CHAPTER CVIII

THE POSITION OF WOMEN

It has been well said that the position which women hold in a country is, if not a complete test, yet one of the best tests of the progress it has made in civilization. When one compares nomad man with settled man, heathen man with Christian man, the ancient world with the modern, the Eastern world with the Western, it is plain that in every case the advance in public order, in material comfort, in wealth, in decency and refinement of manners, among the whole population of a country — for in these matters one must not look merely at the upper class — has been accompanied by a greater respect for women, by a greater freedom accorded to them, by a fuller participation on their part in the best work of the world. Americans are fond of pointing, and can with perfect justice point, to the position their women hold as an evidence of the high level their civilization has reached. Certainly nothing in the country is more characteristic of the peculiar type their civilization has taken.

The subject may be regarded in so many aspects that it is convenient to take up each separately.

As respects the legal rights of women, these, of course, depend on the legislative enactments of each State of the Union, for in no case has the matter been left under the rigour of the common law. With much diversity in minor details, the general principles of the law are in all or nearly all the States similar. Women have been placed in an equality with men as respects all private rights. In some States husband and wife can sue one another at law. Married as well as unmarried women have long since (and I think everywhere) obtained full control of their property, whether obtained by gift or descent, or by their own labour. This has been deemed so important a point that, instead of being left to ordinary legislation, it has

in several States been directly enacted by the people in the Constitution. Women have in most, though perhaps not in all, States rights of guardianship over their children which the law of England denied to them till the Act of 1886; and in some States the mother's rights are equal, where there has been a voluntary separation, to those of the father. The law of divorce is in many States far from satisfactory, but it always aims at doing equal justice as between husbands and wives. Special protection as respects hours of labour is given to women by the laws of many States, and a good deal of recent legislation has been passed with intent to benefit them, though not always by well-chosen means.

Women have made their way into most of the professions more largely than in Europe. In many of the Northern cities they practise as physicians, and seem to have found little or no prejudice to overcome. Medical schools have been provided for them in some universities. It was less easy to obtain admission to the bar, yet several have secured this, and the number seems to increase. They mostly devote themselves to the attorney's part of the work rather than to court practice. One edits, or lately edited, the *Illinois Law Journal* with great acceptance. Several have entered the Christian ministry, though, I think, only in what may be called the minor sects, not in any of the five or six great denominations, whose spirit is more conservative. Some have obtained success as professional lecturers, and not a few are journalists. One hears little of them in engineering. They are seldom to be seen in the offices of hotels, but many, more than in England, are employed as clerks or secretaries, both in some of the Government departments, and by telegraphic and other companies, as well as in publishing houses and other kinds of business where physical strength is not needed. Type-writing work is largely in their hands. They form an overwhelming majority of the teachers in public schools for boys as well as for girls, and are thought to be better teachers, at least for the younger sort, than men are.[1] No

[1] The number of teachers in the common schools is given by the United States Bureau of Education Report for 1889–90 at 125,602 men and 238,333 women. As male teachers are in a majority in the Southern States and in Indiana and New Mexico, the preponderance of women in the Northern States generally is very great. It has increased sensibly of late years over the whole country. In Massachusetts women teachers are nine times as numerous as men.

class prejudice forbids the daughters of clergymen or lawyers of the best standing to teach in elementary schools. Taking one thing with another, it is easier for women to find a career, to obtain remunerative work of an intellectual as of a commercial or mechanical kind, than in any part of Europe. Popular sentiment is entirely in favour of giving them every chance, as witness the new Constitutions of several Western States (including Washington, which has refused them the suffrage) which expressly provide that they shall be equally admissible to all professions or employments. In no other country have women borne so conspicuous a part in the promotion of moral and philanthropic causes. They were among the earliest, most zealous, and most effective apostles of the anti-slavery movement. They have taken an equally active share in the temperance agitation. Not only has the Women's Christian Temperance Union with its numerous branches been the most powerful agency directed against the traffic in intoxicants, particularly in the Western States, but individual women have thrown themselves into the struggle with extraordinary zeal. Some years ago, during what was called the women's whiskey war, they forced their way into the drinking saloons, bearded the dealers, adjured the tipplers to come out. At elections in which the Prohibitionist issue is prominent, ladies will sometimes assemble outside the polls and sing hymns at the voters. Their services in dealing with pauperism, with charities and reformatory institutions, have been inestimable. In New York some few years ago, when an Act was needed for improving the administration of the charities, it was a lady (belonging to one of the oldest and most respected families in the country) who went to Albany, and by placing the case forcibly before the State legislature there, succeeded in obtaining the required measure. The Charity Organization societies of the great cities are largely managed by ladies; and the freedom they enjoy, coupled with a knowledge of business, less frequent among European women, makes them invaluable agents in this work, which the growth of a pauper class renders daily more important. So too when it became necessary after the war to find teachers for the negroes in the institutions founded for their benefit in the South, it was chiefly Northern girls who volunteered for the duty, and discharged it with single-minded zeal.

American women take less part in politics than their English sisters do, although more than the women of Germany, France, or Italy. That they talk less about politics may be partly ascribed to the fact that politics come less into ordinary conversation in America (except during a presidential election) than in England. But the practice of canvassing at elections, recently developed by English ladies with eminent success, seems unknown. Ladies have never, I think, been chosen members of either Republican or Democratic conventions. However, at the National Convention of the Prohibitionist party at Pittsburg in 1884 a number of ladies presented credentials as delegates from local organizations, and were admitted to sit. One of the two secretaries of that Convention was a woman. Several were placed on the Committee of Credentials. So women have in some cities, and notably in Philadelphia, borne a useful and influential, albeit comparatively inconspicuous part, in the recent movements for the reform of municipal government. Here we are on the debatable ground between pure party politics and philanthropic agitation. Women have been so effective in the latter that they cannot easily be excluded when persuasion passes into constitutional action, and one is not surprised to find the Prohibition party declare in their platform of 1884 that "they alone recognize the influence of woman, and offer to her equal rights with man in the management of national affairs." At the recent gatherings in the West which gave expression to the discontent of the farming class, women appeared, and were treated with a deference which anywhere but in America would have contrasted strangely with the roughness of the crowd. One of them signalized herself by denouncing a proposed banquet, on the ground that it was being got up in the interests of the brewers. Presidential candidates have often "receptions" given in their honour by ladies, and some of the letters which, during the campaign of 1884, appeared in the newspapers in advocacy of one or other party, bore female signatures. One hears of attempts made to establish political "salons" at Washington, but neither there nor elsewhere has the influence of social gatherings attained the importance it has often possessed in France, though occasionally the wife of a politician makes his fortune by her tact and skill in winning support for him among professional politicians or

the members of a State legislature. There is, however, another and less auspicious sphere of political action into which women have found their way at the national capital. The solicitation of members of a legislature with a view to the passing of bills, especially private bills, and to the obtaining of places, has become a profession there, and the persuasive assiduity which had long been recognized by poets as characteristic of the female sex, has made them widely employed and efficient in this work.

I have already, in treating of the woman suffrage movement (Chapter XCVI.), referred to the various public offices which have been in many States thrown open to women. It is universally admitted that the gift of the suffrage must carry with it the right of obtaining any post in the service of the country for which votes are cast, up to and including the Presidency itself.

The subject of women's education opens up a large field. Want of space obliges me to omit a description, for which I have accumulated abundant materials, and to confine myself to a few concise remarks.

The public provision for the instruction of girls is quite as ample and adequate as that made for boys. Elementary schools are of course provided alike for both sexes, grammar schools and high schools are organized for the reception of girls sometimes under the same roof or even in the same classes, sometimes in a distinct building, but always, I think, with an equally complete staff of teachers and equipment of educational appliances. The great majority of the daughters of mercantile and professional men, especially of course in the West,[1] receive their education in these public secondary schools; and, what is more remarkable, the number of girls who continue their education in the higher branches, including the ancient classics and physical science, up to the age of seventeen or eighteen, is as large, in many places larger, than that of the boys, the latter being drafted off into practical life, while the former indulge their more lively interest in the things of the mind. One often hears it charged as a fault on the Ameri-

[1] There are some private boarding schools and many private day schools for girls in the Eastern States. Comparatively few children are educated at home by governesses.

can system that its liberal provision of gratuitous instruction in the advanced subjects tends to raise girls of the humbler classes out of the sphere to which their pecuniary means would destine them, makes them discontented with their lot, implants tastes which fate will for ever forbid them to gratify.

As stated in a previous chapter (Chapter CV.), University education is provided for women in the Eastern States by colleges expressly erected for their benefit, and in the Western States by State universities, whose regulations usually provide for the admission of female equally with male students to a gratuitous instruction in all subjects. There are also some colleges of private foundation which receive young men and maidens together, teaching them in the same classes, but providing separate buildings for their lodging.

I must not attempt to set forth and discuss the evidence regarding the working of this system of co-education, interesting as the facts are, but be content with stating the general result of the inquiries I made.

Co-education answers perfectly in institutions like Antioch and Oberlin in Ohio, where manners are plain and simple, where the students all come from a class in which the intercourse of young men and young women is easy and natural, and where there is a strong religious influence pervading the life of the place. No moral difficulties are found to arise. Each sex is said to improve the other: the men become more refined, the women more manly. Now and then students fall in love with one another, and marry when they have graduated. But why not? Such marriages are based upon a better reciprocal knowledge of character than is usually attainable in the great world, and are reported to be almost invariably happy. So also in the Western State universities co-education is well reported of. In these establishments the students mostly lodge where they will in the city, and are therefore brought into social relations only in the hours of public instruction; but the tendency of late years has been, while leaving men to find their own quarters, to provide places of residence for the women. The authorities have little to do in the way of discipline or supervision, and say they do not find it needed, and that they are not aware of any objections to the system. I did find, however, that the youths in some cases expressed aversion to

it, saying they would rather be in classes by themselves; the reason apparently being that it was disagreeable to see a man whom men thought meanly of standing high in the favour of lady students. In these Western States there is so much freedom allowed in the intercourse of youths and girls, and girls are so well able to take care of themselves, that the objections which occur to a European arouse no disquietude. Whether a system which has borne good fruits in the primitive society of the West is fit to be adopted in the Eastern States, where the conditions of life approach nearer to those of Europe, is a question warmly debated in America. The need for it is at any rate not urgent, because the liberality of founders and benefactors has provided in at least five women's colleges — one of them a department of Harvard University — places where an excellent education, surpassing that of most of the Western universities, stands open to women. These colleges are at present so efficient and popular, and the life of their students is in some respects so much freer than it could well be, considering the etiquette of Eastern society, in universities frequented by both sexes, that they will probably continue to satisfy the practical needs of the community and the wishes of all but the advocates of complete theoretical equality.

It will be seen from what has been said that the provision for women's education in the United States is ampler and better than that made in any European countries, and that the making of it has been far more distinctly recognized as a matter of public concern. To these advantages, and to the spirit they proceed from, much of the influence which women exert must be ascribed. They feel more independent, they have a fuller consciousness of their place in the world of thought as well as in the world of action. The practice of educating the two sexes together in the same colleges tends, in those sections of the country where it prevails, in the same direction, placing women and men on a level as regards attainments, and giving them a greater number of common intellectual interests. It does not, I think, operate to make women either pedantic or masculine, or to diminish the differences between their mental and moral habits and those of men. Nature is quite strong enough to make the differences of temperament she creates persistent, even under influences which might seem likely to diminish them.

Custom allows to women a greater measure of freedom in doing what they will and going where they please than they have in any European country, except, perhaps, in Russia. No one is surprised to see a lady travel alone from the Atlantic to the Pacific, nor a girl of the richer class walking alone through the streets of a city. If a lady enters some occupation heretofore usually reserved to men, she is subject to much less censorious remark than would follow her in Europe, though in this matter the society of Eastern cities is hardly so liberal as that of the West.

Social intercourse between youths and maidens is everywhere more easy and unrestrained than in England or Germany, not to speak of France. Yet, there are considerable differences between the Eastern cities, whose usages have begun to approximate to those of Europe, and other parts of the country. In the rural districts, and generally all over the West, young men and girls are permitted to walk together, drive together, go out to parties, and even to public entertainments together, without the presence of any third person, who can be supposed to be looking after or taking charge of the girl. So a girl may, if she pleases, keep up a correspondence with a young man, nor will her parents think of interfering. She will have her own friends, who, when they call at her house, ask for her, and are received by her, it may be alone; because they are not deemed to be necessarily the friends of her parents also, nor even of her sisters. In the cities of the Atlantic States, it is now thought scarcely correct for a young man to take a young lady out for a solitary drive; and in few sets would he be permitted to escort her alone to the theatre. But girls still go without chaperons to dances, the hostess being deemed to act as chaperon for all her guests; and as regards both correspondence and the right to have one's own circle of acquaintances, the usage even of New York or Boston allows more liberty than does that of London or Edinburgh. It was at one time, and it may possibly still be, not uncommon for a group of young people who know one another well to make up an autumn "party in the woods." They choose some mountain and forest region, such as the Adirondack Wilderness west of Lake Champlain, engage three or four guides, embark with guns and fishing rods, tents, blankets, and a stock of groceries, and pass in boats

up the rivers and across the lakes of this wild country through sixty or seventy miles of trackless forest to their chosen camping ground at the foot of some tall rock that rises from the still crystal of the lake. Here they build their bark hut, and spread their beds of the elastic and fragrant hemlock boughs; the youths roam about during the day, tracking the deer, the girls read and work and bake the corn cakes; at night there is a merry gathering round the fire or a row in the soft moonlight. On these expeditions brothers will take their sisters and cousins, who bring perhaps some lady friends with them; the brothers' friends will come too; and all will live together in a fraternal way for weeks or months, though no elderly relative or married lady be of the party.

There can be no doubt that the pleasure of life is sensibly increased by the greater freedom which transatlantic custom permits; and as the Americans insist that no bad results have followed, one notes with regret that freedom declines in the places which deem themselves most civilized. American girls have been, so far as a stranger can ascertain, less disposed to what are called "fast ways" than girls of the corresponding classes in England,[1] and exercise in this respect a pretty rigorous censorship over one another. But when two young people find pleasure in one another's company, they can see as much of each other as they please, can talk and walk together frequently, can show that they are mutually interested, and yet need have little fear of being misunderstood either by one another or by the rest of the world. It is all a matter of custom. In the West custom sanctions this easy friendship; in the Atlantic cities so soon as people have come to find something exceptional in it, constraint is felt, and a conventional etiquette like that of the Old World begins to replace the innocent simplicity of the older time, the test of whose merit may be gathered from the universal persuasion in America that happy marriages are in the middle and upper ranks more common than in Europe, and that this is due to the ampler opportunities which young men and women have of learning one

[1] Between fastness and freedom there is in American eyes all the difference in the world, but new-comers from Europe are startled. I remember to have once heard a German lady settled in a Western city characterize American women as "*furchtbar frei und furchtbar fromm*" (frightfully free and frightfully pious).

another's characters and habits before becoming betrothed. Most girls have a larger range of intimate acquaintances than girls have in Europe, intercourse is franker, there is less difference between the manners of home and the manners of general society. The conclusions of a stranger are in such matters of no value, so I can only repeat that I have never met any judicious American lady who, however well she knew the Old World, did not think that the New World customs conduced more both to the pleasantness of life before marriage, and to constancy and concord after it.

In no country are women, and especially young women, so much made of. The world is at their feet. Society seems organized for the purpose of providing enjoyment for them. Parents, uncles, aunts, elderly friends, even brothers, are ready to make their comfort and convenience bend to the girls' wishes. The wife has fewer opportunities for reigning over the world of amusements, because, except among the richest people, she has more to do in household management than in England, owing to the scarcity of servants. But she holds in her own house a more prominent, if not a more substantially powerful, position than in England or even in France. With the German *Hausfrau*, who is too often content to be a mere housewife, there is of course no comparison. The best proof of the superior place American ladies occupy is to be found in the notions they profess to entertain of the relations of an English married pair. They talk of the English wife as little better than a slave, declaring that when they stay with English friends, or receive an English couple in America, they see the wife always deferring to the husband and the husband always assuming that his pleasure and convenience are to prevail. The European wife, they admit, often gets her own way, but she gets it by tactful arts, by flattery or wheedling or playing on the man's weaknesses; whereas in America the husband's duty and desire is to gratify the wife and render to her those services which the English tyrant exacts from his consort.[1] One may often hear an American matron commiserate a friend

[1] I have heard American ladies say, for instance, that they have observed that an Englishman who has forgotten his keys, sends his wife to the top of the house to fetch them; whereas an American would do the like errand for his wife, and never suffer her to do it for him.

who has married in Europe, while the daughters declare in chorus that they will never follow the example. Laughable as all this may seem to Englishwomen, it is perfectly true that the theory as well as the practice of conjugal life is not the same in America as in England. There are overbearing husbands in America, but they are more condemned by the opinion of the neighbourhood than in England. There are exacting wives in England, but their husbands are more pitied than would be the case in America. In neither country can one say that the principle of perfect equality reigns, for in America the balance inclines nearly though not quite as much in favour of the wife as it does in England in favour of the husband. No one man can have a sufficiently large acquaintance in both countries to entitle his individual opinion on the results to much weight. So far as I have been able to collect views from those observers who have lived in both countries, they are in favour of the American practice, perhaps because the theory it is based on departs less from pure equality than does that of England. These observers do not mean that the recognition of women as equals or superiors makes them any better or sweeter or wiser than Englishwomen; but rather that the principle of equality, by correcting the characteristic faults of men, and especially their selfishness and vanity, is more conducive to the concord and happiness of a home. They conceive that, to make the wife feel her independence and responsibility more strongly than she does in Europe, tends to brace and expand her character, while conjugal affection, usually stronger in her than in the husband, inasmuch as there are fewer competing interests, saves her from abusing the precedence yielded to her. This seems to be true, but I have heard others maintain that the American system, since it does not require the wife habitually to forego her own wishes, tends, if not to make her self-indulgent and capricious, yet slightly to impair the more delicate charms of character; as it is written, "It is more blessed to give than to receive."

A European cannot spend an evening in an American drawing-room without perceiving that the attitude of men to women is not that with which he is familiar at home. The average European man has usually a slight sense of condescension when he talks to a woman on serious subjects. Even if she is

his superior in intellect, in character, in social rank, he thinks that as a man he is her superior, and consciously or unconsciously talks down to her. She is too much accustomed to this to resent it, unless it becomes tastelessly palpable. Such a notion does not cross an American's mind. He talks to a woman just as he would to a man, of course with more deference of manner, and with a proper regard to the topics likely to interest her, but giving her his intellectual best, addressing her as a person whose opinion is understood by both to be worth as much as his own. Similarly an American lady does not expect to have conversation made to her. It is just as much her duty or pleasure to lead it as the man's is, and more often than not she takes the burden from him, darting along with a gay vivacity which puts to shame his slower wits.

It need hardly be said that in all cases where the two sexes come into competition for comfort, the provision is made first for women. In railroads the end car of the train, being that farthest removed from the smoke of the locomotive, is often reserved for them (though men accompanying a lady are allowed to enter it), and at hotels their sitting-room is the best and sometimes the only available public room, ladyless guests being driven to the bar or the hall. In omnibuses and horse-cars (tram-cars) it was formerly the custom for a gentleman to rise and offer his seat to a lady if there were no vacant place. This is now less universally done. In New York and Boston (and I think also in San Francisco), I have seen the men keep their seats when ladies entered; and I recollect one occasion when the offer of a seat to a lady was declined by her, on the ground that as she had chosen to enter a full car she ought to take the consequences. It was (I was told in Boston) a feeling of this kind that had led to the discontinuance of the old courtesy. When ladies constantly pressed into the already crowded vehicles, the men, who could not secure the enforcement of the regulations against overcrowding, tried to protect themselves by refusing to rise. It is sometimes said that the privileges yielded to American women have disposed them to claim as a right what was only a courtesy, and have told unfavourably upon their manners. I know of several instances, besides this one of the horse-cars, which might seem to support the criticism, but cannot on the whole