

WOMEN IN ENGLISH LIFE.



ANN,

Lady Fanshawe.

WOMEN
IN ENGLISH LIFE

from Mediæval to Modern Times.

BY
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IN TWO VOLUMES.

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INTRODUCTION.

THE object aimed at in the following pages is to show the place that women have held in our national life, from the days when what we call the Saxon race was dominant in England, down to the present time. For this purpose those phases of our social history have been dwelt upon which display most clearly the changes that have taken place in the position of women, and the influence of great forces like the Church and Feudalism. Names have been used as illustrations, and not with any intention of adding to biographical literature. Instances that are the most striking individually do not always serve best as examples. For this reason many familiar historical scenes and figures have been omitted. The continuity of a general record would be broken by divergence into episodes interesting on account of their exceptional character. Prominence has been given to domestic life, as that

concerns the larger number, and to those aspects of the case which have not been summed up in the numerous accounts of noteworthy women.

In literature and art, which have their own special histories, where the part that women have played is recounted at length, only a few general points have been noted in order to show how women have stood in relation to letters and art in successive periods. The subjects themselves are treated as stages marking social advance, not discussed in the light of their intrinsic interest and attractiveness.

A consideration of the position of women in England leads, naturally, to the subject of their position in Europe generally, for the main influences which have affected women in this country are the same as those that have operated on the Continent, although the result has taken different forms in accordance with the idiosyncracies of each nation. It is unnecessary to discuss the condition of women in the Eastern parts, for while Western Europe has been changing and progressing with ever-increasing rapidity during the last ten centuries, Eastern Europe—as far as social life is concerned—remained for a long period in an almost stationary state. In character it was Asiatic, though during the last three hundred years it has succumbed more to the influences of its geographical position.

In the Middle Ages the conditions of life in Western Europe were pretty uniform. There was hardly any education in the sense of book-learning, except among religious communities. Locomotion was difficult and dangerous, so that there was but scanty intercourse between the inhabitants of different parts of the same country. Fighting was the chief business of men, and manual work, skilled and unskilled, occupied women of all ranks.

In an age when war was so frequent, the civil duties of life were left to women, who fulfilled obligations that in more peaceful times fell to the lot of men. They not only had entire charge of the household, but shared largely in the operations of the field and the farm ; they were the spinners, the weavers, the brewsters, and the bakers. They frequently controlled the management of estates, and occasionally held public offices of trust and importance. There were no laws to prevent women from filling such positions, and the fittest came to the front unhampered by conventionality or arbitrary restrictions. But although women appear to have had a wider field of activity than they afterwards enjoyed, when social life became more complex, there was a counter-acting influence which told against the development and free exercise of their energies. This was the influence of the Church.

It was the policy of the Church to keep women in a subordinate position. As long as they remained thoroughly convinced of their natural inferiority, and of the duty of subservience, they could be reckoned upon as valuable aids to the building up of the ecclesiastical power. The immense force of the religious and devotional spirit in woman was at the absolute disposal of her spiritual directors. At a time when there was no science, no art, and, for the majority, no literature, the power of the Church was incomparably greater than anything we can conceive of now.

The Church did not find it difficult to persuade women to accept the limits marked out for them. There was no public sentiment to set off against the power of the priest. Society was ruled by physical force; the law was weak, and the Church was women's shelter from the rudeness of an age when those who should have protected the defenceless were themselves the greatest offenders.

In order to enforce the doctrine of inferiority, the Church went further, and proclaimed that there was in woman a wickedness additional to the sin common to humanity. The "eternal feminine" was held before men's eyes as a temptation to be warred against. To fly from the presence of woman was to resist evil. Celibacy was a saintly virtue, and

family life a thing to be tolerated rather than approved. In the words of St. Chrysostom, woman was "a necessary evil, a natural temptation, a desirable calamity, a domestic peril, a deadly fascination, and a painted ill." The influence of the Fathers was not confined to their own age; their writings continued to affect the whole teaching of the Church, Anglican as well as Roman, which has always been in favour of the subordination of woman. She has been assigned a lower place in religious exercises, and has been excluded from the priestly office.

In successive periods of history the Church was largely responsible for the terrible persecutions inflicted upon women—and chiefly upon the poorest and most helpless—on the ground of witchcraft. Once having disseminated the theory of woman's inherent vice, it was only a natural corollary to impute to her both the desire and the power of working extraordinary mischief. The doctrine suited ages which believed not only in an embodied and omnipresent Power of Evil, but also in countless and multiform expressions of that power through natural objects and phenomena.

The Feudal System, which prevailed in England up to the middle of the fifteenth century, and in France up to a much later period, had a repressive

effect on women of the lower classes, though for women in the upper ranks it presented certain advantages. The women of the families of tenants on a feudal estate were regarded as chattels which went with the land. They were bound to the soil, and were fined if they either accepted work or married outside the lord's domain.

The age of chivalry had a twofold effect on the position of women. It created an ideal of womanhood which stirred the imagination and the poetic fancy. Chivalry had its sublime side. It was a protest against tyranny and vice; it inspired men to heroic deeds; it gave them a loftier conception of duty. It was the revulsion of noble minds from the coarseness, the unpitying indifference to wrong, and contempt for weakness, which characterized the Middle Ages. Like a new gospel, chivalry dawned upon a world in which the virtues of Paganism had declined, while its vices still triumphed.

But chivalry had another side. The pure reverence for woman passed into romantic admiration, into a worship of physical beauty, into mere passion. Woman, from being little less than a saint, became a toy. The teaching of the Church and the spirit of chivalry both acted adversely on the position of woman. By the one she was lowered below the level of humanity, by the other she was raised to

an ideal pinnacle, where it was impossible she could remain. The fault was the same in both cases. The priest and the knight removed woman from her natural place into a false position, endowing her with sub-human wickedness and superhuman excellencies.

With the Renaissance and the spread of education, social life underwent great changes. The Church was no longer the dominant influence. Great secular forces came into play; the tide of learning swept over Europe; commerce, travel, discoveries, inventions, caused old habits to be unlearned. Thought, which had been stagnant, was freshened into a moving stream. In the intellectual re-birth, in the conflict of faiths, in the deadly political struggles which occupied the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries in England, we see how women were passing from the narrow life of the home into the wide life of the nation.

The great industrial revolution, which began in the last century, and has progressed with such rapid strides, has had its special bearing on the position of women. The material improvements brought about by machinery and developing trade, have lifted the middle-class woman out of the purely domestic sphere by lessening her household duties, and so leaving her free for other occupations. She has

ceased to be a producer. But the working woman has been simply drawn more and more from family life, to be absorbed into the ranks of outside workers. She is, in many cases, as much detached from the home as the man, by the necessity of wage-earning.

The educational revolution of modern times has also worked great changes in the position of women in England. It has specially affected the middle classes, who have been thereby enabled to enter with perfect freedom into the world of letters, to follow professional and business careers—in a word, to carve out for themselves an independent course. A new conception has arisen of what is woman's place in society. She now bears an active part in all the great movements—political, religious, philanthropic; her co-operation is sought in public work, and her presence welcomed, rather than resented, in all new social enterprises.

In the lighter side of life—in its recreations, which are now more in the nature of work than play—women have a much wider field than formerly, and take their pleasure as best suits them, without let or hindrance. They are free to act according to their necessities and tastes, wherever common sense and fitness lead them, without finding the barrier of sex laid across the path. Those who are afraid lest the world should suffer by women adopting modes of life

unsanctioned by tradition, may console themselves by remembering that Nature is stronger than fashion or opinion, and will at once make her voice heard whenever the lightest of her laws is transgressed.

The position of women in England cannot be regarded as an orderly evolution. It does not show unvarying progress from age to age. In one direction there has been improvement, in another deterioration. There have been breaks and gaps in the general advance, so that certain periods appear at a disadvantage in comparison with their predecessors. The last half-century shows very rapid and momentous changes. Never were such advantages placed within the reach of women; never were so many opportunities—social, literary, educational, commercial—open to them. But these advantages and opportunities would have been useless if women had not been ready, and shown their fitness for the new trusts. They have themselves largely created the public sentiment which now so strongly impels them towards wider action, and imposes on them greater responsibilities.

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