

## Toronto Ramabai Circle



THE PUNDITA RAMABAI.

*(From Engraving kindly loaned by Publishers St. Nicholas Magazine).*

From Prof. F. Max Muller's Endorsement of Ramabai's Work in behalf of the Child-Widows of India.  
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## Ramabai.

THERE were, according to the census of 1881, no less than 20,930,626 widows in India. Out of that number 78,976 were under nine years of age, 207,388 were under fourteen years of age, 382,736 were under nineteen years of age.

We can hardly realize the idea of a widow under nine years of age, still less can we realize the life of misery that is implied in that name. That poor creature, the child-widow, is the combined result of native superstition and Mahomedan licentiousness. In ancient times it was considered the duty of the father to see his daughter married as soon as she was marriageable. To make quite sure of a husband, a father would often marry his daughter when she was a mere child. He had then done his duty. The child was brought up at home or in her future husband's house, and when the time came, the betrothed children became husband and wife. This system acted fairly well so long as women knew of no other. Parents were careful in the selection of husbands for their daughters and of wives for their sons, and women were taught to accept a husband as they accepted a father.

But when during the present generation European education found an entrance into some of the better families in India, it could not be otherwise but that some of the young women who had read Shakespeare, Scott, and Tennyson, should revolt against being treated as mere articles of barter. They would become the wives of their betrothed husbands if they could respect and love them; if not, they would choose for themselves, or rather remain unmarried.

Unfortunately it was not always easy for fathers to find boys as proper husbands for their daughters. The daughter of a Brahman could be married to a Brahman only, and there were numerous restrictions as to consanguinity. Hence, if no proper husband could be found, any husband was taken as long as he was of the right caste. Mere girls were affianced to husbands old enough to be their fathers and grandfathers. At last it became a regular trade for certain Brahmans to marry as many as fifty or even a hundred little girls, some of whom they would never see again,



but all of whom would become child-widows as soon as their reputed husband died.

This may help to explain the appalling number of widows and child-widows in India. But now let us hear what is the life of a widow in India. It is true they can no longer be burnt, but it is equally true that many of them would gladly prefer the funeral pile to the hell on earth to which they now find themselves consigned. I quote the words of Ramabai, herself a widow, a lady who has tasted well nigh every bitterness that human life can present to a woman's lips, but who is as courageous as ever, and determined, so long as her frail body can hold her strong soul, to fight the battle of her sisters against native intolerance and English indifference. She says :—

Throughout India widowhood is regarded as the punishment for horrible crimes committed by the woman in her former existence. . . . If the widow be a mother of sons she is not usually a pitiable object, although she is certainly looked upon as a sinner. The widow-mother of girls is treated indifferently, and sometimes with special hatred. But it is the child-widow upon whom in an especial manner falls the abuse and hatred of the community as the greatest criminal upon whom Heaven's judgment has been pronounced. A Hindoo woman thinks it worse than death to lose her beautiful hair. Among the Brahmans of the Deccan the heads of all widows must be shaved regularly every fortnight. Girls of fourteen and fifteen, who hardly know the reason why they are so cruelly deprived of everything they like, are often seen wearing sad countenances, their eyes swollen from shedding tears. They are glad to find a dark corner where they may hide their faces. The widow must wear a single coarse garment. She must eat only one meal during the twenty-four hours of a day. She must never take part in family feasts. A man or woman thinks it unlucky to behold a widow's face before seeing any other object in the morning. The relations and neighbors of the young widow's husband are always ready to call her bad names. There is scarcely a day of her life on which she is not cursed by these people as the cause of their beloved friend's death. In addition to all this, the young widow is always looked upon with suspicion, for fear she may some time bring disgrace upon the family by committing some improper act. She is closely confined to the house, forbidden even to associate with her female friends. . . . Her life, then, destitute as it is of the least literary knowledge, void of all hope, empty of every pleasure and social advantage, becomes intolerable, a curse to herself and society at large.

Need we wonder that these young widows try to escape from their prison home? But what can they do? The only alternative before them is either to commit suicide or, worse still, accept a life of infamy.

This is, indeed, the sad end of many a woman's life in India. After the few years of a joyous infancy follows the sudden darkness of child-widowhood, of a woman's despair or disgrace.

Can nothing be done to alleviate the miserable lot of those poor child-widows under nine years of age? If they are outcasts in their own families, if many of them are almost inevitably driven to a life of infamy, could not an experiment be made to found a home and a school for these waifs and strays of womankind, where a chance might be given them of preparing themselves for a happy and a useful life? F. M. M.

It is to the task above suggested that Ramabai is devoting herself, and, in May last, the Christian people of Toronto were privileged to hear her plead for her work, and many hearts were deeply stirred by the pathetic and powerful appeal then made. With the view of enabling all, so desiring, to share in this great work there was subsequently organized a "TORONTO RAMABAI CIRCLE FOR THE ELEVATION OF WOMAN IN INDIA," and the following officers were elected:

MRS. STEPHEN HOWARD, 38 Peter St., *President.*

MISS CARTY, 221 Jarvis St., *Secretary.*

MRS. S. R. HART, 25 Wilcox St., *Treasurer.*

The "Circle" consists of persons who contribute, in one payment \$10, or annually for ten years \$1 to the fund, which is being raised to defray the annual cost of maintaining and carrying on the school for high caste child-widows about to be established by Ramabai in or about Poona, in Southern India. Contributors of \$1 per annum must also, in order to become members of the "Circle," pledge themselves to continue their subscriptions for ten years. Information in regard to the progress of the work will, from time to time, be disseminated among the members of the "Circle," chiefly by means of printed statements, as it is not felt necessary or desirable to have stated meetings of the members. The "Circle" is in connection with the central organization, known as the "Ramabai Association," organized in Boston, Mass., December 13th, 1887. The work is to be carried on under the direction of an influential committee of the Association, assisted by an Advisory Board in India. The expenditure of the funds contributed will be entirely under the control of this committee and the Treasurers of Local "Circles" will remit to the Treasurer of the Association at Boston all moneys received by them.

Contributions of any amount from those not desiring to become members of the "Circle" or from others will be gladly received.

*Toronto, September, 1888.*