

# German Women and Their Social Condition

IN ANCIENT times the women of the Germanic tribes enjoyed a degree of freedom and authority which was a marked contrast to the restricted and narrow sphere of their successors today. They were leaders and law givers, having a voice in all matters pertaining to the public weal, and it was inevitable that the strong, fearless sons, inheriting the strength and dauntless courage of such mothers, should have been resistless when they confronted the legions of decadent Rome. Today, with all her military prestige and material power, the woman of Germany, except of the very highest classes, are little more than upper servants, with no real authority in ordering the affairs of their household, every penny of expenditure, no matter how much of it may have been a part of the wife's own dower, being carefully supervised by the husband, who is literally the major domo.

A German girl is taught subservience and humility from the moment she is able to understand anything. As a child, she must obey her father; as a wife, her husband is her master; and, should he die, the son thinks, plans and acts for her. Only in exceptional instances is she supposed to be capable of thinking and acting for herself. Her property rights are nominal; from birth to death she is a minor in the eye of the law.

Until very recently there was a great difference in the education of boys and girls. Boys were required to study with the utmost industry, with little relaxation and few holidays; that they might stand first in the examination, which are the open sesame to advancement in every field, educational, civil or military. The girls, with no such incentive, had a much less varied course, Latin having been forbidden them in the public schools, on the ground that their mental powers were not equal to so great a tax. Mathematics was also curtailed on the same ground, and an undue length of time was devoted to instruction in sewing and knitting—arts in which girls are so well drilled at home that it would seem hardly worth while to carry it into the precious study hours, which are none too many.

## Home Training.

A girl's home training is indeed the main consideration. A domestic creature above all else, she is grounded in the art of cooking, in making the queer soups and sausages and cakes in which the German menu abounds. Compared to her brother, she

is of little consequence. Every sacrifice must be made to establish him in life, and all the economies, therefore, fall upon the feminine members of the household.

The most important event of early girlhood is the confirmation, for which the candidate is prepared by being placed under the instruction of the pastor, unless the family should be Catholics, when the priest performs this duty. After weeks of laborious catechizing the candidate is in readiness, and, with hundreds of others, presents herself in white gown, gloves, veil and wreath at the chancel, where she is formally received into the communion of the church. The confirmations begin on Palm Sunday, and the church is usually a bower of flowers and greenery on the important occasion. At home there are congratulations, feasting and visiting, the newly-made communicant being the center of interest.

There is very little social intercourse between men and women; nothing, indeed, of that pleasant comradeship which obtains in our own country, which so enriches life, and is full of benefit for both sexes. Whatever intellectual training German women may have, few—in the middle class—the bone and sinew of the empire—make any use of it. Absorbed in "the three Rs," in accordance with the behest of the present rule, they could not be intellectual companions to their better educated husband and brothers, if they wished to be.

## Social Functions.

Husbands and sons take themselves off to the *Kneipe*—the German substitute for the club—where, over their mugs of beer and in clouds of tobacco, puffed from their huge *meischaums*, they discuss affairs of state and all other questions of general interest. They do not talk of such matters to wife and daughter, as Americans and Englishmen are wont to do—a means of liberal education in itself. Christmas, Easter and Whitsuntide—"Pflingsten"—are the three great annual festivals and to these are added the family birthdays, all of which make much work for the women folk in the additional baking and brewing which they necessitate. Not only must the cakes peculiar to each stated season be prepared, but the gifts also, which are very often of home manufacture.

Each bride is supposed to be furnished with a supply of linen—clothing, napsery and bed linen—which will last a lifetime, and which is added to gradually until the dower chest is full. This generous supply has led to the establishment of quarterly wash days, when there is a general cleansing and renovating, with the odors

of the laundry filling the house for a week. Well-to-do residents of cities send the linen to the country, and when it must be done at home it is a sort of penitential season, in which the whole family suffers and the *haus frau's* temper is sorely tried. Bread baking being eliminated from German housekeeping lessons the work very materially, and simply living, the absence of unnecessary display, is the almost universal rule.

The two solemn social functions are the *Kaffee Klatsch*—literally, the coffee fight—and the formal dinner. At all such occasions precedence is accorded the importance of a sacred edict. Upon no consideration would the hostess yield to the guest of a lower station in life the place and honor that belongs to her superior; nor would she shorten the grand personages' brevet title by so much as a simple consonant. To the *Exzellenz*—the *Frau Generalin*—is assigned the place of honor on the stiff-backed sofa before which is planted the small lace-covered table. When she enters all rise, the *Frau Hauptmann*—the wife of the captain—the *Frau Professorin*, the *Frau Kaufmann*, and, no matter their graces, wealth and virtue, they remain standing until the great lady is seated. All have brought their work, sewing or knitting, in pretty work-bags; coffee and cakes are served and the time is devoted to talk—or, rather, the discussion of the servant question, the price of veal or beef, with any permissible scandal, which, however, must be dealt with discreetly, since young girls are present. Men are not invited. Invitations to a *Kaffee Klatsch* are usually from 5 to 8.

## A Solemn Occasion.

Dinner is a much more solemn occasion and upon the arrival of the guests the husbands betake themselves to a separate apartment, where they smoke and talk politics—guardedly in these days, with the fear of lese majeste ever present while their wives in the drawing room gossip and knit—the knitting occupying them on almost all occasions. Preliminary tea and cakes serve to ameliorate the pangs of waiting for the more formal feast to follow. In the drawing room and at table the *frau generalin* takes her proper place, the humblest of the guests—fixed by her husband's vocation—bringing up the rear of the procession, and being assigned an unobtrusive seat.

There are few opportunities for German women to engage in business independently; the law of the land, as in France and elsewhere, giving the husband entire control of the wife's earnings. Women carry on

small shops, and, in the country, not only work in dairies, but in the actual labor of tilling the soil, sowing the grain and gathering the harvests. In the vine-growing districts they also form an important industrial factor in the cultivation of the vines and through every stage of the vintage. In the cities they sell their garden produce in the markets and are frequently employed as hod-carriers and messengers, labor necessitated by the absence of men, a large proportion of whom are serving in the army.

Midwives and trained nurses are employed—the former in every town and city in the empire—and are carefully trained for their calling. Women physicians have made their way for some time, two of eminence, Dr. Siebel and *Fraulein Dorothea Christiana Erexleben*, having distinguished themselves so long ago as the reign of Frederick the Great. *Fraulein Erexleben* obtained permission to practice, after having received the doctorate degree from the University of Halle.

Two others of note—pioneers in these latter days—were *Fraulein Franziska Tiberius*, the daughter of a farmer on the island Rügen, and Dr. Emily Lehmann, the daughter of a clergyman in Füh. Both settled in Berlin, where they found Dr. Henrietta Hirschfeld, a dentist, already established. She had studied her profession in Philadelphia, received her degree and returned to practice in Germany.

## Women in the Professions.

The objection to German women entering professions seems to be largely theoretical, a prejudice against a class, not the individual, since these women, and others who succeeded them, married Germans of high professional position.

Notwithstanding the general policy of repression that has discouraged women from engaging in professional work or seeking broader intellectual culture, Germany has produced women of notable force and intelligence. The Empress Augusta, grandmother of the present empress, professed an interest, as became her rank, in literature, art and science. The present empress, who was the Princess Augusta Victoria of Schleswig, while by no means brilliant, possesses those sterling virtues which are the German ideal of the wife and mother. It has been said that she lacks amiability, but this is the verdict of enemies—for even an empress has her detractors. At the same time, her simplicity and modesty and devotion to her husband are fully acknowledged.

But it is to the Empress Frederick, the

eldest daughter of Queen Victoria, that Germany is indebted for innovations that no German woman would have had the hardihood to suggest. During the lifetime of William II, as the wife of the crown prince, the prospective empress, she wielded an immense influence, an influence approved by her husband, who adored her, and which had for its paramount aim the advancement of German women. She herself a woman of naturally strong mind had been thoroughly well-educated. She has been called "a woman of universal attainments," familiar with international politics, interested in art and science, and, like her sister Louise, now the duchess of Argyll, she beguiled the time with brush, pen and pencil, and kept up a voluminous correspondence with the eminent men and women of every country in Europe. It is due to her that the Thiergarten, once a pleasure ground for the aristocracy, was thrown open to the people and she was also instrumental in establishing playgrounds for children in various open squares about Berlin. Her chief monument, however, one destined to have a direct effect upon the future development of Germany, was the establishment of the Victoria Lyceum for the higher education of women, and to which not only Germany but those of other nationalities are admitted. The tuition, which is the best that the empire affords, is free, and the Empress Frederick gave to it liberally of her own private means.

Among women below the rank of royalty, George Eliot, in her earlier letters—about 1830—writes of *Fraulein Selmer*, whose salon in Berlin was famous for many years. At that time she was between 30 and 40 and gathered about her all the great people in the capital, speaking French, English, Italian and German with equal facility. "There was not," wrote the great English woman, "the slightest warmth of manner or expression in her, but always the same even cheerfulness and intelligence." The Countess Schleichitz also wielded great influence, and her salon was crowded with servants, artists and literateurs, who assembled every evening until Bismarck, who was then chancellor, intervened. They met subsequently once a week.

Several American women have married Germans of high rank, the most notable of whom is the Countess von Waldberg. Without radically disturbing the established order of things, they have undoubtedly made their presence felt, and are doing their part to secure a more liberal recognition of the rights of progressive German women.

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