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I

THE POSITION OF WOMEN IN ENGLAND, 1836

The women's movement in England took shape about the middle of the nineteenth century. Fifty years earlier, Mary Wollstonecraft horrified her contemporaries by writing *A Vindication of the Rights of Women*, 1792. Of all those who have worked for the women's movement, she stands apart, a genius and a prophet. She wrote as the champion of women, half the human species, 'labouring under a yoke which through the records of time' had degraded them. She appealed to women for worthy conceptions of self-respect and to men to break the chains from women and to accept from them rational fellowship instead of slavish obedience. 'It is time', she wrote, 'to strike a revolution in female manners: to restore their lost dignity and make them labour, and by reforming themselves reform the world.' If women took exercise, she said, their bodies would become strong and a reasonable education would cultivate their minds. Why should they not enter spheres of paid work, instead of eating out their hearts in idleness? 'Women might cer-

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tainly study the art of healing and be physicians as well as nurses,' and again, 'Women must have a civic existence in the State, married or single.' 'Let woman share the rights and she will emulate the virtues of man.' No wonder England was shocked. Mary Wollstonecraft was far in advance of her time and her programme is not completed yet.

Five years later she died, and for half a century the position of women changed little. Then, gradually, the humanitarian movement awakened dull consciences and the idea dawned in lesser minds than that of Mary Wollstonecraft that women had rights as well as men. The organized women's movement started about 1850 and was at first controlled by middle-class women who thought mainly of the needs of women in their own class. Later, when the parliamentary franchise was extended (1867), the demand for votes for women began and working-class women co-operated actively. Many other reforms took place during Elizabeth Garrett's life, but she gave untiring support and her whole strength to the women's movement. 'No one has time for everything,' she said, and, 'the passion of my life is to help women.'

It may be well to describe shortly the position of middle-class women in England in 1836, the year Elizabeth Garrett was born.

The much discussed case of Mrs. Caroline Norton occurred that year and directed public attention to the

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legal disabilities of married women. Mrs. Norton left her husband on account of his cruelty: she could not bring an action against him, employ counsel, keep possession of money she inherited or earned, nor force him to tell her where he had sent the children. The rights of a husband over the children of the marriage were absolute and at his death he could leave them under a guardianship which did not include their mother.

Petitions were organized to alter these laws and the agitation started which finally secured the Equal Guardianship of Infants Act, 1839, and the Married Women's Property Act, 1870.

Although marriage had these disadvantages, most women wished to marry. As Florence Nightingale wrote, 'Marriage is the only chance (and it is but a chance) offered to women to escape from this death [idleness] and how eagerly and how ignorantly it is embraced.'

To remain single was thought a disgrace and at thirty an unmarried woman was called an old maid. Those who did not marry formed the problem of the superfluous woman. After their parents died, what could they do, where could they go? If they had a brother, as unwanted and permanent guests, they might live in his house. Some had to maintain themselves and then, indeed, difficulty arose. A hundred years ago the only paid occupation open to a gentlewoman was to become a governess under despised conditions and at a miserable salary.

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None of the professions were open to women; there were no women in Government offices; secretarial work was not done by them. Even nursing was disorganized and disreputable until Florence Nightingale recreated it as a profession by founding the Nightingale School of Nursing in 1860.

Men were believed to dislike 'blue-stockings', so that parents thought the serious education of their daughters superfluous: deportment, music and a little French would see them through. 'To learn arithmetic will not help my daughter to find a husband,' was a common maternal point of view; 'Be good, sweet maid, and let who will be clever,' the prevalent adage. A governess at home, for a short period, was the usual fate of the girls. Their brothers might go to public schools and the university, but 'home' was considered the right place for their sisters. Some parents sent their daughters to a finishing-school, but good schools for girls did not exist. Their teachers were untrained and ill-educated. No public examinations accepted female candidates. Schoolgirls did not play games. It would be disastrous to let their faces tan with the sun and it was undesirable that they should grow strong and muscular. When weather permitted they walked in pairs in a 'crocodile', sunshades, veils and 'clouds' being in constant use. High buttoned boots were worn, and gloves even in the garden. Their hair and their clothes prevented active exercise. Voluminous petticoats and constricting bands hampered

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them; as they grew up, their skirts touched the ground. Crinolines gave way to bustles, but the number of petticoats and the length of skirts remained unaltered. 'Woollen next the skin' was the rule, and stays became bonier and bonier as age increased. A waist of 21 inches was desired; no measurement over 25 inches was permitted. To look languid and anaemic was thought correct for a girl. It gave her a refined appearance. No doubt their dull lives and uncomfortable clothes were responsible for some of the fashionable complaints from which women of the period suffered—depression, the vapours, hysteria and fainting fits. Whether well or ailing, daughters at home were expected to be 'bright and gay', ready at any time to drive with mamma or to amuse papa. Their lives were of no account. In the morning they turned over photograph albums or did needlework, sitting together in the parlour. If a woman had gifts she must not use them: if she had knowledge, she must hide it.

Writers of the period preach the inferiority of women and their need for self-repression, patience and resignation. Above all they must avoid any sign of superior information, men disliking this so much. The writings of Mrs. Ellis had a great vogue. 'It is the privilege of a married woman', she wrote, 'to be able to show by the most delicate attentions how much she feels her husband's superiority to herself not by mere personal services but by a respectful deference to his opinion, a

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willingly imposed silence when he speaks.' And again, 'Even a highly gifted woman must not exhibit the least disposition to presume upon such gifts for fear of raising her husband's jealousy of her importance.' A daughter at home had neither a latch-key nor money. She could go nowhere alone, a chaperon being indispensable.

Apart from want of education, inability to earn a reasonable salary, and legal injustice, there was the mental stigma. The moral, intellectual and physical inferiority of women to men was accepted almost universally. No one has expressed her resentment of this attitude with greater force than Florence Nightingale. Her home was cultured and wealthy; her education had been excellent; legal disabilities did not touch her; but since she was a 'young lady' she had to live in idleness, and at the age of thirty she longed to die. In 1852 she wrote a fragment, *Cassandra*, from which the following extracts are taken: 'To have no food for our heads, no food for our hearts, no food for our activity, is that nothing? If we have no food for the body how do we cry out . . . how all the newspapers talk of it . . . ! Death from Starvation! But suppose we were to put a paragraph in *The Times*—Death of Thought from Starvation . . . how people would stare . . . ! We have nothing to do which raises us . . . We can never pursue any object for a single two hours.' 'Jesus Christ raised women above the condition of mere slaves, mere ministers to the passions of the man, raised them by his sympathy, to be ministers of God. He gave

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them moral activity. But the Age, the World, Humanity, must give them the means to exercise this moral activity, must give them intellectual cultivation, spheres of action.' 'There is perhaps no century where the woman shows so meanly as in this.'

Summed up, then, the position of English middle-class women during the first half of the nineteenth century was very restricted and exceedingly dull. They were not trained to do anything and they had no responsibilities. They possessed none of the rights of citizenship beyond that of paying rates and taxes. They could not vote at municipal or parliamentary elections. This state of affairs excited little comment. It was accepted by men and women alike. It was not thought to be cruel or unjust; it was taken for granted until the case of Caroline Norton occurred, followed some years later by the protesting voices of Barbara Leigh Smith (later Mme Bodichon), Emily Davies, Elizabeth Garrett and others. Gradually supporters appeared and the movement took shape.

Perhaps increased ease of travel helped. In 1836 almost every one remained where his work took him and mixed with a small unchanging group of people with ideas to match. In the eighteen-thirties railways were beginning and fast coaches were near the end of their short life, but all except the wealthy stayed at home or suffered on their journeys what we should call extreme discomfort and delay. The misery of travel except by the best

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coaches on the best roads must have been great. Jolting over ruts a foot or more deep, luggage might be lost and outside passengers might die from exposure. With the railways travel became easy and ideas began to stir. Decades later the advent of the tricycle (1880) and the bicycle (1890) undoubtedly helped the emancipation of women. They made dress reform necessary. The coat and skirt and small sailor hat appeared. On their bicycles girls escaped from their chaperon and left their fainting fits and vapours behind.

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2

THE GARRETT FAMILY

In 1836, when Elizabeth Garrett was born, the world did not treat her sex kindly, but to a child the home is all important and in hers love and justice reigned, boys and girls sharing everything equally.

Elizabeth's parents, Mr. and Mrs. Newson Garrett, were Suffolk people. For generations his forbears had been gunsmiths and makers of agricultural implements in different parts of the county. In 1675 a Richard Garrett carried on the trade of edge-tool-maker at Ufford, Suffolk, and somewhat later at Glemham a Garrett worked as blade-smith. In 1778 another Richard Garrett (grandfather of Newson), coming to Leiston, married the daughter and inherited the business of Mr. Newson, agricultural tool-maker in that place. In 1807 Newson Garrett's elder brother Richard, sixth in the direct series of name and trade, was born. During his life the Leiston works prospered as Richard Garrett & Sons, and before his death, 1866, they did a large export trade.

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The Garrett Family

Newson Garrett was born in 1812. He and Richard married sisters, Louisa and Elizabeth Dunnell. During the early years of their marriage, Newson and Louisa lived in London, with or near her parents. During this period three children were born—Louisa Maria (Louie), February 1835; on 9 June 1836 Elizabeth, and in 1837 a son who died in infancy.

The 'Happy Family' group reproduced opposite is said to be a good portrait of the Garretts in 1838. This ambitious painting was commissioned by Newson Garrett when he was twenty-six and far from rich. It shows that he meant to found a family and that he had courage.

One of Elizabeth's earliest recollections was the state visit of Queen Victoria and Prince Albert to the opera after their marriage in 1840. Mr. Garrett insisted that Elizabeth should see the procession. 'Dear Mother' expostulated, the hour was late and the child asleep. Her father had vision: 'Nonsense,' he said, 'the child *must* see it. She will remember it all her life.' On his shoulder Elizabeth was taken to the window and saw the crowds and the lights, and she passed the picture on to her children.

Soon afterwards the Garretts went to live at Aldeburgh on the coast of Suffolk. The journey was by sea, the usual route at that date, and great was the discomfort of landing young children and furniture from open boats. In Tudor times Aldeburgh had been an important

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