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*** START OF THE PROJECT GUTENBERG EBOOK GIRLS: FAULTS AND IDEALS ***

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GIRLS: FAULTS AND IDEALS.

A FAMILIAR TALK, WITH QUOTATIONS FROM LETTERS.

BY

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"Cleanse thou me from secret faults." PSA. xix, 12. "The King's daughter is all glorious within: her clothing is of wrought gold."--PSA. xiv. 13.

The religion of Christ has something to say to every man, woman, and child, in every relation, on every day, in every experience of life. It is not something for Sundays, and for prayer-meetings, and for sick-rooms, death-beds, and funerals: it is just as much for the school-room, the play-ground, the store, the kitchen, the street. Wherever you may chance to be, if you listen you will hear a voice behind you, whispering, "This is the way; walk ye in it." The Bible is the Word of God, our Father's will concerning his children; and it has something to say each day, at every point of experience, to every one of us. I want to help the girls and young women, if I can, to hear a little of what Christ has to say to them.

It is good for us to see ourselves as others see us. Hence, I have asked a number of Christian young men to give me answers to certain questions, and from these I have quoted in this familiar talk. I take two of these questions, viz.:

1. "What are some of the most common faults in young women of your acquaintance?"
2. "What are some of the essential elements of character in your ideal of true young womanhood?"

We shall think then of common faults and of ideals. The first text I have chosen is a prayer for for the cleansing of faults. The second is a description of the life that pleases God.

"Cleanse thou me from secret faults." Is there one of us who does not, from deepest heart pray this prayer? I pity that man or that woman who does not long to be cured of faults, whatever they are, however painful or costly their removal may be.

Some one says,--and the words are worthy of being written in gold,--"Count yourself richer that day you discover a new fault in yourself,--not richer because it is there, but richer because it is no longer a hidden fault; and if you have not found all your faults, pray to have them revealed to you, even if the revelation must come in a way that hurts your pride." Mr. Ruskin has this word also for young women: "Make sure that however good you may be, you have faults; that however dull you may be, you can find out what they are; and that however slight

they may be, you had better make some patient effort to get rid of them.... Therefore see that no day passes in which you do not make yourself a somewhat better creature; and in order to do that find out first what you are now.... If you do not dare to do this, find out why you do not dare, and try to get strength of heart enough to look yourself fairly in the face, in mind as well as in body.... Always have two mirrors on your toilet table, and see that with proper care you dress both the mind and body before them daily."

These words show us the importance of the prayer: "Cleanse thou me from secret faults." We all have our faults, which mar the beauty of our lives in the eyes of others. Every noble soul desires to grow out of all faults, to have them corrected. The smallest fault mars the beauty of the character; and one who seeks to possess only "whatsoever things are lovely" will be eager to be rid of whatever is faulty. Ofttimes, however, we do not know our own faults: we are unconscious of them. We cannot see ourselves as others see us. The friend does us a true kindness who tells us of the things in our character, habits, manners, which appear as blemishes, although many people have too much vanity to be told of their faults. They resent it as a personal insult when one points out any blemish in them. But this is most foolish short-sightedness. To learn of a fault is an opportunity to add a new line of beauty to the life. Our prayer each day should be that God would show us our secret faults, whatever messenger he may send to point them out, and then give us grace to correct them.

The young men who have replied to my question concerning the faults of young women have done so in most kindly spirit, for to a noble soul it is always an unwelcome task to find fault; it is much easier to name the beautiful things in those we love than the blemishes.

Several writers have referred to the matter of dress. One says "Too much time is given by many young ladies to dressing. They scarcely think of anything else." Another names, "The love of dress, the inordinate desire to excel their companions in this particular," as among the common faults in young women, adding that it has led many of them to ruin. Another says they like to make themselves attractive by conspicuous colors, and suggests that if they would spend less time in shopping and more in some elevating occupation, for example in making home brighter for brothers and parents, it would be better.

"Following fashion to an extreme that is unbecoming and often extravagant; too great attention to outward adornment at the expense of inner adornment," another marks as a too prominent fault. We remember that St. Peter has a word about dressing: "Whose adorning, let it not be that outward adorning of plaiting the hair, and of wearing of gold, or of putting on of apparel; but let it be the hidden man of the heart, in that which is not corruptible, even the ornament of a meek and quite spirit." Every young woman should dress well, that is, neatly, tastefully, modestly, whether she be rich or poor. Conspicuous dressing is vulgar. True refinement avoids anything showy and flashy: it never dresses better than it can afford, and yet it is always well dressed, even in simple muslin or plain calico.

Another fault mentioned is the lack of moral earnestness. "Frivolity, arising from want of purpose in life," one names, "even the most sacred duties and relations being marred by this frivolousness. The best years of life are wasted in small talk and still smaller reading, tears and sighs being wasted over a novelist's creations, while God's creatures die for want of a word of sympathy." Another names, "Frivolity, want of definiteness of purpose." Still another says: "The giving of so little time to serious reflection and for preparation for the responsible duties of life. In other words, frivolity of manner, shallowness of thought, and, as a consequence, insipidity of speech are strongly marked faults in some young ladies." This writer pleads for deeper, intenser earnestness. "Young women will reach a high excellence of moral character only as they prepare themselves for life by self-discipline and culture." Another puts it down as "A want of firm decision in character and action," and says that too often, in times "when they ought to stand like a rock, they yield and fall;" and adds: "The young ladies of our land have power to mould the lives of the young men for good or for evil."

There is a caution in these words which every young woman should heed. Life is not play, for it has its solemn responsibilities, its sacred duties; and eternity lies beyond this little span. I call you to earnestness, moral earnestness. Determine to make the most and the best of your life. Get an education to fit you for life's duties, even though it must be gotten in the little fragments of time that you can redeem from busy days. Life is too short to crowd everything into it. Something must always be left out. Better leave out many of your amusements and recreations, than grow up into womanhood ignorant and with undisciplined intellectual powers. Train your mind to think. Set your ideal before you,--rich, beautiful womanhood,--and bend all your energy to reach it.

Some of these letters speak of the common talk of girls as being largely idle gossip; criticisms of absent people; unkind words about persons whom the ladies would meet with warm professions of friendship and fervent kisses if they were to come in a minute later.

Dear girls, I plead for sincerity in speech. "Do not yield to the passion for miserable gossip which is so common. Talk about things, not people. Do not malign or backbite your absent friend. What is friendship worth if the moment the person is out of sight the tongue that has professed affection becomes a poisoned fang, and the lips which gave their warm kiss utter the word of ridicule, or sneer, or aspersion? Better be dumb than have the gift of speech to be used in the miserable idle words, insincerities, and backbitings too common in modern society. Surely something better can be found to talk about; if not, utter silence is more heaven-like. A stupid girl who cannot talk at all is better far than a chattering girl who can talk of nothing good or useful.

"Find thou always time to say some earnest word
between the idle talk."

One mentions "_want of reverence for sacred things_" as a sad fault in some young women. He has seen them whispering in the church and Sunday school, during sermon and lesson, even during prayer, and has marked other acts of irreverence. It is to be hoped that this fault is indeed rare, unless it be in very young girls, who know no better. But as the fault has been pointed out by one who has been sorely pained by it, will not the girls and young women think of it a moment? A girl's religion should be full of joy and gladness. It should make her happy, fill her lips with song; but it should make her so reverent that, in the presence of her God, in prayer, in worship, in the study of the Bible, her heart shall be silent with the silence of adoration. Dear girls, remember that in any religious service, you are standing or bowing before God, and let nothing for one instant tempt you to whisper, to smile, to do aught that would grieve the Holy Spirit. Others speak of "_a want of respect for the aged_", and especially for parents, as a fault of young women. "How often is the kind advice a father and mother set aside, just because it goes against some whim or fancy of their own! A desire on the part of a young lady to live in the fashion, to be well-dressed at all hours and ready for callers--how much toil and sacrifice often fall to a good mother from such an ambition!" The writer gives other illustrations of the same spirit in some girls. It is hoped that there are but few who see their own face in this mirror.

Not long since I stood by the coffin and grave of a young girl whom I had known for a dozen years. She received a fine education, having finished a course in one of the best colleges of the land. What did she do with her education? Did she sit down as a lady of elegant leisure? Did she think her trained powers were too fine to be used in any common work? Did she look down from her lofty height upon her mother as old-fashioned, out of date? No: she came home from college at the end of her course, and at once went into her home to lift the burden and care from the shoulders of the loving, patient mother who had toiled for her so long in order that she might receive her education and training. When the beautiful girl was dead, the mother told me with loving gladness how Gertrude had lifted one by one every burden from her during those years, until, at last, the child's own hands carried all the household care and responsibility. She did not think her richly-furnished life too fine to be used in plain household duties, She remembered all her mother's self-denials in her behalf in earlier days, and rejoiced that now she might, in some measure, reward her. I have spoken of this one young woman's loving regard for her mother, and of the way she showed it, in the hope that it may inspire in many another young girl's heart a spirit of noble helpfulness toward a tired mother.

One writer notes as a fault in some young women, that they are "_careless of their good names_". "They are not careful enough as to their associates and companions. Some of them are seen with young men who are known to be of questionable moral character. On the streets they talk loudly, so as unconsciously to attract attention to themselves. They act so that young men of the looser sort will stare at them and even dare to speak to them." In these and other ways, certain young women, this writer says, imperil their own good name, and, I may add, imperil their souls.

When will young girls learn that modesty and shrinking from public gaze are the invariable marks of true beauty in womanhood; and that anything which is contrary to these is a mark of vulgarity and ill-breeding?

Guard your name as the jewel of your life. Many a young woman with pure life has lived under shadows all her later years, because of some careless--only careless, not wrong--act in youth which had the appearance of evil.

In one letter received from a thoughtful young man, mention is made of a "disregard of health," as a common fault in young women. Another mentions but one fault,--"the lack of glad earnestness." Another specifies, "thoughtlessness, heedlessness, a disregard of the feelings of others," Another thinks some young women "so weak and dependent that they incur the risk of becoming a living embodiment of the wicked proverb, 'So good that they are good for nothing.'" On the other hand, however, one writer deplures just the reverse of this, the tendency in young women to be independent, self-reliant, appearing not to need protection and shelter.

Doubtless there is truth in both those criticisms: there are some young women who are so dainty, so accomplished, so delicate, that they can be of little use in this world. When misfortune comes to such and they are thrown out of the cosy nest, they are in a most pitiable condition indeed. They can do nothing to provide for themselves. Then there are others who so pride themselves on their independence, that one of the sweetest charms of womanhood is lost--the charm of gentle trustfulness.

I have suggested enough faults for one lesson,--perhaps as many as you can carry in your mind, certainly as many as you can correct, although I have not exhausted the list that I find in my correspondence. As I said at the beginning, these faults are pointed out, not in the spirit of criticism, but in the spirit of kindness, of truest interest, and with desire to help. Many of them may seem very trivial faults, but small specks stain the whiteness of a fair robe. "Little things make perfection." You cannot afford to keep the least discovered fault in your character or conduct, for little blemishes are the beginnings of greater ones that by and by will destroy all the beauty of life.

"It is the little rift within the lute
That by and by will make music mute,
And, ever widening, slowly silence all--
The little rift within the lover's lute:
Or little pitted speck in garnered fruit,
That rotting inward, slowly moulders all."

Will you not, then, pray this prayer: "Cleanse thou me from secret faults"? Do not try to hide your faults--hiding them does not cure them. Every true woman wants to grow into perfect moral and spiritual beauty. In order to do this, she wants to know wherein she fails, what blemishes others see in her, what blemishes God sees in her. Then, as quickly as she discovers the faults, she wants to have them removed. The old artist Apelles had for his motto: "_Nulla dies sine linea_"--"No day without a

line." Will you not take this motto for yours, and seek every day to get the victory over some little blemish, to get some fault corrected, to get in your life a little more of the beauty of perfect womanhood? Cleanse thou me, O Lord, from secret faults.

Now I turn your thoughts away from faults to ideals. The second question was: "What are some of the essential elements of character in your ideal of true young womanhood?" Here also I can give only very few of the answers received.

Nearly every one emphasizes the element of gentleness. One says: "I like to see a young lady kind and agreeable to all, yet dignified." "Gentle in speech, voice, and manner; full of love for her home, yet firm and decided in her convictions," says another. One sums up his ideal in these particulars: "An unspotted character, a cheerful disposition, a generous, untiring heart, and a brave will." Nearly all put strength with gentleness, in some form. "All the firmness that does not exclude delicacy, and all the softness that does not imply weakness. Loving, helpful, and trusting, she must be able to soothe anxiety by her presence; charm and allay irritability by her sweetness of temper." Another writes: "A beauty of spirit in which love, gentleness, and kindness are mingled. Patience and meekness, fortitude, a well-governed temper, sympathy, and tenderness," Says another: "Kind, courteous, humble, and affectionate to old and young, rich and poor, yet ambitious to right limits." One young man writes: "Loving and kind, a Christian in heart and arts; a character based on Christ and his teachings." Then follows this noble tribute: "My own mother has lived and proved this ideal for me."

Of this tenor are all the letters. Without gentleness no woman can be truly beautiful. Cruelty in a man is a sad disfigurement, but in a woman it is the marring of all her loveliness.

Purity is another element which, in many of the letters, is emphasized. I need not quote the words. I need only remind you that purity must have its home in the heart, if it is to be the glory of the life. "Blessed are the pure in heart," is the Master's beatitude. "You are pure, you say; are your thoughts as white

As the snow that falls with the midnight's hush?
Could you see them blazoned in letters of light,
For the world to read, and feel no blush?

If you stood in the court of heaven, mid swift,
Glad greetings of loved ones who know no wrong,
Could you bare your heart to them all, and lift
Unshrinking eyes to that spotless throng?"

Faithfulness is named by many as another essential element in true womanhood. One answers: "Courage to take a positive stand on all moral questions ... Industry that consists in something more than playing mechanically a few pieces on the piano, or tracing grotesque figures in wool or silk." Here two elements of faithfulness are

indicated--faithfulness in one's place in all one's work, and moral faithfulness in following conscience. Other letters suggest practically the same essential quality.

It is impossible to over-emphasise this element. The time has gone by forever when woman, in Christian lands, can be regarded as a mere ornament, and can be shut out of active life. She is not a doll or a toy. She has her duties and responsibilities. She is not born merely to be married as soon as possible, and from girlhood to consider her wedding as the goal of her life. Thousands of young women will never be married, and yet their life need not be a failure though their fingers are never circled by a wedding-ring. Women have immortal souls. Their heaven does not depend upon being linked with a husband, as the Mormons teach. Marriage is a good thing for a woman, if she marry well. I honor marriage as one of the holiest and most sacred of God's ordinances.

But, here is the truth which I want to impress, that a young woman should not begin her life with the thought that she must get a husband. Oh, the sad desecration of womanhood that such a purpose in life produces! Every young girl should set for her great central aim in life, to be a woman, a true, noble, pure, holy woman, to seek ever the highest things; to learn from her Master her whole duty and responsibility in this world, and to do the one and fulfil the other, That should be her aim,--to realize in her character all the possibilities of her womanhood, and to do all the work for her Master which he may give her to do. Then, if God shall call her to be a wife, let her still go on with the same reverence, faith, and love, in whatever lines she may be led. I call young women to faithfulness--that is all, simple faithfulness, Accept your duty, and do it. Accept your responsibility, and meet it. Be true in every relation you are called to fill, Be brave enough to be loyal always to your womanhood.

One letter refers to what a true and noble sister may be to her brother, especially of the better than angel guardianship of an older sister over her younger brother. Evidently this young man writes with the consciousness that he himself has had the benediction of such an older sister. Volumes could be written concerning such ministries. Moses was not the only child by whose infancy's cradle an older sister has kept sacred watch. He was not the only great man who has owed much of his greatness to a faithful, self-denying Miriam. Many a man who is now honored in the world owes all his power and influence to a woman, perhaps too much forgotten now, perhaps worn and wrinkled, beauty gone, brightness faded, living alone and solitary, but who, in the days of his youth, was guardian angel to him, freely pouring out the best and richest of her life for him, giving the very blood of her veins that he might have more life; denying herself even needed comforts that he, her heart's pride, might be educated and might become a noble man among men.

Men who have true-hearted, self-forgetful older sisters rarely ever honor them half enough for their sacrifices, their unselfishnesses, the influence of their gentle purity and their hallowed love. Many a sister has denied herself everything, and has worn out her very life, for a brother who in his wealth or fame too often altogether forgets her.

There is a class of women in every community whom society flippantly denominates "old maids." The world needs yet to be told what uncrowned queens many of these women are, what undecorated heroines, what blessings to humanity, what builders of homes, what servants of others and of Christ. In thousands of cases they remain unmarried for the sake of their families. Many of them have refused brilliant offers of marriage that they might remain at home to be the shield and comfort and stay of parents growing feeble and needing their gentle care. Hundreds more there are who have hidden away their own heart-hunger that they devote their lives to good deeds for Christ and for humanity.

Florence Nightingale denied herself the joy and sweetness of wedded happiness, and gave her life to service in army hospitals, carrying to wounded and weary men the blessing of her kindly ministry, instead of shutting it up within the walls of a home of her own. And "Sister Dora," who wrought with such brave spirit in English parlours, "whose story is as a helpful evangel, was the bride of the world's sorrow only." Every community has its own examples of those whose hands have not felt the pressure of the wedding-ring because home loved ones seemed to need their affection and their service. We ought to honor these unmarried women. Many of them are the true heroines, the real sisters of mercy, of the communities where they live. Those who sometimes speak lightly of them might better bow down before them in reverence and kiss the hands, wrinkled now and faded, which never have been clasped in marriage. Some one, by the coffin of one of these unwedded queens, writes of the folded hands:

"Roughened and worn with ceaseless toil and care,
No perfumed grace, no dainty skill, had these!
They earned for whiter hands a jewelled case,
And kept the scars unlovely for their share.
Patient and slow, they had the will to bear
The whole world's burdens, but no power to seize
The flying joys of life, the gifts that please,
The gold and gems that others find so fair.
Dear hands, where bridal jewel never shone,
Whereon no lover's kiss was ever pressed,
Crossed in unwonted quiet on the breast,
I see through tears your glory, newly won,
The golden circlet of life's work well done,
Set with the shining pearl of perfect rest."

Every writer speaks of Christlikeness as the real crown and completeness of all womanly character. I have not space to quote the words of any letter. I may say only that Christ is not merely the ideal, the pattern, for every young woman to model her life upon, but that Christ is to be her Friend as well as her Saviour, her Master, her Helper. Mary, sitting at Christ's feet, is a loving picture which every young girl ought to keep framed in her heart. One letter sums up the ideal womanhood in these elements: "Trustfulness, hopefulness, joyfulness, peacefulness." But Christ must be in your heart before you can have these qualities in your life.

Let me now turn your thoughts to the other Scripture test. "The King's daughter is all glorious within; her clothing is of wrought gold." As the words read in our Common Version, they seem to describe the heart life and the outer life, or conduct. "All glorious within," with heart pure, beautiful, radiant, bearing the image of Christ. "Her clothing is of wrought gold," woven of threads of gold; that is, her outward life also is pure, beautiful, radiant, Christ-like. This is the King's Daughter's text; it is the motto which gives them the aim of all their life and activity. Let us look at it a few moments as containing the Scriptural ideal for all young womanhood. "_All glorious within_" That is the first thing to seek in your ideal of true young womanhood. You must have your heart right, and it must be kept right. An evil heart never made a holy life. A dark heart never made a shining life. A selfish heart never made an unselfish life. A sad heart never made a glad life. Says Faber: "There are souls in the world who have the gift of finding joy everywhere, and of leaving it behind them when they go. Joy gushes from under their fingers like jets of light. Their influence is an inevitable gladdening of the heart. It seems as if a shadow of God's own gift had passed upon them. They give light without meaning to shine. These bright hearts have a great work to do for God."

The reason these lives are such benedictions is because they are glorious within. I cannot press home this truth too earnestly. Everything depends upon the heart. The heart makes the life. A beautiful soul will make even a homely face beautiful. Seek, dear girls, to be "all glorious within."

There is only one way. Our natural hearts are not beautiful, not pure, not glorious. We must let Christ wash our souls till they are made whiter than snow. We must let the Holy Spirit cleanse us and purify us and glorify our life within. Here is a little prayer for all who would have their hearts transformed:

"Holy Spirit, dwell with me;
I myself would holy be;
Separate from sin, I would
Choose and cherish all things good;
And whatever I can be,
Give to him who gave me thee."

"_Her clothing is of wrought gold_" Not only is the inner life of the King's daughter all glorious, but her outer life also is resplendent. Her character is beautiful. Her disposition is kindly. Her spirit is gentle. She does lovely things. The heart makes the life. A glorious light within shines out and transfigures all the being. It is wonderful how the whole life is brightened by a loving, joyful heart. So I counsel the young women to seek to have their very faces shine with the glory of peace. Watch your life, your temper, your disposition, your conduct, your acts, your words. You are a daughter of the King; wear your royal garments wherever you may go. Go continually on your King's errands.

You know the morning prayer which each "King's Daughter" is requested to

offer: "Take me, Lord, and use me to-day as thou wilt. Whatever work thou has for me to do, give it into my hands. If there are those thou wouldst have me to help in any way, send them to me. Take my time and use it, as thou wilt. Let me be a vessel close to thy hand and meet for thy service, to be employed only for thee and for ministry to others in thy name."

It does not need great and conspicuous things to make a life golden and radiant in God's sight. Go out each day with this prayer of consecration on your lips, and be a blessing to every one you meet. Be a blessing, first, in your own home, to those who love you most. Leave joy in their hearts as you go forth, or as they go forth, for the day. Then go with benedictions to every other life you meet or touch.

We are told of Jesus that when persons touched even his garment's hem, virtue went out of him and healed them. We read of Peter that the people laid their sick in the street, that the apostle's shadow as he passed by might fall on them and heal them. It should be so, dear Christian young people, with your lives. You should be so full of the Spirit of God that at every touch of love or need or sorrow, virtue may flow out of you to heal and bless, and that the mere shadow of your presence may have a benediction for every one on whom it falls. Is there not some one whom you know, perhaps some lowly one, whom it always does you good to meet? Seek to have your life such a reservoir of good, of blessing, of life, of peace, of joy, that no one can meet you without taking away some blessing.

Some one may be discouraged by this setting forth of so high an ideal.

"I can never reach it. I can never train my life into such beauty. I can never be such a woman. I can never do the duties of a Christian in such a perfect way." No, never in your own strength. If no help came from God, if there were set for us all the lofty ideals of the Scriptures, and we were then left alone to work them out as best we could, unhelped, we might well despair. But, for every duty and requirement there is a promise of divine grace.

Ruskin says: "He gives us always strength enough, and sense enough, for what he wants us to do. If we either tire ourselves or puzzle ourselves, it is our own fault." This puts tersely, and in strong, homely phrase, the essence of such promises of the Scriptures as "My grace is sufficient for thee;" "As thy days so shall thy strength be," and many others, "Strength enough and sense enough." The latter is a fresh reading of the old assurance. We often say we shall get strength enough, but we do not always remember that we shall get sense enough for every duty, every perplexity, every place where great delicacy of wisdom is required. Yet there is a promise to any one who knows that he lacks wisdom and will ask for it.

So the young girl need not be afraid to step out into life, if she have Christ with her. He will show her the way. He will make her strong for duty. He will be in her, and will help her to grow into radiant beauty of life. He will give her wisdom for every place where wisdom is required. As you bow at his feet, Christ looks into your face with love

and yearning, eager to grant you a new blessing. Ask him for what you want most, and will it not be for the blessing of simple goodness, the love of Christ to fill your heart and pour out through all your life? No other gift can be such a benediction to you; no other can make you such a benediction to others.

I cannot tell you how my heart yearns for the young people to whom these words are addressed; how I long and pray that they may be cleansed of all hidden faults and made all glorious within, and that their garments may shine as if woven of threads of gold. With all sincerity I can make for each one who may read these pages this earnest, loving prayer:--
Father, our children keep!

We know not what is coming on the earth;
Beneath the shadow of thy heavenly wing,
Oh keep them, keep them, then who gav'st them birth.

Them in thy chambers hide!
Oh hide them and preserve them calm and safe,
Where sin abounds and error flows abroad,
And Satan tempts, and human passions chafe!

Oh keep them undefiled!
Unspotted from a tempting world of sin;
That, clothed in white, through the bright city gates
They may with us in triumph enter in."

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