FRENCH WIVES AND MOTHERS.

BY ANNA L. BICKNELL.

WITH PICTURES BY BOUTET DE MONVEL.

THOSE who have gathered their opinions as to the real character of the average Frenchwoman from the romantic literature of the present century, more especially that of the last few years, would necessarily bear a severe judgment, tinged with a considerable amount of contempt. Such an opinion would, however, be unjust and wholly undeserved, as any impartial observer, having been privileged to share French home life, could truly tell them. The average Englishwoman is very graphically depicted in English novels, and a foreigner can form a fair estimate of her merits and demerits from the descriptions of English domestic life presented by popular writers. But it is not so in France or in French literature. The real French gentlewoman deserves to be better understood, for she is totally unlike the heroines of modern novels, whose writers know about as much of aristocratic life as the author of «The Lady Flabella» in «Nicholas Nickleby.» The pictures presented in Octave Feuillet's writings are perhaps the truest to nature as it is seen in some melancholy cases; but he himself certainly would have been ready to admit that the women he met in daily life had nothing in common with his morbid heroines. As he belonged to a good old family of the upper *bourgeoisie*, he had better opportunities of knowing the society which he depicted so powerfully in his novels of fashionable life than have the upstarts who describe *salons* of which they have never crossed the threshold.

But even in the works of Feuillet, although the frame is accurate, the portraits are those of exceptionally diseased minds. Women like Madame de Champallon in «Monsieur de Camors,» or the dreadful Julia de Trécœur, may exist in France or elsewhere; but those who know French society will certainly recognize more readily women like Madame de Camors and her charming mother, or the Suzanne of «La Clef d'Or,» with the home of Sibylle and the dear old people so delightfully described there. Many examples might be quoted equally sweet and pure among the heroines of Feuillet's impassioned narratives, and one is convinced that these have been more faithfully copied from nature than the others.

The fact is that the great majority of French novelists belong to the Bohemia of literature, and are not admitted within the precincts either of aristocratic circles or of the less refined, but equally strict, bourgeois homes. They know only the borderland, peopled in general by the wealthy and adventurous foreign set which budded and expanded during the Second Empire, and has now taken its place by the side of French society, but not within its pale.

Napoleon III, with the intention of favoring the interests of trade and also of raising his own position, chose to have everything connected with his court on a scale of great magnificence, and gave splendid fêtes. But who attended the court balls? Not the old French aristocracy, with few exceptions—which were not always of the most estimable kind. The majority of the great families, partly from political opposition, but still more from pride of lineage, would not condescend to cross the threshold of the Tuileries. The dearth of French aristocracy opened the doors to foreigners—Wallachians, Hungarians, Moldavians, Russians covered with jewels, South Americans showering gold, all bringing barbarous wealth and too often barbarous morals. The women spoke French with a piquant foreign accent which seemed to give the language an additional charm; they wore splendid toilets,—for money can procure anything in Paris,—but of a style as foreign as their tongue; they imitated the fascinations and manners of the least respectable sirens; they lived in meretricious splendor, and opened their doors wide to all who chose to enjoy their luxury and to study their ways, imagining them to represent the very quintessence of refinement. But nothing of all this was *French*.

The younger and pleasure-loving members

of the wealthy parvenu families who have made their fortunes in financial or commercial enterprise have, it is true, often been drawn into the vortex, with very undesirable results. But these belong to a special class, particularly open to temptations, and deprived of the traditional restraints of the steady old families, whether belonging to the nobility or to the upper bourgeoisie.

The old *mariage de convenance*, which caused so much sorrow and consequent evil in former days, when a girl was taken out of a convent to be shown the man to whom she was about to be married, is now a thing of the past. It must be acknowledged, however, that marriages are still made up, often too hastily and superficially, by nicely balanced family arrangements and by the intervention of friends. Nevertheless, attraction and repulsion are now taken into consideration, and a girl is no longer forced to marry a man whom she positively dislikes. I could quote instances in the very highest (historical) aristocracy where, at the last moment, after the trousseau had been sent in (marked, according to custom, with the united initial letters of the two names elaborately embroidered), and all the social preparations made, the marriage was broken off because the bride had declared that she could not «get accustomed» to the bridegroom, nor endure the idea of seeing his face in her home during her natural life. In one of these instances the family lamentations over the initials of the trousseau were really amusing. Fortunately, a substitute was soon found, whose name, like that of the rejected suitor, began with an X, and the complications were thus happily settled.

The great object of the French girl's life is marriage. From the time of her birth her parents have prepared for this event, and in many cases they have considerably straitened their income and curtailed their enjoyments to make up her *dot*. Every girl in every class is expected to have something; those who have nothing are exceptions, and constitute a minority of old maids. The girls who from choice do not marry generally become nuns, usually much against the wishes of their parents. The old tales of young women being forced into convents to improve the position of their brothers are forgotten in these days when, while no child can on any pretense be deprived of a share in the father's inheritance, monastic vows are not recognized by law. Nuns and spinsters are exceptions; marriage is the rule.

When a girl is of an age to be introduced into society, her friends and relatives immediately look out for a suitable husband, whom it is considered highly desirable to obtain before she has reached the age of twenty-one, that she may not be proclaimed *fille majeure* when the banns are published. The principal considerations are equality of birth, of position, of fortune; and in the last particular the scale is usually expected to weigh rather more on the side of the young lady, especially if the young man, in addition to sufficient present advantages, can bring forward a number of relatives not likely to live long. This is called having hopes (*des espérances—beaucoup d'espérances*). If the young lady with a substantial dot can also show a satisfactory background of invalid uncles and aunts, then everything is as it should be, and the young people are brought together with every prospect of a favorable conclusion. It happens, however, too often that they do not know each other sufficiently, and that they are persuaded to believe that the mutual liking is greater than it really is. Sometimes this sort of undefined attraction ripens into a deep and devoted love; when this occurs there are no more affectionate wives or more faithful widows than Frenchwomen.

More frequently, especially in the higher classes, a sort of cool friendliness springs up, where they see but little of each other, and freedom is enjoyed on both sides. The authority of the husband is less felt than in an English household. There is a sort of understanding that in her home the wife is queen, and settles matters as she pleases.

But their best and warmest feelings are awakened by all that concerns their children. French parents are perhaps the most affectionate in the world. The interests and welfare of their children are their first consideration, and wonderful sacrifices of their own pleasure and enjoyment are made in favor of their sons and daughters by the most worldly men and women. These are taken as a matter of course; no one thinks of doing otherwise, or of seeing any merit in such acts.

The mothers especially are unequaled; nothing will stand in the way of a Frenchwoman where her children's interests are concerned. This love is so engrossing that it swallows up every other; they are more mothers than wives, and if called upon to choose between allowing a husband to go alone on a foreign mission, or leaving their children, they would not hesitate. «Mes enfants avant tout.»

The love of a Frenchwoman is always absorbing, leaving little room in her heart for anything outside. If she has no children, and loves her husband, he is her one thought, and she cares for nothing else; so that the union of an affectionate pair becomes a sort of «partnership in selfishness,» as it has been called.

No matter how her matrimonial life may turn out, the Frenchwoman of the present day never complains, and never admits strangers, or even acquaintances, into her domestic troubles. On the contrary, she takes a sort of pride in describing everything about her as particularly delightful; above all, she never complains of her husband so long as she lives with him, whatever he may do. When at last some scandalous affair which cannot be concealed takes place, the public discovers with amazement that the affectionate couple hated each other; that the fathers- and mothers-in-law, always talked of as perfections and treasures, were intolerable plagues and made endless mischief; that the charming sons and daughters, so exceptionally gifted, gave great trouble in various ways; that the delightful home was a place of torture. But nobody ever knew anything about it; and most unhappy couples go on thus to the end. The thorns may prick their fingers, but then they wear faultless gloves, and no one sees the wounds. «Marie, you will bring my death through grief!» I once heard a French mother vociferate to a rebellious child, in accents of despair; but immediately afterward she gave us the assurance that everything had been blessed in her household since «that angel» had been sent to them.

When the first «angel» makes its appearance, the great question to be settled is that of the nurse; for few young women of the higher classes are considered sufficiently robust to perform maternal functions themselves. Many eminent physicians strongly express an opinion that this fatal prejudice is the cause not only of much injury to the health of many young mothers, but that it also explains the startling number of deaths in the higher classes after the birth of a first child. But warnings and expostulations are of no avail; custom has its way; and although the *nourrice* is considered in the light of a plague of Egypt, she is installed in the nursery, where she reigns supreme till the happy time when the baby no longer requires her services, and she is sent home. Meanwhile she is generously paid, and clothed from head to foot with more or less of elegance, according to the position of the family, young and wealthy mothers taking great pride in her costume—a smart cap wreathed with broad ribbons, the streamers of which, fastened to the cap by large gold pins, fall to her feet. Then she must be delicately fed, and must never be contradicted; if irritated in any way, baby may be made ill from taking unwholesome nourishment. She is fully aware of the advantages of her position, and consequently tyrannizes over every one in the house, inflicting every imaginable whim and caprice on all about her. But the tables are turned in many cases, and in a manner which might not be thought quite justifiable; for many parents have no scruple in opening letters addressed to her, lest they should contain bad news, nor even in suppressing them if they seem likely to agitate her. I remember an instance when I could not help feeling great pity for a nurse, knowing that she had lost her eldest child, a boy, of whom she talked constantly with the fondest affection, wondering anxiously at having no news from home. These poor women seem to be sold in bondage for the time, and are treated more like pet animals than like rational human beings.

When the nourrice, or *nou-nou*, as she is familiarly called, has taken her departure, the child becomes the plaything of the mother and the darling of the father, who at first has not fully appreciated the charms of babyhood, except when it happens to be represented by a son who has been anxiously expected that he may revive an ancient name likely to become extinct. In other cases, partly through defective attractions on the part of the infant, who screams and cuts its teeth, partly through exasperation at nou-nou's exigencies, papa has kept aloof as much as possible. But now that baby has developed into a pretty little smiling doll, beautifully dressed, it is worshiped and usually most injudiciously spoiled by both papa and mama. Consequently baby becomes unmanageable, grandmama remonstrates, and assistance is called in—usually a German maid or nursery governess, who professes a violent attachment for her charge, shown by exaggerated terror of possible colds, inducing superfluous clothing, large fires, closed windows, and a prudent horror of the liberal use of water. After a time *Fräulein* becomes extremely exacting with regard to the gratitude which she considers due to her; she perpetually takes offense, and sheds tears. Mama becomes bewildered; papa is exasperated; and

finally Fräulein is sent to weep elsewhere, being replaced by a practical Englishwoman, who exacts an unknown amount of personal comfort, but who keeps baby under discipline, with plenty of fresh air and cold baths, much to the improvement of the freshness of its complexion. So far all is well; but then baby begins to talk a jargon composed of defective English mixed with a reminiscence of German gutturals and still more imperfect French. Papa and mama are then more puzzled than ever. «Yours is such a peculiar language,» I was once told. «The pronunciation and spelling are so different that when you see written ‹Solomon› you may expect to be required to pronounce ‹Nebuchadnezzar.› But, more than this, the letter *h* is invariably introduced into words where it does not exist in the written spelling, and it is always suppressed when it does exist there.» After a time they become sufficiently enlightened as to the cause of these latter mysterious difficulties to correct the instructions given by «Mees» (or, as she is often called, «Mademoiselle Mees») by a more able teacher, with the addition of a French teacher to prepare the way for general education.

But when the time comes for studies to begin in earnest, then fresh perplexities arise. In aristocratic and wealthy families boys are either sent to the junior classes of an ecclesiastical college, or an abbé is engaged to play the part of tutor, the latter arrangement, it must be owned, being often unsatisfactory. The priests who accept tutorships in wealthy families instead of devoting their time to parish work are not usually of the most zealous stamp, and the necessarily false position in which they find themselves placed is not likely to make them more devout or conscientious. The obligations of a Roman Catholic priest are so strict, and his duties are so austere, that a life of retirement seems absolutely necessary for their proper fulfilment, and constant contact with the world can produce only undesirable results.

For daughters there are several modes of education: a resident governess; a daily governess who takes them to the various *cours*, or classes, held by well-known professors; and the various convents. The cours are principally lectures, with a few questions addressed to the pupils; but they are a great trial to the governess, on whom hard work is devolved without reaping any personal satisfaction. The lecture of the professor is usually extremely superficial in the junior classes, and but little understood by the children who attend. The governess must take notes incessantly, and then go over the whole with the pupil to make it intelligible to her. The trouble is much greater than if the instruction were left to the governess; and she has no credit for the progress of the pupil, which is entirely attributed to the professor. In the more advanced classes the cours is often interesting and useful; the professor takes more pains; he is better understood by his hearers; and his teaching has broader views and a wider range than are usually found in the instruction given by women. But the junior cours are deceptive, and of small practical value.

In former days the cours was, however, quite sufficient for education as it was understood at that time. No one cared for much learning in women. The Frenchwomen, celebrated for their *esprit* and attractions, were usually self-taught, and neither very learned nor very accomplished. Every man was afraid of learned women; the very phrase called up disagreeable associations. George Sand says that the image presented to most people's minds by the expression «a superior woman» was that of an ugly creature with blue spectacles and ink-stained fingers. Women really well informed were the exception; and they had not usually the art of carrying their acquirements easily and gracefully, but seemed provokingly pedantic. Like a very clever Frenchwoman of my acquaintance when offered books for seaside reading, they might have answered that they had with them all that they required for their enjoyment,—Homer and Sophocles,—proceeding to dilate on the merits of both. Average men, not having Homer or Sophocles present to their minds, felt annihilated by such speeches, and cordially hated the learned ladies with superior intellects. Even without such pretensions, women who read much or who talked of books were ridiculed.

The typical *jeune fille* was superficial, and her intellectual acquirements were required only to give piquancy to her conversation, and to save her from an appearance of absolute ignorance when more serious topics were discussed. The great object of her education was to keep anything «improper» out of her way. Consequently, she read and learned only «beauties» of various writers; but even these were improved upon and modified in defiance of rhyme and sense. In Lamartine's beautiful poem «Le Lac,» for instance, not only were several stanzas

omitted, but the last verse was altered: «Ils ont *passé*» instead of «Ils ont *aimé*» (a forbidden word!). The same dread of «impropriety» prevented any detailed historical reading; a dry summary of events, with the dates of accession of the kings, the famous battles, the length of the reigns, was considered sufficient. The question of «impropriety» was carried to such an extent that while staying with an illustrious French family, during my holidays at the Tuileries, I was much surprised to see a number of Leech's sketches, in the published collection of his contributions to «Punch,» with slips of paper carefully pasted over them. Certainly no English parents, of however strict views, would see anything improper in the harmless jests immortalized by the pencil of John Leech, and I could not refrain from expressing astonishment. «Oh,» said a little girl present, daughter of the lady of the house, «mama pasted them over because she did not consider that they were proper for me. But if you would like to look at them, you have only to hold them up to the window; you will see them quite well.» This practical illustration of the consequences of too much severity struck me as more amusing than satisfactory.

This doubtful system by which young girls were kept, as it were, in a glass case, like rare plants, till they were married, was carried out with great strictness at the convents, where at least a portion of school-room years is usually spent, especially by the daughters of aristocratic families. The principal convent in Paris is the Sacré-Cœur, where most of the teachers and pupils belong to the highest nobility of France. The tone of the Sacré-Cœur is aristocratic and Royalist. Any other political opinion would be considered, if not absolutely sinful, at least very improper and highly reprehensible. Formerly the studies had the reputation of being very superficial; now the necessity of keeping up with the government schools has wrought considerable improvement, and it must be acknowledged that the pupils are more thoroughly taught than when the convents had matters entirely their own way. The discipline is strict,—perhaps too much so,—but the spirit inculcated is essentially fitted for the development of Christian gentlewomen. There is a little too much talk about pedigrees, and too much importance is attached to illustrious names, although the foundress, who is revered as a saint, was not of noble birth.

Next to the Sacré-Cœur comes the Congrégation de Notre-Dame, better known as Les Oiseaux. The original house, now built into the conventual establishment, belonged to a gentleman who possessed a remarkable aviary. Thus it was popularly called «La Maison des Oiseaux,» which name has been retained. Here there is more simplicity and a less exclusive spirit; the higher middle class is more widely represented; and the nuns themselves, though thoroughly ladylike, have less of the courtly stiffness which characterizes the *dame du Sacré-Cœur*. The tone of the establishment is more homelike. Apart from particular social views, there is no reason for preferring one to the other; the choice must depend on individual requirements and positions.

Of course there are many other convents both in Paris and the provinces; but the one considered next in rank to the two previously mentioned is the Assumption, of which the principal or «mother» house is at Auteuil, a suburb of Paris. It has the reputation of being the educational establishment where the studies are almost as wide and thorough as those at the government institution of the Légion d'Honneur, which, however, is open only to the daughters of members of the Legion of Honor.

The objection to all those immense educational establishments lies in the gathering together of too many girls under the same roof. Education cannot be thoroughly satisfactory in what has been called a «women's barracks,» under almost military drill. Experienced mothers, especially those who have spent some years in such establishments, often take their daughters home when they have reached the age of fifteen. They feel that in all well-regulated families the mother alone can efficaciously watch over the final development of a girl's mind and character. In the conventual houses, although it is impossible to remove all that may be criticized, the constant, conscientious watchfulness of the nuns, and the religious spirit which pervades all their teaching, are nevertheless valuable preservatives.

There is nothing of the kind in the government schools, even in those of the Légion d'Honneur, which rank as the best. In its anxiety to destroy so-called «clerical» influences, the present government has established secular lyceums for young ladies, in opposition to the convents. It provides excellent accommodation and capable teachers, and the terms are sufficiently moderate to prove a temptation. Public examinations are now required of all professional teachers,

and the curriculum has been raised. But for the education of girls more is required than a mere official diploma, and, unfortunately, many of the teachers in the *lycées de filles* have no better qualification than the possession of this guaranty that they are sufficiently competent as regards their studies. Experience, principles, moral and religious training, are secondary considerations. What is called «morality» is taught exactly like grammar—by rule and precept, without any higher motive for distinguishing between right and wrong. In the schools of the Legion of Honor there is more of traditional training, the teachers being exclusively chosen from among former pupils of the establishments; but even here the religious teaching is a matter of social propriety, learned like any other lesson; the guiding spirit of religious faith and fervor plays no part. But in the other government schools there is an unfortunate advance beyond this indifference; religion is wholly set aside, and the spirit cultivated is decidedly freethinking.

It is therefore only natural that families with religious principles, even in the bourgeoisie, should refuse to send their daughters to the lycées, the objections to which are so obvious that many men in public life known as anti-clerical, and even as freethinkers, actually prefer the convents for their daughters. The lycées de filles are comparatively deserted, and rejected particularly by the upper classes.

But competition has had the effect of greatly raising the level of female studies, even in the convents. The sisters have passed examinations and obtained diplomas, while the narrow spirit of former days has been widened to suit modern exigencies. It is now fashionable for young ladies in perfectly independent and even wealthy positions to pass the examination at the Hôtel de Ville, and to obtain the diploma authorizing to teach professionally. In such cases this is, of course, intended only as a guaranty that the studies have been followed in a satisfactory manner; but the real advantage lies in the fact of having an object in view to stimulate the energies of the girls. In these examinations, unhappily, the prudery of former days is only too much set aside, especially in the case of candidates coming from the conventual schools, and questions are sometimes asked which no modest girl could answer without embarrassment. They are a wholly gratuitous annoyance, due to the bad taste and ill will of some examiners, as to which many indignant protestations have been made.

There are two degrees of diplomas: the first, called «elementary,» is comparatively easy; the second, or «superior,» diploma is a serious test of capacity; but it must necessarily be preceded by the other, and cannot be obtained at once. Those who do not intend to study professionally are generally satisfied with the first, and do not go beyond; but the «superior» diploma is now often required by mothers even of their private governesses, and is a necessity for all professional teachers.

Yet surely even this guaranty of mere abstract learning should not be considered to sum up all that is required for the delicate task of developing the mind and character of a gentleman's daughter.

It often happens that when it is thought desirable for a young girl to return home from her convent, for reasons to which we have previously referred, her education is still unfinished, and has to be completed either by private lessons or by following the higher cours, which now require hard work; for pupils no longer have to exercise their faculties on such interesting subjects of composition as the following: «What Flower is My Favorite, and Why I Prefer It»; «Letter to a Friend on Her Brother's Promotion»; «Whether I Like Town or Country Best, and Why»; «The Season that I Prefer, with Description»; etc.

These intellectual achievements caused, however, great excitement among fond mothers and considerable rivalry among pupils; but even in the easy time now gone by some professors forestalled the present system, and required of their pupils—what are now the rule—compositions which really called intellectual faculties into play. For example:

«Write a summary of the struggle between the Guelfs and the Ghibellines; its origin and principal events.»

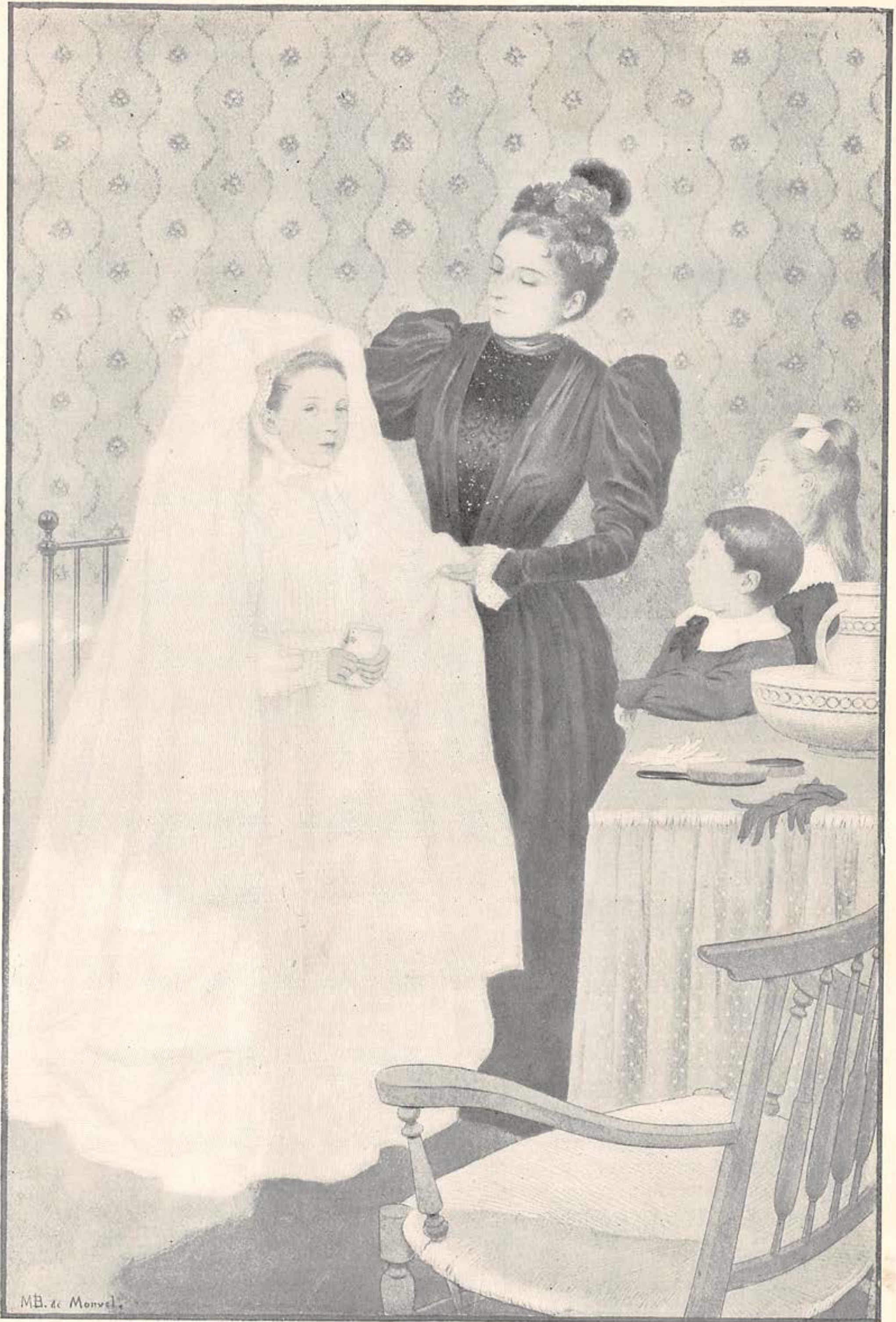
«Explain the motives of the war between the popes and the emperors.»

«Give an account of the occupation of Spain by the Moors.»

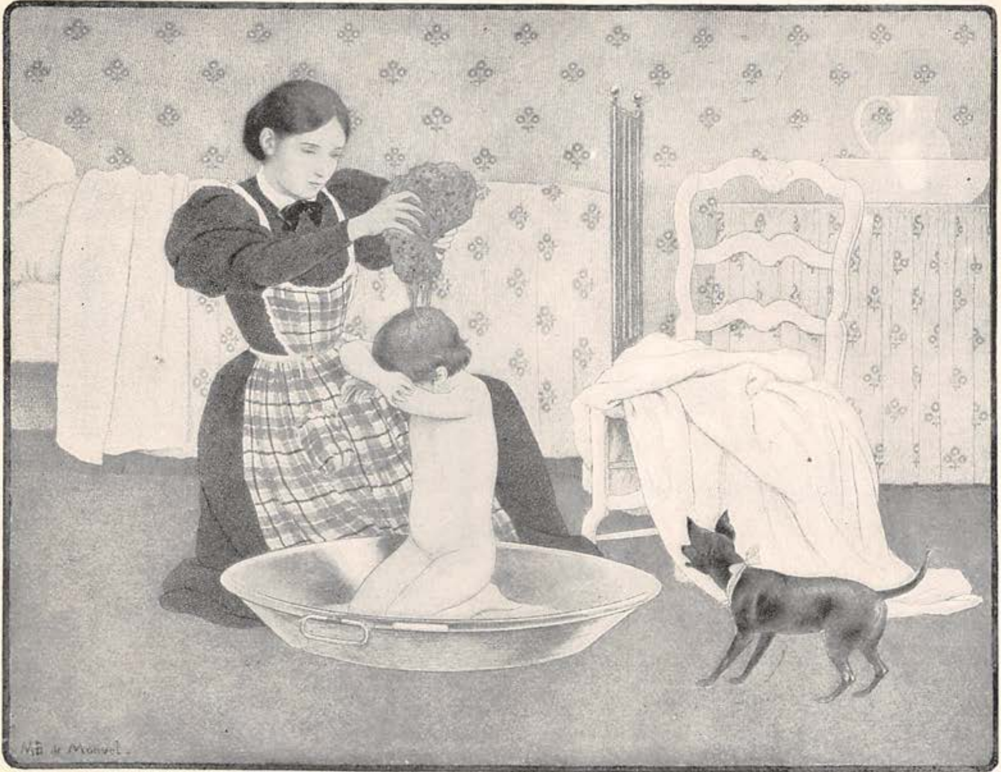
«Analyze the character of Catherine de' Medici, and that of Queen Elizabeth; compare and show the difference between them.»

«Give a summary of the great wars occasioned by the rival pretensions of royal families up to the present time.»

Such subjects required real study on the part of the pupil, and were certainly very useful for mental development; but what was then the exceptional teaching of some



TOILET FOR THE FIRST COMMUNION.



THE ENGLISH NURSE BATHING THE FRENCH BABY IN COLD WATER.

particularly clever and zealous professor is now more or less happily carried out by all.

It is in the families of the middle and professional classes, usually of straitened means, that the character of the French wife and mother is fully developed in all her devotedness to her duty. She cannot have the assistance of a governess, and all the work consequent on the necessities of her children's education falls upon her. She begins by taking them to the *catéchisme*, a prolonged course of serious religious instruction to prepare them for their first communion, which takes place at about the age of twelve, and constitutes the greatest event of their early years—a day always remembered and treasured in French families, when children are admitted to make a solemn profession of faith, to renew their baptismal vows, and for the first time to participate in the holy communion.

Everything that can be done by magnificence of ceremonial is combined to produce a lasting impression on the minds of the children. Even the white robe worn, with its veil falling to the ground, becomes an event in the life of girls who have not yet known any worldly excitement, and the whole seems to give them a vision of heaven. But even on such a solemn occasion the extreme simplicity of attire required by rule is a sore trial to maternal vanity in the more wealthy families. In all cases, whether it be for the daughter of a princely house in the aristocratic Faubourg St.-Germain, or for the child of a petty tradesman or even workman, the dress must be the same plain white muslin, the bodice lined up to the throat, without any mundane transparency recalling, even at a distance, anything like a ball-dress; the same unpretending close little cap; the same long muslin veil shrouding the figure from head to foot.

I remember being much amused at the anger of a fashionable lady, which I happened to witness, and against which I tried to expostulate.

«The idea of the child being muffled up to her chin, as if she were seventy!»

«But, my dear madame, remember that it will be worn in a church, and that it is a general rule; there must be nothing transparent in the bodice of the dress.»

«Well, if they don't want to see her skin, just as if she had some disease, I don't want to show it to them. She might as well be a

leper! It is too ridiculous! But why, on the happiest day of her life, she is to be got up to look like Jane Grey going to the scaffold is more than I can understand!»

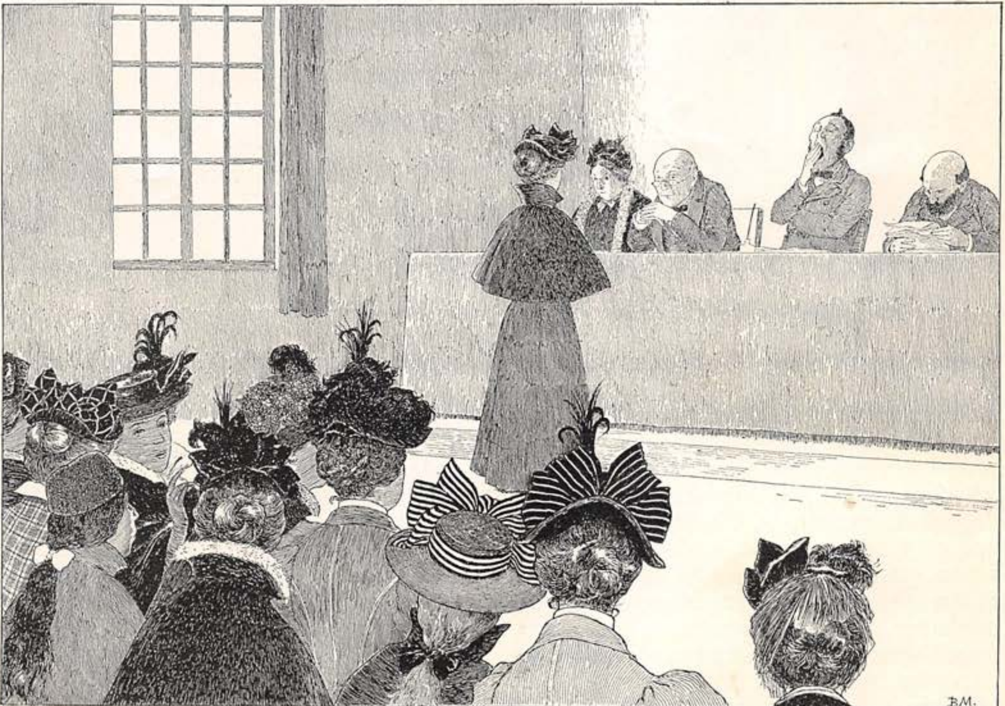
And the indignant mother paced the room, repeating, «Jane Grey—just like Jane Grey!» while I laughed beyond polite dissimulation, and a chorus of attendants cried, «But it must be! The lady inspectresses would not allow her to pass!»

It must be owned, however, that these «sumptuary laws» preventing invidious distinctions are a great boon to families such as those to whom I have referred.

When the first communion is over, the cours becomes the great occupation, entailing even more work on the mother than on the pupils. She also takes them to the houses of the different masters for accomplishments, because the lessons are cheaper thus. Then she does not wish to deprive them of all relaxation, so she accompanies them to the houses of their young friends, or takes them to walk in the public gardens. In the intervals of time she mends and makes their clothes. When evening comes, and the children are safe in bed, the mother has no strength left for any interest more engrossing than her daily «Figaro»; and the flirtations or intrigues with which she is so liberally credited by novel-writers are simply impossible.

In the families where the father conducts any business the wife becomes his best clerk, and usually his cashier. The wives are exceedingly intelligent and acute, extremely sharp at driving bargains, and accurate in keeping accounts. They are their husbands' partners in every sense of the word, and it is wonderful to see how they acquit themselves of such a multiplicity of duties. Self is completely annihilated; and if weak health is mentioned, it is never an impediment to what they have to do for their children or their husbands, but is mentioned only as a disagreeable accompaniment to necessary fatigue, without an idea of using it as an excuse for shortcomings.

In the same spirit ladies of the higher classes sacrifice their health to take their daughters into society when of marriageable age; and if it is suggested that such late hours are destructive to those who absolutely require a quiet and regular life, the answer is a look of astonishment and the rejoinder: «But it cannot be helped. It must be! My daughter must have every opportunity to be married.» And though she should die for it, the mother goes on, day after day, or rather night after night, accepting any amount of



EXAMINATION AT A GIRLS' SCHOOL.

physical fatigue and consequent suffering. «It must be!»

Absolute sacrifice of self for a given motive,—or, what is perhaps still more remarkable, absolute forgetfulness of self,—is a striking characteristic of the Frenchwoman's nature developed by example and education.

Ladies of the highest rank, who seem the most engrossed by frivolous pleasures, will perform heroic acts of charity in the most unexpected manner. The Infirmary for Cancerous Diseases, containing the most fearful and loathsome examples of that repulsive malady, is regularly attended by ladies of rank, who have their fixed days of duty, when, each in turn, they dress the wounds with their own hands. The Duchesse d'Uzès, one of the best-known leaders of fashion, whose splendid festivities fill the chronicles of the leading newspapers, is one of the most assiduous, showing an adroitness in the exercise of her charitable functions which induces her care to be particularly desired by the patients.

I know great families who, when residing in their country houses, have regular days in the week when the daughters of the family dress wounds and sores among the surrounding peasantry. The mothers in such families repress energetically any morbid sensibility which might interfere with such duties. «What will you be fit for in after life if you cannot command your feelings?» I have heard said by a venerable marquise who looked as if she had stepped down from the frame of one of the pictures in her château. I may quote another instance, of a lady in a less high position, who took in a wretched beggar child on a cold wintry night, performing maternal offices as regards removing the consequences of his neglected condition which were so repulsive that her physical strength gave way and she was taken violently ill in consequence. On my praising her charity, she exclaimed almost indignantly: «What! when our Lord washed the feet of his disciples, you would have me shrink from doing what is necessary for a poor, wretched child, merely through a feeling of disgust?»

THE BUSINESS MAN'S WIFE GOING OVER THE ACCOUNTS.

I said nothing, but could not help think-

ing how many would have left the care to others.

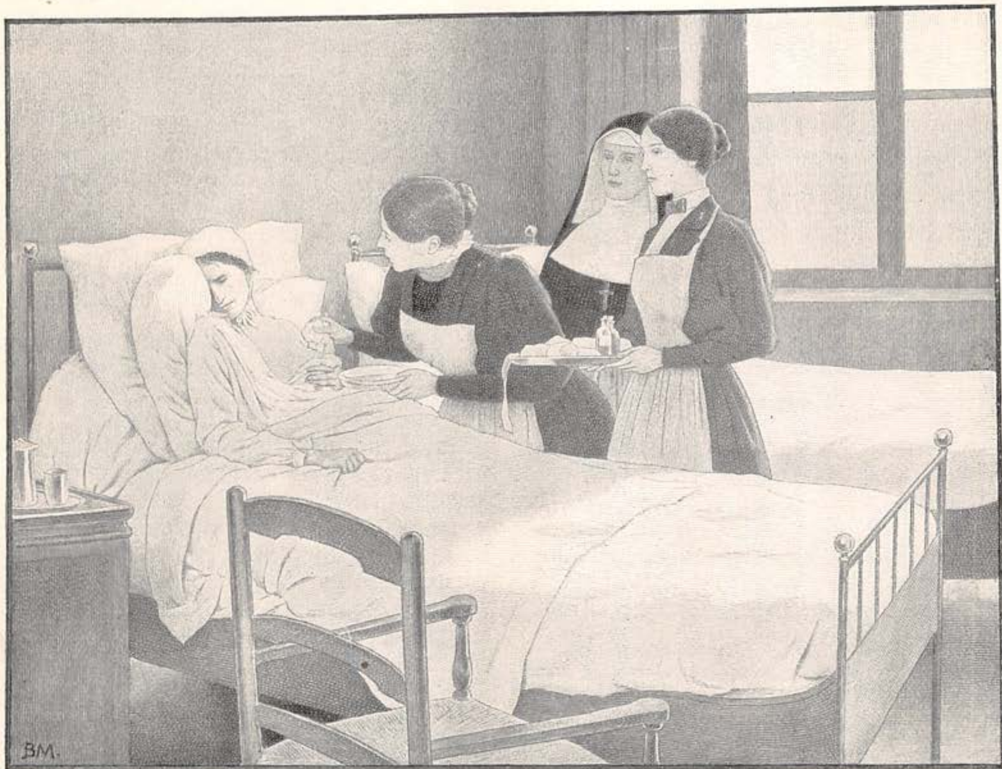
It must be acknowledged, however, that by the side of acts of heroic charity there is, saving exceptions, a great lack of that genial kindness which shows itself to equals in any trouble by many little friendly attentions in England and America—the «cup of cold water» of the gospel.

Here the French are usually supremely indifferent. It is no concern of theirs, and people must see to their own business. They are not hospitable, and it is rare indeed when an «outsider» is admitted into a French home. They will make some sacrifices for their relatives or the friends of their childhood; but that large-hearted helpfulness so readily found among English and Americans does not in general exist in France. I have seen a lady in bad health, absolutely deprived of all assistance by the misconduct of a servant, and unable to go out herself on account of the excessive severity of the weather, left without even an offer of a share in their dinner by acquaintances living in the same house, who were perfectly aware of her difficulties. The same people would have gone through snow and frost to visit some poor protégé, for that would have been «an act of charity.» There is certainly here a mistaken view of the meaning of the word; for «charity» does not necessarily imply almsgiving, but may be shown in many ways. This sort of indifference is, however, the general rule; active kindness the exception.

With the present cost of living in Paris, where prices rise constantly, it is often puzzling to imagine how some people live at all—the people whom nobody helps, because the straits of their position are carefully concealed. An innumerable body of former government employees of all classes have no resource worthy of mention beyond their pensions, which are ridiculously small. At a fixed age they are superannuated to make room for others, and then they must live as they can on these pensions. Those that are married and have sons and daughters are less to be pitied than others; Frenchwomen are ingenious and industrious, family ties are strong, and they will do anything to help their parents. The ingenious contrivance with which such home affairs are managed is really remarkable. Whole families pack into flats of two or three rooms, out of which they always reserve a «salon,» which once a week is set out to receive visitors, but is invariably closed to all comers on any other day. «Madame est sortie,» says the concierge, and no one is allowed to go up to the fifth or sixth floor where they nestle. They work incessantly, the mother sewing and mending, the daughters, when not competent to give lessons, doing embroidery for the shops. At night they sleep anywhere—perhaps in a corner of a dark passage screened off, the father or brother on a «shake-down» in the salon, the mother and another daughter crammed into a tiny cell too small for one and intolerable for two. It is all dreadfully unwholesome, no doubt, especially as the whole is warmed by a pestilential «Choubersky» stove, poisonous, but cheap, and consequently adopted in all such homes, notwithstanding its dangerous and often fatal effects. «We must manage to live somehow, and rents are so dear that we cannot stop to think of such things.» All are very shabbily dressed; usually the mother is even frightfully untidy; but, they argue, no one can get into their den, «so what does that matter?»

On the day devoted to visitors no one would suspect the «secrets of the prison-house.» The salon is set out attractively for all comers, and adorned with evergreen plants—often imitations from the Bon Marché, as the real plants are an expensive luxury, but so well placed in corners, and so prettily surrounded, that the delusive appearance is complete. The mother and daughters are becomingly, although not expensively dressed; above all, they are smiling and cheerful, seeming perfectly happy and contented, and never allude to any drawbacks in their position, or complain of any inconvenience. All those who visit them leave the house with a pleasant impression, and do not dream that when the last visitor has left economy again rules supreme, and that the smiling hostesses sit down to a dinner of sausages and cabbage, or eat the cold boiled beef which has made soup, with a little oil and vinegar. The *pot-au-feu*, or meat-soup, is in fact a festive meal; more often the mother has made soup with dry crusts soaked in the water which has boiled vegetables, and the addition of pea-pods or some such delicacy. If they live near the Halles Centrales, or principal markets, the mother goes there late in the afternoon, and looks out for articles of food which would not bear a day's delay, and pounces upon these because they are sold at any price. In the case of old bachelors or widowers, «lone and lorn,» who are not so expert at bargaining, there is the characteristic resource of what are called technically *les*

bijoux, namely, the remnants sold by cooks of large establishments and by first-class restaurants. These are collected from door to door, and tumbled together in no very appetizing fashion; but the retailer sorts and arranges the various articles, which are then properly adorned (*parés*), scraped, and cut into neat pieces, nicely garnished, and set out on clean plates. Customers who are brave enough to forget the antecedents of such dainties may thus purchase for a trifle portions of the choicest game or the best fish served on high-class tables, with many other delicacies of tempting appearance. Many old *rentiers*, so called, living in garrets, and sunning themselves all day on benches in the public gardens, where they talk politics with their fellows, get really good dinners in this way.



A WOMAN OF FASHION ATTENDING THE SICK IN A HOSPITAL.

The typical French families, such as I have described, are not reduced to such straits as these, and would shrink from such suspicious good things. Their fare is cheap and coarse; they are very frugal in their habits; but they have in general more substantial food than English families in equivalent positions. «Making up» with tea and bread and butter is unknown here. The French family of the class of which I am speaking despises tea, which is resorted to only as a remedy after some indigestible omelet, or too large a portion of fried potatoes—a favorite treat. On such occasions *une pincée de thé* (literally, a «pinch» of tea) is put into a large china tea-pot, which is then filled up with moderately warm water. Those who have great pretensions as to their proficiency in the art of making tea then put the tea-pot over a saucepan of hot water, and thus let it simmer slowly till they consider it *bien infusé*. The liquid thus obtained is poured into a cold cup or bowl, mixed with about an equal quantity of boiled milk, with several large lumps of sugar, and stirred with a large table-spoon. It is then swallowed by the patient with mingled resignation and confidence in its virtues as a sovereign remedy for dyspepsia. Often great astonishment is expressed as to the peculiarities of the English nation, which is so strangely fond of tea; this they consider incomprehensible, and no wonder.

One small indulgence is treasured by Parisian women who have reached middle age—that of their morning coffee, the cherished

café-au-lait, for which they would give up any other treat, and which, like the Englishwoman's tea, seems the one comfort of their lives. This is strictly Parisian; for they are more philosophical in the provinces, and more primitive in their habits. I could name ladies of princely rank who begin the day with a bowl of pumpkin-soup as their only breakfast.

An instance may be quoted of a young English lady who, through a peculiar assemblage of circumstances, was by a rare privilege admitted on a visit to share the home life of a great French family in their château. The Marquise ——, a most dignified old lady, inquired what her visitor wished to have for breakfast. The young stranger, considerably frightened and bewildered by her new surroundings, answered shyly:

«Tea—or coffee—or anything Madame la Marquise pleases.»

«My dear,» was the reply, «you are my guest, and of course you shall have anything you like; but my daughters take soup, and if you are wise you will do as they do; young people should avoid contracting habits.»

Of course the hint was sufficient, and the English girl breakfasted on a bowl of onion-soup; but I would not guarantee that she enjoyed the necessity.

In the case of the real old aristocratic families the country life of the mistresses of châteaux is usually extremely simple. When the church is near the ladies usually go to early mass; but this is rather exceptional, as the châteaux are not usually near the villages. In towns it is, however, a general custom. No one is expected to be seen before the *déjeuner à la fourchette*, or luncheon, the hour for which varies between eleven and twelve. The family then meet in the simplest dresses imaginable, which are frequently retained for the dinner without any change. Everything they wear is fresh and neat, but often of the humblest material, such as printed cotton. The meals are, however, served ceremoniously, on massive old plate, and the fare is excellent. Nothing is supposed to be necessary between luncheon and dinner, except for children, who are given preserves and bread, or fruit. The young children and their governesses are present at all the meals, even the late dinner—a very undesirable practice for many reasons. «Afternoon tea» is unknown out of Paris, except as a compliment to an occasional visitor; nor is tea served in the evening; but excellent coffee is taken immediately after dinner. A tray with sugar, water, and syrup, placed within reach, is considered sufficient for all needs till the next morning.

The long walks and rides which play such an important part in English country life are unusual here, and the ladies of the family do not habitually walk beyond the private grounds. Croquet and lawn-tennis have made their appearance in some country-houses, especially those in the neighborhood of Paris, usually belonging to wealthy bankers, or manufacturers, or large tradesmen, whose household arrangements are much more luxurious, trying hard to imitate English ways. They certainly come nearest to the traditions of country life in England, and there is usually plenty of gaiety going on; but, in general, hospitality is not a virtue congenial to the French soul. There is a good deal of display, but also a considerable amount of thrift.

Among the old French aristocracy, their principles of education are much shocked by the familiarity of modern habits, and especially of modern games. A great advance in this direction has been made within the last few years, under the patronage of some wealthy and rather «fast» leaders of fashion, who have introduced hunting- and shooting-parties in which young ladies take an active share; but these innovations belong to a peculiar set, and are viewed with consternation by the others.

There is not so much visiting of the poor and teaching of children as in English villages. The Sisters of Charity, where they are allowed to remain, undertake the distribution of alms, and keep poor-schools, visited and patronized by the château families, who give all assistance to the poor under the guidance of the sisters; but in many places the sisters have been dismissed; then there is tacit war with the authorities, causing much annoyance and unpleasantness on both sides. In such cases the ladies of the château take the place of the sisters in tending the sick, and even in dressing their wounds, as has been previously stated. They also make clothes for the poor and embroider vestments for the village church.

The families in which the education of children does not oblige them to return to Paris early for the sake of classes and masters remain more and more in the country, notwithstanding the monotony of their lives, in such strong contrast to the animation of Paris; so that now the great families dwell there but a short time, taking all their gaiety, as it were, in one dose.

But the real Parisians born and bred, who

A SISTER OF CHARITY NURSE.

usually belong to the financial and commercial classes, have no love for the country, and would as soon choose to live in a cemetery.

When summer has fairly set in, everybody who is anybody has left long ago, and those who are nobodies try to cheat themselves into the belief that they are «in the country» by taking refuge in the white cardboard houses of the environs. Here they are choked with dust and blinded by the glare of white, chalky roads. They pay a higher price for all provisions, and have very limited resources within their reach; but they are «in the country,» and monsieur, who goes to Paris every morning, can bring back anything not to be had in the locality. Then *mon fils* is at school in Paris, and can spend his weekly holidays with his loving parents, who can also be present at the distribution of prizes which precedes the vacation, and enjoy the thrilling sight of a succession of laurel wreaths placed on the head of their cherished son; for he must be a dunce indeed who does not get a prize of some kind in a French college, and each prize has its wreath of laurel, or crown, as it is called in republican France.

When monsieur is in Paris, madame enjoys the delight of walking about a tiny garden in a state of cool, comfortable untidiness, which becomes the privilege of monsieur when he returns in the evening and puts himself at ease. Notwithstanding her professed love for the «country,» madame is forced by supposed dire necessity to go into Paris two or three times a week, in the freshest of summer toilets; and thus she gains sufficient strength of mind to get through her time of exile without repining, and even with eloquent dissertations on the delights of country life to her friends, when they come to dinner on Sundays, and take back with them large bouquets of strongly scented flowers, to the great annoyance of their fellow-travelers in the railway-carriages.

In families of all classes, when mon fils is at home his tastes, his amusements, his enjoyments, are the one thought of his parents. In the case of sons there is as much sybaritism encouraged as there is simplicity and a certain amount of austere discipline shown in the education of daughters.

One thing remains after an over-spoiled childhood—a devoted affection for their mothers on the part of the sons. Family feelings are very strong: they love their sisters and respect their fathers; but they worship their mothers, who often can obtain from them sacrifices which they would refuse to all other entreaties or remonstrances.

The period of enforced military service is a hard time for all, but more especially for the young men of the upper classes, who have not been inured to hardships and privations. It is an anxious time for mothers—in many cases even calamitous, in others perhaps really useful as a means of counteracting the too luxurious habits of many young French gentlemen brought up like spoiled girls, and accustomed to every indulgence. For such Sybarites, of which there are too many, the life of French barracks, where a duke's son lies next to a plowman's son, on the same sort of pallet, may be a useful lesson, when it is not beyond their physical strength, necessarily much reduced by habits of luxurious comfort. Unhappily, many deaths are registered every year, either through accidents or through illness caused by hardships endured.

The lists of pupils admitted to the military schools show a great increase of aristocratic names. For some time after the establishment of the republic there was a good deal of holding back among the high families, and a disinclination to serve in the army; but now that they *must* do so, there is so great an advantage in the position of an officer that, besides the considerations of patriotism, which overrule political dislikes, the question of personal interest would prove sufficient in many cases. The white flag was buried with the Comte de Chambord; there is now but one for all parties, and the army represents *la patrie*, the fatherland.

Besides, no other profession is now open to young men of high birth. Under the empire there were the prefects and sub-prefects—in other words, governors of departments and sub-governors of towns. This sounded well, and had an air of viceroyalty about it which was a temptation. But now all these functionaries must be declared republicans, and as such are kept at a distance by all the local families of position, to whom ceasing to be monarchists would be like renouncing their religion, and would be considered as a sort of apostasy. Any one who goes to the prefect's receptions or balls is immediately put outside the pale of aristocratic society. «They are people—who go to the prefect's receptions!» Nothing more need be said, and henceforward every other door is closed upon them.

The violence of political feeling, especially in the provinces, could hardly be imagined by outsiders. I could quote an instance of an English lady, received in the best society of

a provincial town, who, having met on neutral ground a republican gentleman whom she thought particularly clever and agreeable, allowed him to recognize her and exchange a few words with her in the street.

«You spoke to Monsieur ——?»

«Why not? Is he not perfectly respectable and very agreeable?»

«But he is a *declared republican!*»

«What does that matter?»

«It matters so much that if you know him no one will receive you.»

And the Englishwoman was forced to submit to local tyranny, on pain of losing all her acquaintances.

Such a state of affairs is not likely to bring about much friendly feeling between the different political parties.

The antagonism was slightly modified during the presidency of Marshal MacMahon, when the Faubourg St.-Germain itself condescended to be represented at his receptions. But then, he was one of their set, and his wife was the daughter of the Duc de Castries; so it was considered that the visits were addressed to the marshal of France, and not to the president of the French republic!

The diplomatic career was formerly eagerly sought by young men of good family; but the same difficulties now prevent them from trying to obtain any post. They could not be attachés under a republican ambassador or minister without finding themselves perpetually placed in false positions, while the hope of promotion for those bearing significant names would be very slight.

The result is that young men of high birth now enter the army as the only way of having something to do, and remain there after marriage. The attractions of Paris are no longer sufficient to induce young ladies to lay down the condition that their intended husbands should leave the army and live in the only place where, under the empire, life seemed endurable. When daughters married *sous-préfets*, or even *préfets*, the whole family wept over the miseries of the separation, and the dire necessity of residing, at least for some time, in a provincial town. They were called «exiles,» and it was considered only natural that they should escape to Paris whenever they could find an excuse to do so. When their «espérances» were realized by the death of rich relatives, they hastened to give up their post of uncongenial honor, and returned to Paris—or Paradise.

At the present time people are more sensible and more practical, though perhaps with lessened merit; for Paris has lost many of its charms. They travel more; they no longer fear distances; and young wives consent very philosophically to inhabit garrison towns for an indefinite period. They now have a better understanding of comfort, and have learned how to make homes pretty; they are always well dressed, and always bright and cheerful in public, whatever their domestic troubles may be: in short, they make the best of their position.

I hope to have proved that the Frenchwoman is not the frivolous being that she is supposed to be. She is very intelligent, and exceedingly practical in her views; not much given to literature, and heartily glad to have «finished her education,» but retaining enough of the past «cramming» to join brightly in any conversation and say a sparkling word on any subject. She is devoted to her children, for whom she will perform any sacrifice or accept any amount of slavery; for which she is rewarded by the love and confidence of her children, more especially of her sons, over whom she retains through life great influence.

When Casimir-Périer persisted in giving up the presidency of the French republic, notwithstanding the entreaties of his mother, every one felt that his decision must be irrevocable indeed.

The Frenchwoman, of the upper classes especially, is sincerely religious and conscientious; she is a good housewife and a good manager, even inclined to too much thrift in everything but her toilet, where her reasoning powers seem to disappear. Toilet she must have, at any cost and any risk. But here, again, appearances are not always to be trusted. Many Frenchwomen are exceedingly expert with the needle, and will unrepiningly work for whole days, without change or relaxation, to get up a pretty dress for some occasion, if their purse should be insufficient for dressmaking bills. The bonnet especially is the great achievement, the established principle being that a dress, if well made, may be of any material, provided the *chapeau* be irreproachable. Therefore many fashionable ladies make their own bonnets, so as to have an endless variety. I have known princesses whose deft fingers could *chiffonner* any amount of tulle or lace into fascinating head-gear, so as to rival the productions of a fashionable milliner.

In short, the Frenchwoman is a butterfly gathering honey like a bee. «A monster!» some may exclaim. Well—perhaps—if by «monster» is meant something heterogeneous; but what a charming monster!