

Girlhood Days of Julia Ward Howe

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1820.

OF THE girlhood of seventy years ago I am able to speak from experience. As I was city-bred, and that in New York, I cannot say how hardy may have been the discipline of country lasses of that remote period, but of the governing traits and ideas of the time I still retain a vivid remembrance.

In the household training of girls the precepts were rather negative than positive. A young lady even of six or seven must not do this, and should not do that. These commands, when obeyed, usually led to the acquisition of careful and somewhat formal manners. The absence of spontaneity thus cultivated may have had some share in forming the romance of the period, which was one of weakness rather than strength. Its heroines were usually characterized by morbid sentiment, enhanced by infirm health. The delicate creatures who fainted away on every occasion which called for courage and endurance, the lovelorn maidens who, failing of the wished-for correspondence of affection, at once fell into a rapid decline—these were prominent features in the fiction, poetry and prose of sixty years ago. The changes in this respect which we now observe appear to me wonderful indeed. Truly, Wisdom has her miracles, seen in the progress of human thought. The ideals of today for women are ideals of health, of strength, of self-reliance.

The disturbances of French society in the earlier decades of the last century had caused a number of persons of that nationality to seek employment in New York. Among these was a woman who bore the historic name of Fabre. I must have had my first French lessons from her before I was well at home with the alphabet, as I remember being called upon to speak French before I was able to read. A tutor of the same nationality gave me my first lessons in Latin. I recollect he insisted that the Almighty in prayer should always be addressed as "you," the pronoun "thou" implying an unwarrantable assumption of familiarity.

My early education was conducted by a governess, whose strong points were a taste for elocution and the cultivation of memory by a process which was then called mnemonics. At the age of 9 years I was sent to a private school just started by a woman who had once been prominent in New York society. The school drill of that day consisted largely in the recitation of lessons committed to memory from textbooks. The first one given to me under this dispensation was Palsey's "Moral Philosophy," which I managed to recite in parrot fashion. I was glad when, having come to the end of this treatise, we passed on to "Mrs. B's Conversation on Chemistry," an entertaining work, full, however, of the details of experiments which were never shown us. Passing to another school I began the study of geometry and also enjoyed a course of lectures on world history given by a Mr. Bostwick, whose excellent chart antedated that of General Bem, so much admired in later years.

The writing of compositions was one of the tortures inflicted upon the pupils of that time. To descend upon fame, courage, poetry, history was difficult for children unaccustomed to the consideration of such topics. I sometimes handed in a copy of verses, which once caused our principal to remark: "Julia is quite a dabster at rhyming."

Spelling and English grammar were diligently studied. Our lessons in parsing were sometimes taken from Cowper's "Task," oftener from Milton's "Paradise Lost." Of the various textbooks then in use I recall with pleasure Blair's Rhetoric, Hedge's Logic and a work of Abercrombie's on "The Intellectual Faculties." To these I must add a "Political Class Book," written by William Sullivan of Boston, in which was given a very clear account of the principles and working of our government.

The formation of handwriting received considerable attention. New York offered many facilities for the study of foreign languages. Of these Italian and German most attracted me. I left school at the age of 16 with a mental determination to add to my slender stock of knowledge by a strenuous pursuit of studies at home. In this I was fortunate to have the assistance of a very competent tutor.

In the days of my youth young ladies usually went into society at the age of 18. Balls were given in private houses, the strictly fashionable circle of that time being small enough to make this possible. For these occasions the parlor carpets were usually removed, the floor smoothed and sometimes adorned with designs in colored chalk. The rooms were lit with wax candles and the number of these was much considered in the estimation of the entertainment given. I remember a bachelor who was wont to pervade the ballrooms of my youth wearing a very serious expression of countenance. One might have supposed him to be occupied with reflections upon the vanity of the scene before him. It was presently ascertained that he busied himself counting the number of the lights, as he would address himself to one or other of the guests, saying: "There are just 150 candles in these rooms. At Mrs. S's ball I counted 200."

In those days the region of Broadway in New York, now wholly given up to business, was a sort of debatable ground on which belles and bachelors walked together, discussed the last drama or concert and took

careful note of the costumes of those whom they met. Into this region the chaperone, elsewhere indispensable, did not enter.

The milliner was an important functionary in my little old New York and the headgear proper to the several seasons occupied us more, I fear, than the inward adornment commended by St. Paul. Easter Sunday was much observed in regard to bonnets, especially in the congregations of Episcopal churches. We went to the Easter service freshly adorned and glanced eagerly through aisles and galleries, taking note of the array of our fellow worshipers.

Appearance at church was much thought of and brides always made their debut in bridal bonnets of white silk or satin. Anniversary week was for us a sober carnival. The most popular meetings were held in

of that time were scarcely trained at all in chirography.

In reviewing the girlhood of forty years ago the effect of our civil war must not be overlooked. The intense interest of that time centered in its military operations. Fashion forsook its round of dress, dance and dinner and hung with keen anxiety upon the latest reports from the battlefield.

Many young women rendered brave service in the care of the sick and wounded. The sharp lines of social demarcation were for the moment forgotten. The women of the north were as a unit in the strength of their patriotic feeling. Those of the south were no doubt equally fervent in their devotion to the cause which they held to be just.

Among us of the north the practical fac-

of the higher education became established throughout the land.

Upon the results of this great enlargement it is scarcely necessary for me to dwell. The entrance of women into the professions, their acceptable services in many departments of public work, the independence of position secured to them by the cultivation of their natural abilities—these are facts so familiar as not to need special mention in the present connection.

The rehabilitation of the drama in this middle period opened for our youth a new source of enjoyment and instruction. The elder Booth, Forrest and Macready had already gained among us the favor of a limited public, but by the time that Edwin Booth came upon the stage the ancient prejudice had gradually given away. I cannot

principles which are found to have a steadfast value in human life.

The varieties of taste and pursuit which we see among the young women of today are so many proofs of what nature can accomplish under the condition of freedom. In the typical "society girl" the new development is least apparent. Yet in the class to which she of right belongs are seen many refreshing outcroppings of originality. Although born of wealthy and fashionable parents she may elect to go to college, she may choose for herself a profession, she may devote herself to the practice of art and to the study of philosophy. Her predilection may be in favor of athletic sports and we may see her name on the list of winners at golf or tennis. In whichever direction her choice may lead her she will not, by following it, necessarily become unacceptable to the circle in which she was born and bred. She will, on the contrary, become recognized in that circle as a beneficent influence, her very presence tending to redeem it from frivolity and intellectual stagnation.

The familiarity with European life which is now common among our people considerably affects our young girls. Americans who travel in Europe often meet parties of their youthful fellow countrywomen, under the escort of some elderly guardian, who conducts them from place to place in search of various points of interest. Such expeditions, if well managed, may be fruitful in instruction as well as in pleasure. Yet it is much to be desired that young persons who go abroad should first learn enough about their own country to have some notion of the value of its institutions.

The marriage of American heiresses to titled Europeans, often poor in reputation and almost always poor in estate, is a fact mortifying to our national self-respect. We surely may hope that the better training which is now almost imperative for our girls will tend to make them lovers of their native land, preferring to dwell at home rather than to commit themselves to life-long exile from all that should be most dear to them.

We hear with pain of the wild antics of some very young maidens and of certain vices which tend to invade the domain of the privileged classes, so-called. I allude especially to gambling and the use of narcotics and stimulants. These regrettable traits rarely show themselves among college-bred women, but wherever they may appear I feel assured that the better sense of the greater number and the experience of later life will more and more correct the excesses of youthful frivolity, and that we shall see among all classes, with a few unusual exceptions, the normal conditions of orderly and decent behavior.

In these days, as in others, sweeping statements of praise or of blame are to be avoided. In all the time of which I have had experience individual exceptions have been seen in contrast to the prevailing human average. Studious women in many ages have followed philosophy, science, belles-lettres. Society is never so foolish as not to show, here and there, men and women whose elevation of character goes far to redeem its general aspect of frivolity. It is never so wise but that you shall find at intervals those fools and groups of fools whom the satirist delights to ridicule.

In what I have here written I have only attempted to characterize the averages of the several periods under consideration as I have been able to observe them. Let me say in conclusion that I turn from this rapid survey of our past with high hopes for our future. I earnestly believe that American society will fulfill the promise which its early days gave to the world and that its moral progress will not fall behind its undisputed advance in the appliances of civilization. JULIA WARD HOWE.



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Broadway tabernacle. Many parents disapproved of what they called "the gay world." The daughters of such families did not attend the balls of fashionable society, but moved in an intimate, friendly circle, often interesting themselves in church work. But girls of both description, grave as well as gay, attended the anniversaries in their best spring attire and listened to wonderful statements from returned missionaries or to fervent exhortations from popular preachers.

In general society the waltz was disallowed by fathers of the stricter sort. As the German element became more recognized among us the round dances made their way more and more. No chairs were provided for the German, but the dancers stood in a circle and the dance itself scarcely occupied more than one hour. Fashionable dinners began at 6 o'clock or possibly half an hour later.

The educational routine already described differs but little from that pursued in the school days of my daughters. In these, it is true, the study of English grammar gave place to that of the Latin tongue. Spelling was no longer so strictly considered, a theory having come into vogue that correct spelling is a natural gift, bestowed on some individuals and withheld from others. I heard experts complain, some thirty or more years ago, that the young people

ultly came into increased demand—the knitting of socks for our soldiers. The preparation of lint and bandages occupied fingers familiar with the elegant trifles of life. Huge bazars in aid of the sanitary commission were planned and successfully carried out, with large pecuniary results. Young women took orders for cakes and embroidery, to be sold for the benefit of the soldiers.

The exigencies of the war had called into the field much of the young manhood of the community. The places of the elder sons were taken by a very youthful set of partners who desired to meet "the girls," if at all, upon a footing of easy fellowship. Culture was now no longer at a premium, and the more thoughtful girl graduates from schools began to take refuge from the prevailing nonsense in classes and clubs.

But now comes upon the scene a new agency. College education, long sought by the few, derided and denied by the many, is at last conceded to girls who are wise enough to desire it. Oberlin, in fair Ohio, had granted it many years earlier, as did Antioch when Horace Mann became its president. But when Vassar and Wellesley opened their doors the new feature appeared in our very midst. The pros and cons of the question at first divided society pretty sharply. The greater number opposed the new departure and preferred adherence to the old lame curriculum. But the measure soon spoke for itself and the right of our sex to a full participation in the advantages

but esteem this change an evidence of our advance in polite culture. It pains me even now to recall the old-time uncharity shown to plays and players. These last were regarded by the sober people of my young days as outlaws, a view which even their authority could not induce me to share. I am proud today to have enjoyed the friendship of Charlotte Cushman, of Edwin Booth and of Tommaso Salvini. Our indebtedness to these artists and to others of their grade is such as no amount of money can repay.

1800.

What shall we say of girlhood at the present day? We may say that it moves in a wider sphere and with a freer gait than at either of the earlier periods here spoken of. It has, or would have, an athletic body and an active mind. The old notion of accomplishments has been discarded, but the good gospel of work has taken its place and in that work a large freedom of choice and opportunity is allowed. A certain proportion only of our girls enter college. These, after their graduation, occupy themselves mostly with pursuits into which the idea of public service largely enters. This proportion modifies the position of all. The coming-out party is no longer anticipated as "the crisis of my fate." Society now accepts both the college girl and her less studious sister and exacts only that each shall live a useful and reasonable life, employing talents for worthy ends and having regard for the

Pointed Paragraphs

Chicago News: The man who boasts of being a cynic is not very dangerous.

Fame is something that makes a lot of fools want to shake your hand.

Every man ought to have a good-natured wife to grumble at occasionally.

A woman's weakness lies in her love for a man who is strong enough to work.

The price of liberty is eternal vigilance—and it is always payable in advance.

A bachelor always wonders what is the matter with a baby when it isn't crying.

Lots of married people in the world pose as danger signals to those who are single.

A Kansas editor alludes to a rival as a reservoir of corruption and an aqueduct of mendacity.

If a young man wants to make a girl blush all he has to do is to tell her that he is a mindreader.

A Kansas editor alludes to a rival as a safe, says it is advantageously located fifty miles from a lawyer's office.

Possibly married men think just as mean things about women as old bachelors do, but they are afraid to say them.

The Inquisition

Philadelphia Press: Snappy—Oh! he's one of those inquisitive bores.

Snappy—How do you mean?

Snappy—You know the breed. There are some people that are never satisfied to know that a thing is so, but they must ask the why and wherefore of it.

Sappy—That's so. I wonder why it is.