark, delicate faces. What a picture it was! Those youthful figures, not one above sixteen, in their many-hued Oriental costumes, all of them with sad histories. One dear little innocent had been left a widow at three years of age. It remains a weird, yet delightful, memory, and the white figure of our gentle hostess flits through it all."

Ramabai went into the famine districts and collected hundreds of starving widows and orphans and took them to her home. The house at Poona was not large enough for the little famine waifs, and so she bought a farm at Khedgaon, and named it "Salvation" (Mukti). She has two thousand in her two schools. The mission buildings form a small town. Many of her scholars have become teachers, assistants of missionaries, and skilled trained nurses.—*Laura M. Latimer, in Christian Work.*

THE SCHOOL FOR THE BLIND.—Dr. Fraser, superintendent of the School for the Blind, has arranged for pupils of the school a series of meetings in this province. The object is to show what the children can do, the other is to awaken interest in them, for the school needs funds, and while it does most excellent work, it could do more if it had the means. The following dates and places are arranged:

- Sussex—Wednesday, April 15.
- St. John—Thursday, April 16.
- St. John—Friday, April 17.
- Woodstock—Saturday, April 18.
- St. Andrews—Monday, April 20.
- St. Stephen—Tuesday, April 21.
- Fredericton—Wednesday, April 22.
- Moncton—Thursday, April 23.
- Memramcook—Friday, April 24.
- Sackville—Saturday, April 25.
- Amherst—Monday, April 27.
- Parrsboro—Tuesday, April 28.
- Springhill—Wednesday, April 29.
- Oxford—Thursday, April 30.

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