

GIRLS OF FIFTY YEARS AGO AND NOW.

By EMMA BREWER.

"Fashions alter I know, my dear,
Things are different year by year
Not a bit what they used to be,
When your grandfather courted me."

F. E. Weatherly.



VERY now and then I think of my visit to a sweet old lady of eighty-four, who still takes a deep interest in the doings of her friends and whose mind and judgment are still remarkably clear.

I was not surprised, therefore, when she suddenly asked, "And what are you working at just now?"

"Nothing at present," was my reply. "I am only thinking."

"What about?" was her next question.

"The girls of fifty years ago and those of to-day; I want to write about them and compare them."

"My dear," she said excitedly, "you

are undertaking an impossible task; you can't compare them; they are of separate worlds, with no habit, custom or occupation the same; why, their speech even is different. The girls of fifty years ago and those of to-day! Why, a great genius would not dare to compare them! Give it up, my dear, give it up."

"Oh, I can't do that, the subject fascinates me," was my reply.

"Well, go your own way," was her last word.

Yet, as you see, in spite of the warning and disapprobation of my dear old friend, I am setting about this task, and I do it because I love girls, and also that it has been one of the pleasures of my life to note, year by year, their gradual physical and mental development, their bravery and increasing reliability.

The last fifty years have been remarkable for many changes, discoveries, and developments in the artistic and scientific world; in religious and secular teaching; as well as in the literary world; but in no direction have the changes and developments been more remarkable than in the condition of our girls and all that belongs to their daily life.

Of course, it may be that the changes and developments in all their surroundings may have helped materially to influence their character, for there is no doubt that what my dear old lady says is true—a great change has come over them.

A favourite song by Weatherly recognises this when it says—

"Girls were simple and timid then,
Now they fight in the world like men."

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"Then they sang at the milking pails,
Lads were blithe as they swung their flails,
All was humble and sweet content,
No one troubled what grandeur meant."

What was it that made girl-life so colourless, so monotonous, so objectless in the earlier days? Looking back with the eyes of 1900, we should say that first and foremost it was the absence of liberty and the lack of responsibility and independence; their limbs even had not fair play, their mental horizon was so limited that a few books, narrow in thought and scope, were all that the mind had to feed on, while thought, free, original and comprehensive, was impossible, and self-reliance and independent action were regarded by the elders with serious displeasure.

Such a notion was unnatural and detrimental to the destiny of the human race, which is really and truly in the hands of women and girls.

If we try to picture the girls of the earlier period, it is as sweet, gentle, timid creatures, who submitted themselves to the wills of those in authority over them, who neither thought for themselves, nor were even allowed to walk alone, whose education consisted of the three R's, as they are called, a little French, and sufficient music to play the "Battle of Prague," and whose deportment was considered good if they knew how to enter and leave a room with a graceful curtsy, and treated their parents and superiors with deference and reverence.

There was nothing to break the monotony of their lives and every opportunity to indulge in the sins of emptiness and gossip. Tidings, we know, traveled slowly, means of getting about were expensive and cumbersome, there was so little they might do, and so very much they might not do, that their lives became a daily round of *don'ts*, and so were bound to be colourless.

Had they wanted to work for their living, there was nothing open to them; every avenue was blocked, for at that time there was no honour attached to girls' work.

Of course, there were exceptions when girls made first-rate housewives, good needlewomen and excellent dairymaids; and, as we know, every now and again, girls came to the front having broken the fetters which bound them, and became known to the world as writers, musicians and artists; but in order to do this they had to face the prejudices of the age, which required all their courage and determination to surmount.

Do not think I am underrating the girls of fifty years ago. On the contrary, I acknowledge that they had characteristics which would be extremely valuable in toning down the recklessness which takes possession of some of our girls to-day, especially in the less educated class, but what I contend for is that there can be no healthy action without full liberty of the individual, and it is towards this that girls and women have been striving through all the years between then and now.

A change such as that which has occurred in girl life could only have come about gradually, for had it been a sudden movement the whole world would have stood up against it. Imagine a sudden leap from the slow graceful minuet or maypole dance to what are called Kitchen Lancers and the Wild Waltz; or a proposal of marriage on bended knee to a coy blushing maiden to the nonchalant offer made to a girl while at the piano, who receives it laughingly or scoffingly; or from a seat on a pillion to one in a hansom cab, or, stranger still, to one on a bicycle. Why, it would not have been tolerated; I am taking extremes, not filling in the details, between then and now.

Again, fifty years ago, an unmarried woman of, say, thirty-five, regarded herself, and was so regarded by others, as a hopeless old maid; she took to caps, and had to stand by while her younger sisters took part in pleasures and amusements which she was supposed to be too old to enjoy. The only relaxations considered suitable for her advanced age were Dorcas meetings, church tea parties, and an occasional bazaar. Now all this is changed. No one of thirty-five need be on the shelf now unless she

places herself there. If you look round you will find her in the thick of the fight for work and taking her recreation with a zeal equal to the girl of fourteen, and as bright and cheerful as any of them. The idea of a girl in a cap in these days almost makes one laugh. It is hardly allowed to those who have white hair.

In every new venture the pioneers have a rough time of it, and some of our girls paid heavily for stretching their wings and breaking the fetters which crippled them. They were regarded as altogether unfeminine and found favour with neither men nor women. They made many blunders in their early efforts after a fuller, nobler, and more practical life, but in spite of everything they have made their way and have had the courage of their opinions, until now they take their place worthily in the many professions and trades open to them, and scarcely anyone sneers or looks askance at them for using their talents outside the limit set by ancient custom. Nor are they less womanly or less helpful in their homes because they lead fuller lives.

Whether they are happier or better girls than those of fifty years ago is a matter of opinion. We are not asked to discuss that question, but rather are they using the talents with which God has endowed them to His honour and glory, to the advantage of those around them, and to their own well-being?

If so, surely this is a condition more in accordance with our idea of rational responsible beings than sitting down with folded hands to wait what the future will bestow in the shape of a husband, or a legacy, or what their parents, by the sweat of their brow, may leave them. Anyhow, the time has passed when the matter lay in the balance; the die is cast and girls have settled it for themselves.

Ridicule and contempt were freely pointed at them, but, like many noble souls before them, they cared for none of these things.

As their powers developed science supplied them with instruments for exercising them, such as had never been dreamed of in early days, and they have, as a rule, been most careful that in any career chosen by them, their work should be well done. They have dignified the simplest of work by doing it to the best of their ability.

Nor has the position now occupied been arrived at without hard study and self-sacrifice. Girls have submitted themselves to training so severe as to be more like that of the ancient Greeks when preparing to run races at the Olympian games—it was necessary for their success.

As the position gained becomes more and more firmly established, the recklessness and dash which marks some girls' manners will disappear, for certainty of position acts upon the character like oil on troubled waters—it produces calm.

Girls are indebted for their present position, first, to liberty, for which they have fought inch by inch, and to the knowledge gained that all work, however humble, is ennobled by the way in which it is done.

Beyond these came railways to their help, which allowed girls to emerge from the quiet home life and to travel from place to place and from country to country, and so gain knowledge of the doings, manners, customs and education of other girls. Then came the penny postage, which made communication of ideas freer and easier, and the gradual decrease in the price of good literature which improved both mind and taste. And of the utmost importance was the introduction of the typewriter and photography in affording occupation to clever brains and nimble fingers. Nor must we forget the openings for girls in the Post

Offices and Telegraph Offices. Opportunities for the exercise of girls' powers surrounded them on every side, such as the opening of good schools for teaching cooking, shorthand, indexing, cataloguing, scientific gardening, and book-keeping.

Then came the personal influence and example of Florence Nightingale, who made nursing an honourable occupation for girls, and this led on to other professions such as dentistry and surgery. In fact almost every profession has opened its doors to women.

In all these it is necessary that the start should be made upon a good sound liberal education—an education that would have been thought preposterous, even if possible, for girls fifty years ago, but which is now rendered possible by the very excellent High Schools and Colleges scattered throughout the land.

The change that has come over girl-life has not been limited to any special class; it embraces the highest and the lowest—the Royal Family and the factory girl alike bear witness to this.

Formerly single women, whatever their rank, left helpless and alone, had no chance of earning a pittance but by teaching needlework or domestic service; now think of the careers open to them if they are in earnest.

Great was the prejudice against the first lady doctors in England, and lady surgeons were regarded as utterly improper. I remember in the early days being present at a reception in the house of a celebrated physician, whose purpose it was to introduce a lady student who was preparing to be a doctor. I feel ashamed now at the manner in which we looked upon her; it was rather as we should have regarded a new animal at the Zoological Gardens. Yet she was a quiet graceful girl, well dressed and dignified in manner. She has since made her mark in the world.

Notwithstanding the former opposition to girls entering medical life, there are now some hundreds of women doctors practising in the United Kingdom, some of them holding very important appointments and possessing talents of high order. The demand for women doctors is great both at home and abroad, a sign that the public now recognises their value.

Many girls have become chemists and druggists, and it is quite a usual thing to see them occupied as dispensers in hospitals. I have seen several so engaged in Egypt, Italy, and Germany.

Many are recognised dentists, although the qualifications necessary for registration are almost equal to those required in medical men.

Extremely good appointments are open to women in the General Post and Telegraph Offices in London, Edinburgh, and Dublin, in addition to ordinary clerkships.

The demand for trained nurses grows day by day, and I might go on enumerating the occupations of girls of the present day, some of which were not even known by name to those of fifty years ago.

It was thought that with the new and independent life girls would give up the idea of marriage altogether as being incompatible with the full liberty enjoyed, but the girls of to-day can no more do without the loving home-life than those of fifty years ago, and in the words of the song already quoted—

“Yet in spite of it all, my dear,
Hope still comes with each coming year;
For hearts still love that are true and pure
And that's an old fashion that shall endure.”

