

Chapter One

INTRODUCTION

THE CHILDREN OF the human race are dependent on their parents for a far longer period of time than any other living creatures, and there is a vast sum of knowledge that must be taught them in order that they may become acceptable members of the society into which they have been born. And ever since mankind invented the art of writing, floods of words have poured forth, some wise, some obvious, some plain silly, in regard to the twin problems of what to teach children and the best way of getting the information into their heads so that it has lasting value.

These theories have been argued throughout the centuries with remarkably little variation or conclusion, and for hundreds of years the additional problem of whether girls should receive the same education as boys, or go their own separate ways, has been discussed inconclusively. Nearly every generation has come up with the discovery, heralded on each occasion as new and well-nigh revolutionary, that girls can be as mentally agile as their brothers and as potentially able scholars.

The strongest instinct in any animal is to survive, and that involves the mating of the sexes. As a preliminary, the male and female, however promiscuous, or indeed unadventurous, must, even though for the briefest of periods, please each other, so it would seem that the battle of the sexes began very early in human history. Nevertheless, in prehistoric times, when mankind's principal preoccupation was the eternal quest for food, men and women, recognizing that their natural functions

were complementary, shared the work necessary to their survival intelligently.

As civilization and society developed and became more complicated, with the acquisition of property and the establishment of social classes, the relationship between men and women grew more controversial and subject to the vagaries of fashion and economic expediency. And so it has remained ever since. When work is hard to come by and jobs are scarce, woman's place is in the home, well away from the labour market, but when labour is scarce and every hand is needed, then it is woman's duty to take her place gallantly beside her menfolk. All the feminine wiles and graces, so carefully instilled into her during the years of prosperity and peace, must be suddenly shed and replaced by sterner and less glamorous attributes for the duration of the emergency. In fact it is only by being extraordinarily adaptable that she can keep her end up at all.

The social classes were formed, in the first place, by the conquered and the conquerors, and the status of women plumbed its depths in the pagan slave households of the Classical world, where their function in life was 'caring only to serve the pleasure of men', but amongst the upper classes of the free the eternal argument had already been under way for centuries. In order to please themselves, men and women must please each other. To conquer they must pretend to be conquered. To pursue each other successfully they must assume the role of the pursued, and until a stable relationship of marriage, based on love, affection, mutual respect, indifference or plain dislike, has been established, they must play hide and seek with their emotions and their intellects. There is a paradox to be found in every aspect of the game.

While the ancient civilizations of Western Asia waxed and waned before the growing might of the Persians, the civilization of Greece was taking shape—the civilization on which the whole of the western world has been based. 'We are all Greeks,' said Shelley. 'Our laws, our religion, our art, have their roots in Greece.'

Homer, writing about 1000 B.C. gives a picture of Grecian

women during the Heroic Age of Greece, romantic and beautiful creatures, full of grace and charm. The Greeks were monogamous and at this time the family was the important social unit. The married woman, as the mother of the family, was held in high regard, but legally she had no rights. Her only education was in the domestic arts, which she learnt from her mother. Her marriage was arranged by her father, who received a bride-price for her from the bridegroom, and her duties as a wife were to control the household, produce children and care for them.

Gradually the family units united into independent city states. Greece became a man's world, where the state was more important than the individual. Women had no place in this new world of politics and their social position sank disastrously. They had no political rights and their main function in life was to produce worthy young citizens. These were the years of Greek colonization throughout the Mediterranean, but for the women it was a time of increasing seclusion in the home. They were excluded from nearly all the men's interests, including the public games, and as the men's importance in the community rose it was the wife who now brought a dowry to the marriage. She was no longer worth paying for and in most cases her marriage was little more than a political manoeuvre.

By the first half of the sixth century B.C. a group of women had led a minor revolt, asserting a right to recognition as individuals with minds of their own. They were led by the lesbian poetess Sappho, who established her community on the island of Mytilene, and here they devoted themselves to the arts of music, poetry and love, but the impact of Sappho and her cult on the lives of Greek women generally was negligible. The growing menace of the Persians was nurturing a mood of aggressive militarism amongst Greek politicians and men of affairs, and outside the home women had no place at all.

When the Athenian empire was founded in the fifth century B.C. the status of women continued to decline. Until the age of seven a girl was brought up at home with her brothers, under

her mother's supervision, and during these few short years she enjoyed the greatest freedom she was ever to know, for afterwards she was kept closely confined to the women's quarters of the house and allowed out only on the rarest occasions, to watch some religious festival, perhaps, or even to take part in it, as a choral dancer.

Her mother taught her to read and write, to spin and weave, and sometimes the rudiments of music, but her most important lesson was to learn the virtue of keeping her mouth shut, both in and out of the house, and conducting herself as unobtrusively as possible.

Her marriage was arranged by her father or nearest male relative and her husband had the right to name his successor, should he die before her. Marriage was a political arrangement and the wife's unquestioned duty was to live at home, take charge of the stores, control the slaves and produce more Athenian citizens.

As in any generation, there were, of course, women of outstanding intellect and character in Greece who came to prominence through the sheer force of their personalities. The Greek legislators recognized two groups of women—the wives, whose duty was to remain secluded and faithful to their husbands, and the courtesans, who themselves had their social grades. And it was from the courtesans that most of the women of intellect emerged. Many were extremely intelligent, delighting, like all Greeks, in debate and mental exercise. Some established salons, comparable with those of France in the eighteenth century. Aspasia, with whom Pericles fell in love, set up a school of philosophy in Athens which Socrates attended. She is said to have taught Pericles the art of rhetoric and to have composed some of his speeches for him. Men ridiculed these women. Euripides, in particular, poured scorn on them, maintaining, like any Victorian paterfamilias, that the only safeguard of a woman's virtue and honesty lay in seclusion in the home and a life of retirement. They were undeterred. Thais was to follow Alexander to Persepolis and far beyond, into more distant parts of Asia. Phyrne, so beautiful

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that many believed her to be Aphrodite, was the mistress of Praxiteles and inspired some of his greatest work.

An exception to the rigid seclusion and suppression of most Greek women was to be found in Sparta, which was surrounded by hostile states and had living within its boundaries the subject Helots, who were always on the verge of rebellion. Of necessity, the Spartans were a race of warriors and their women were specially trained to produce strong men, the girls being taught to wrestle, throw the quoit and javelin, to box and run races.

As the physical characteristics of the child were thought to be inherited through the mother, Spartan women became socially of great importance and politically powerful. Their dowries were large and they were allowed to share inheritances with their brothers, so that some became immensely rich, and therein lay their undoing. They took to high living, which sadly undermined their physical well-being and moral fibre. And after the battle of Leuctra, in 371 B.C., when Sparta itself was threatened by Epaminondas, they disgraced themselves by fleeing in tears and lamentation to the refuge of the temples.

It was only a few years after this that Plato proclaimed his views on women and their education. In his *Laws*, the Athenian maintains that there must be public teachers in Athens, receiving a stipend from the state, and they must have for their scholars not only boys and men, but the girls and women. 'For so long as the young generation is well brought up, our ship of State will have a fair voyage, while in the contrary case the consequences are better left unspoken . . .' he said, a sentiment which has been repeated often enough during the ensuing twenty-four centuries.

Girls and women should be subject to the same laws as men and receive the same education, he declared. It was not that Plato had any particular regard for the sex. Far from it, for he felt that they had an 'inherent weakness of the soul' and were mischief makers. The idea of bringing them under control was a purely practical one, for the benefit of the State.

The mind reels at the amount of knowledge which did not

exist at this time for the young to assimilate—the continents unexplored, sciences undiscovered, battles unfought and mountains of literature unwritten—but Pythagoras had paved the way for the heartaches and headaches of future generations of school children half a century before Plato was born and Aristophanes, Socrates, Hippocrates and Aristotle were all his contemporaries.

Plato defined education as ‘a training in goodness, which inspires the recipient with a passionate and ardent desire to become a perfect citizen, knowing both how to wield and how to submit to righteous rule’. ‘It was,’ he said, ‘the highest blessing bestowed on mankind. . . .’

He advocated a nursery day school in every village for boys and girls from the age of three to six, under the supervision of nurses who were to watch over their behaviour. Then it was time for lessons and the sexes should be segregated. The schools should be public, with resident, salaried masters in the various subjects of the syllabus—dancing, mime and callisthenics, as well as choric art and the playing of the lyre—while for the select few who showed uncommon intellectual powers higher education would be provided which should include ciphering and arithmetic, mensuration and astronomy.

But most important of all was physical training in horsemanship and the use of weapons. ‘My law,’ said Plato, ‘will apply in all respects to girls as well as to boys; the girls must be trained exactly like the boys. And in stating my doctrine, I intend no reservation on any point of horsemanship or physical training, as appropriate for men but not for women.’

The Athenian women may not have been so enthusiastic about these plans for their education as Plato. He admitted that they were ‘used to the shady corner’ and would ‘offer a furious resistance . . . if forced from it’, but he argued that it was pure folly not to use their services for the good of the State. And the real sting was in the tail. ‘A legislator should be thorough, not half-hearted,’ he said. ‘He must not, after making regulations for the male sex, leave the other to the enjoyment of an existence of uncontrolled luxury and expense, and so endow

his society with a mere half of a thoroughly felicitous life in place of the whole.'

Plato wrote at a time when Athens was dangerously threatened but he also pressed for the training of girls in the arts of peace as well as war and insisted that there must be a complete association of men and women in education as in everything else.

He advocated military service for men from the age of twenty to sixty and for a woman 'whatever military employments it may be thought right to impose on her after she had borne her children', up to the age of fifty.

Plato died in 347 B.C. and only nine years later Philip of Macedon, father of Alexander the Great, marched south to conquer the city states of Greece. The women of Greece remained in their seclusion and during the next two or three hundred years the power of Greece in the Mediterranean rose to its zenith and then sank before the growing might of Rome.

As the Roman republic grew in strength it became increasingly, as Greece had been, a man's world, in which women played a very minor part. Legally they had few rights, even in the home, and the father had absolute power over his wife and children, but natural affection is stronger than any law, and in practice women were, generally speaking, treated well and with respect, while in myth and folk history their virtues were extolled. Romans were grateful for the accommodating good sense of the Sabine women, they praised the morality of Lucretia and mourned the tragedy of Virginia: and they had a profound respect for the vestal virgins, although they were pitiless in their treatment of any who broke their vows of chastity.

There were elementary schools in Rome for the wealthy, where both girls and boys learnt the three R's, but when the boys passed on to a higher education, comprising history, geography, rhetoric, elocution and the study of the Greek and Roman poets, the girls returned home to learn the arts and manifold duties of the household.

The Punic wars of the third century B.C. brought Rome vast