



## Frances Powers Cobbe

### From “Wife Torture in England”

.....Regarding the extent of the evil<sup>1</sup> it is difficult to arrive at a just calculation. Speaking of those cases only which come before the courts, -- probably, of course, not a third of the whole number, -- the elements for forming an opinion are the following --

In the Judicial Statistics for England and Wales, issued in 1877 for 1876, we find that of Aggravated Assaults on Women and Children of the class which since 1853 have been brought under Summary Jurisdiction there were reported,

In 1876.....	2,737 cases
In 1875.....	3,106 cases
In 1874.....	2,841 cases

How many of these were assaults made by husbands on wives there is no means of distinguishing, but, judging from other sources, I should imagine they formed about four-fifths of the whole.

Among the worst cases, when the accused persons were committed for trial or bailed for appearance at Assizes or Sessions (coming under the head of Criminal Proceedings), the classification adopted in the Parliamentary Return does not permit of identifying the cases which concerned women only. Some rough guess on the matter may perhaps be formed from the preponderance of male criminals in all classes of violent crime. Out of 67 persons charged with Murder in 1876, 49 were men. Of 41 charged with Attempt to Murder, 35 were males. Of 157 charged with Shooting, Stabbing, &c., 146 were men. Of 232 charged with Manslaughter, 185 were men; and of 1,020 charged with Assault inflicting bodily harm, 857 were men. In short, out of 1,517 persons charged with crimes of cruelty and violence, more than five-sixths were males-, and only 235 females. Of course the men's offences include a variety of crimes besides Wife-beating and Wife-torture.

The details of the crimes for which twenty-two men who were capitally convicted in, 1876 suffered death are noteworthy on this head. (Criminal Statistics p. xxix.) Of these:

Edward Deacon, shoemaker, murdered his wife by cutting her head with a chopper.

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<sup>1</sup> Spousal abuse.

John Thomas Green, painter, shot his wife with a pistol.

John Eblethrift, labourer, murdered his wife by stabbing.

Charles O'Donnell, labourer, murdered his wife by beating.

Henry Webster, labourer, murdered his wife by cutting her throat.

.....Let us now proceed from the number to the nature of the offences in question. I have called this paper English *Wife-torture* because I wish to impress my readers with the fact that the familiar term "wife-beating" conveys about as remote a notion of the extremity of the cruelty as when candid and ingenuous vivisectors talk of scratching a newt's tail" when they refer to burning alive, or dissecting out the nerves of living dogs, or torturing ninety cats in one series of experiments.

Wife-beating is the mere preliminary canter before the race, preface to the serious matter which is to follow. Sometimes, there are men of comparatively mild dispositions who are content to on beating their wives year after year, giving them occasional black eyes and bruises, or tearing out of a few locks of their hair and spitting in their faces, or bestowing an ugly print of their iron fingers on, woman's soft arm, but not proceeding beyond these minor injuries anything perilous. Among the lower classes, unhappily, this rude treatment is understood to mean very little more than that the man uses his weapon -- the fists -- as the woman uses hers -- the tongue -- and neither are very much hurt or offended by what is either done by one said by the other. The whole state of manners is what is to be deplored and our hope must be to change bear-garden into the semblance of a civilized community, rather than by any direct effort to correct the special offence. Foul words, gross acts, drink, dirt, and vice, oath curses, and blows, it is all, alas! *in keeping* -- nor can we hope to cure one evil without the rest. But the unendurable mischief, the discovery of which has driven me to try to call public attention to the whole matter, is this -- Wife-beating in process of time, and in numberless cases, advances to Wife-torture, and the Wife-torture usually ends in Wife-maiming, Wife-blinding, or Wife-murder. A man who ha "thrashed" his wife with his fists half-a-dozen times, becomes satiated with such enjoyment as that performance brings, and next time he is angry he kicks her with his hob-nailed shoes. When he has kicked her a few times standing or sitting, he kicks her down and stamps on her stomach, her breast, or her face. If he does not wear clogs or hob-nailed shoes, he takes up some other weapon, a knife, a poker, a hammer, a bottle of vitriol, or a lighted lamp, and strikes her with it, or sets her on fire; -- and then, and then only, the hapless creature's sufferings are at an end.

I desire specially to avoid making this paper more painful than can be helped, but it is indispensable that some specimens of the tortures to which I refer should be brought before the reader's eye. I shall take them **exclusively from cases reported during the last three or four months.** Were I to go further back for a year or two, it would be easy to find some more "sensational," as, for example, of Michael Copeland, who threw his wife on a blazing fire; of George Ellis, who murdered his wife by pitching her out of window; of Ashton Keefe, who beat his wife and thrust a box of lighted matches into his little daughter's breast when she was too slow in bringing his beer; and of Charles Bradley, who, according to the report in the *Manchester*

*Examiner*, "came home, and after locking the door, told his wife he would murder her. He immediately set a large bulldog at her, and the dog, after flying at the upper part of her body, seized hold of the woman's right arm, which she lifted to protect herself, and tore pieces out. The prisoner in the meantime kept striking her in the face, and inciting the brute to worry her. The dog dragged her up and down, biting pieces out of her arms, and the prisoner then got on the sofa and hit and kicked her on the breast."

But the instances of the last three or four months -- from September to the end of January -- are more than enough to establish all I want to prove; and I beg here to return my thanks for a collection of them, and for many very useful observations and tabulations of them, to Miss A. Shore, who has been good enough to place them at my disposal.

It is needful to bear in mind in reading them, that the reports of such cases which appear in newspapers are by no means always reliable, or calculated to convey the same impressions as the sight of the actual trial. In some of the following instances, also, I have only been able to obtain the first announcement of the offence, without means of checking it by the subsequent proceedings in court. Per contra, it should be remembered that if a few of these cases may possibly have been exaggerated or trumped up (as I believe the story of the man pouring Chili vinegar into his wife's eyes proved to have been), there are, for every one of these *published* horrors, at least three or four *which never are reported at all*, and where the poor victim dies quietly of her injuries like a wounded animal, without seeking the mockery of redress offered her by the law.

James Mills cut his wife's throat as she lay in bed. He was quite sober at the time. On a previous occasion he had nearly torn away her left breast.

J. Coleman returned home early in the morning, and, finding his wife asleep, took up a heavy piece of wood and struck her on the head and arm, bruising her arm. On a previous occasion he had fractured her ribs.

John Mills poured out vitriol<sup>2</sup> deliberately, and threw it in his wife's face, because she asked him to give her some of his wages. He had said previously that he would blind her.

James Lawrence, who had been frequently bound over to keep the peace, and who had been supported by his wife's industry for years, struck her on the face with a poker, leaving traces of the most dreadful kind when she appeared in court.

Frederick Knight jumped on the face of his wife (who had only been confined a month) with a pair of boots studded with hobnails.

Richard Mountain beat his wife on the back and mouth, and turned her out of her bed and out of their room one hour after she had been confined.

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<sup>2</sup> Sulfuric acid.

Alfred Roberts felled his wife to the floor, with a child in her arms; knelt on her, and grasped her throat. She had previously taken out three summonses against him, but had never attended.

John Harris, a shoemaker, at Sheffield, found his wife and children in bed, dragged her out, and, after vainly attempting to force her into the oven, tore off her night-dress and turned her round before the fire "like a piece of beef," while the children stood on the stairs listening to their mother's agonized screams.

Richard Scully knocked in the frontal bone of his wife's forehead.

William White, stonemason, threw a burning paraffin lamp at his wife, and stood quietly watching her enveloped in flames, from the effects of which she died.

William Hussell, a butcher, ran a knife into his wife several times and killed her. Had threatened to do so often before.

Robert Kelly, engine-driver, bit a piece out of his wife's cheek.

William James, an operative boilermaker, stabbed his wife badly in the arm and mouth, observing afterwards, I am sorry I did not kill both" (his wife and her mother).

Thomas Richards, a smith, threw his wife down a flight of fourteen steps, when she came to entreat him to give her some money for her maintenance. He was living with another woman -- the nurse at a hospital where he had been ill.

James Fickett, a ratcatcher. His wife was found dying with broken ribs and cut and bruised face, a walking-stick with blood on it lying by. Fickett remarked, "If I am going to be hanged for you, I love you."

James Styles beat his wife about the head when he met her in the City Road. She had supported him for years by charwork, and during the whole time he had been in the habit of beating her, and on one occasion so assaulted her that the sight of one of her eyes was destroyed. He got drunk habitually with the money she earned.

John Harley, a compositor, committed for trial for cutting. and wounding his wife with intent to murder.

Joseph Moore, labourer, committed for trial for causing the death of his wife by striking her with an iron instrument on the head.

George Ralph Smith, oilman, cut his wife, as the doctor expressed it, "to pieces," with a hatchet, in their back parlour. She died afterwards, but he was found Not Guilty, as it was not certain that her death resulted from the wounds.

Fletcher Bisley, a clerk, struck his wife violently on the head with a poker, after having tried to throw a saucepan of boiling soup at her son. Both had just returned home and found Bisley in bed.

Alfred Cummins, tailor, struck his wife so as to deprive her of the sight of an eye.

Thomas Paget, laundryman, knocked down his wife in the street and kicked her till she became insensible, because she refused to give him money to get drink.

Alfred Etherington, shoemaker, kicked his wife in a dangerous way, and a week later dragged her out of bed, jumped on her, and struck her. He said he would have her life and the lives of all her children. He gave no money for the support of his family (six children), and he prevented her from keeping the situations she had obtained for their maintenance. She had summoned him six or seven times.

Jeremiah Fitzgerald, labourer, knocked down his wife and kicked her heavily in the forehead. He had been twice convicted before. The woman appeared in court with her face strapped up.

Patrick Flynn, violently kicked his wife after he had knocked her down, and then kicked a man who interfered to save her. Had already undergone six months' hard labour for assaulting his wife.

Here is a case recorded from personal observation by a magistrate's clerk:-

I attended a dying woman to take her deposition in a drunkard's dwelling. The husband was present in charge of the police. The poor wretched wife lay with many ribs broken, and her shoulder and one arm broken, and her head so smashed that you could scarcely recognize a feature of a woman. She, in her last agony, said that her husband had smashed her with a wooden bed-post. He, blubbering, said, 'Yes, it is true, but I was in drink, or would not have done it.'

And here is one that has come in while I have been writing:-

At the Blackburn police-court, yesterday, John Chamock was committed for trial on a charge of attempted murder. It was stated that he had fastened his wife's head in a cupboard and kicked her with his iron clogs, and that he had deliberately broken her arm. (Feb. 3, 1878.)

And here another (reported in the *Manchester Courier*, February 5th) so instructive in its details of the motives for Wife-murder, the sort of woman who is murdered, the man who kills, and the sentiment of juries as to what constitutes "Provocation" on the part of a wife, that I shall extract it at length:-

#### MANSLAUGHTER AT DUKINFIEW.

Thomas Harlow, 39, striker, Dukinfield, was indicted for the manslaughter of his wife, Ellen Harlow, 45 years old, at Dukinfield, on 30th November, 1877. The prisoner was committed

by the magistrates on the charge of wilful murder, but the grand jury reduced the indictment to that of manslaughter. Mr. Marshall prosecuted; and the prisoner, who was undefended by counsel, stated, in his plea, that he had no intention of killing his wife when he struck her.

The prisoner, who was employed in and about Dukinfield, lived with his wife and three children in Waterloo Street, in that town. On the morning of the 30<sup>th</sup> of November, the deceased went out hawking as usual, and returned shortly after twelve o'clock. During the time she was away the prisoner remained in the house sitting by the fire, and for the most part drinking beer. When she returned she busied herself in preparing dinner, and the prisoner went out for a short time. In the afternoon the prisoner laid himself down, and slept for two or three hours. About five o'clock the deceased, and a lodger named Margaret Daley, and several others, were sitting in the house, when the prisoner came in and asked his wife for twopence. She replied that she had not twopence, and that she had had trouble enough with being out hawking all day in the rain and hungry. He then began to abuse her, and asked her for something to eat. She gave him some potatoes and bacon; after eating the greater part of which he again began to abuse her. He once more asked her for twopence, and Margaret Daley, seeing there was likely to be a disturbance, gave him the twopence, and told him he had better get a pint of beer. Instead of getting beer, however, he sent a little girl to purchase a quantity of coal, and then recommenced abusing his wife. Shortly afterwards he was heard to exclaim, 'There will be a life less to-night, and I will take it.' At this time the persons who were sitting in the house when the prisoner came in went out, leaving Harlow, his wife, and their son Thomas, and Daley together. The prisoner had some further altercation with his wife, which ended with him striking her a violent blow under the right ear, felling her to the floor. She died in a few minutes afterwards, the cause of death being concussion of the brain. The prisoner subsequently gave himself into custody, and made a statement attributing his conduct to the provocation his wife had given him.

The jury found the prisoner guilty, and recommended him to mercy *on account of the provocation* he received. Sentence was deferred.

I think I may now safely ask the reader to **draw breath after all** these horrors, and agree with me that they cannot, must not, be allowed to go on unchecked, without some effort to stop them, and save these perishing and miserable creatures. Poor, stupid, ignorant women as most of them are, worn out with life-long drudgery, burdened with all the pangs and cares of many children, poorly fed and poorly clothed, with no pleasures and many pains, there is an enormous excuse to be made for them even if they do sometimes seek in drink the oblivion of their misery -- a brief dream of unreal joy, where real natural happiness is so far away -- But for those who rise above these temptations, who are sober where intoxication holds out their only chance of pleasure; chaste in the midst of foulness; tender mothers when their devotion calls for toilsome days and sleepless nights, -for these good, industrious, struggling women who, I have shown, are the chief victims of all this cruelty, -is it to be borne that we should sit patiently by and allow their lives to be trampled out in agony?

What ought to be done? (April 1878)