FRENCH GIRLHOOD.

By Mme. GUIZOT DE WITT.

IF, some thirty years ago, I had been asked to write a short account of the life of young girls in France as compared with that of their contemporaries on the other side of the Channel, my task would in some sense have been much more defined. For the contrast was at that time more striking and the differences were more accentuated. Nor were these so, merely on the surface. The two systems of education were radically opposed. All over France, wherever and whenever the English method of bringing up girls came under discussion, mothers would express themselves about it in no measured terms ; even the pleasant freedom of companionship allowed and encouraged between English girls and their brothers would be commented upon, and almost as a matter of course if it happened that some girl less carefully trained than the average were alluded to, the remark, " Oh, she is quite English," would be heard with a very unmistakable accent of reproach, even from the lips of those who had never exchanged a syllable with a member of the English nation. This severe judgment of our neighbours has greatly decreased in the present day ; indeed in Paris, among those generally recognised as constituting the upper classes, it has almost entirely disappeared, and with greater knowledge of English life, the difference between the two nations grows daily less striking.

Of our maidens as well as our youths, it may be said that railways and steamboats are bridging over the separation between them and their young contemporaries across the Channel, as truly as they have lessened the actual distance between the two countries.

The transformation in the education and bringing-up of our girls in Paris and most large French towns is even more wonderful than that which has taken place in the same lapse of time among their brothers. The change in their education has been both radical and speedy. It has also extended far, and is by no means confined to the higher grades of society, where the superficial distinctions between different nations are in many ways slight. Formerly where young girls would have been kept strictly secluded either in their own families or in schools or convents during the years of their education, they are now to be seen, escorted by their mothers, attending classes of all kinds, history, literature, music, drawing, &c. Uncomplainingly, mothers follow their daughters from class to lecture, and from lecture to class, sometimes even neglecting their households, and often to the prejudice of their own health, but they keep their daughters at home, and that compensates them for all !

The reason for so great a change is simple and natural. An education by means of lectures and classes is easy and far from costly, while private lessons were expensive and could not always be obtained. Few mothers had themselves received enough instruction to undertake that of their daughters, others had not the time to devote to it, and the system of home education under the care of a resident governess so thoroughly understood and so universally practised in England, has never taken root with us. There still remains the alternative of education both religious and secular, either in schools or convents, but this system entails the separation of parents and children ; so it is not to be wondered at that the former have joyfully adopted a method which enables them to bring up their daughters under their own supervision.

The result of this, so to speak, out-of-door education, and the constant intercourse between girls of all ages, has naturally brought about, in the last fifteen years, a remarkable social revolution. French girls have become more independent, and have

acquired a greater freedom of speech and manners ; in a word, their individuality has begun to assert itself. Now, instead of the silent and timid child who never left her mother's side, or if educated in a convent took instantaneous refuge under the maternal wing as soon as she returned home, we find young girls boldly claiming for themselves the liberty of speech and action that, not so many years back, was only accorded to them after marriage, and throwing aside as far as they dare the restrictions which formerly surrounded French girlhood. Mothers meet with less respect and less submissive obedience, even though their daughters' affection may still be undiminished. At balls and parties girls rebel against the maternal supervision and loudly proclaim, when some grandmother or great-aunt with old-fashioned ideas ventures to make any objection, "Oh ! you forget that the world has become English now ! "

Is the harm caused by this total transformation as serious as might at first appear ? I think not. In France we thoroughly admire and appreciate the tone of young English girls, and are far from ignoring the serious drawbacks and even dangers appertaining to our old system, all the more insidious because concealed below the surface. What if it be the case that our girls of to-day, from the ages of nineteen to twenty-three, favour us with rather too much of their exuberant vitality and longing for independence ? They accept, later on, none the less seriously their duties as wives and mothers. Or, even if they give expression to many thoughts, wishes, and ideas formerly checked by a more repressive education ? I, for one, do not blame them, nor indeed can I judge them harshly, even when their unconstrained tone and manners jar somewhat on the so-called old-fashioned prejudices from which I cannot hold myself entirely free. Much the same change, I am told, has taken place in England, but as that country, whether in political or social advance, has always been found in the van of other nations, it will be readily understood that French girls must traverse a considerable distance before they can hope to overtake their English contemporaries in the direction of liberty and independence. I believe that in England girls are told that they are becoming "too American," just in the same way that our daughters are reproached with following too closely in the track of the English.

This transformation which has taken place in Paris in the society in which I live, and among the children that I see growing up around me, has so far scarcely made itself felt in the provinces or in the innumerable small towns of France. Nevertheless, the point of view is everywhere gradually changing. A great number of young girls are still educated entirely at home, with no external assistance beyond what can be procured from the professors of the local colleges, or from the teachers of the national schools ; but the desire for knowledge is developing in these young minds, and the doors of their intellect are opening more and more widely. Facts and questions of national or general interest, which formerly a young woman learnt only when already a wife and mother, are now eagerly inquired into by girls. Married life is now no longer looked upon as opening the first possibilities of higher cultivation and intellectual improvement, and thus while our daughters are better prepared for the worthy discharge of its many duties and responsibilities, we find the usual age for marrying somewhat retarded.

The growing desire for greater intellectual development which is everywhere on the increase dates from the disturbances of our social world, and from the universal moral and mental ferment created by the Revolution, to which must be added the long and serious religious dissensions that our poor country has had to undergo. The first results of the complete religious liberty accorded in 1789 were most beneficial, drawing those of different Christian sects nearer to each other, and bridging over the formerly all but impassable abyss which had divided those of dissimilar modes of worship.

Unhappily political troubles have substituted a fresh feud still deeper and more furious than that which existed formerly between Catholics and Protestants, and which had already borne such bitter fruit. Between these two great Christian bodies there had at least been found common hopes and common aspirations ; in sorrow, as in joy, souls could meet at the feet of the same God and the same Saviour, but now, alas ! all is changed. A gulf is again opened, this time between believers and unbelievers—between those who still humbly accept the Divine Revelation and have faith in "things unseen," and those who reject with contempt the ancient religion of their fathers, thrusting it from them as a worn-out garment or a useless relic of past superstition.

This spirit of antagonism is rampant in all classes ; nowhere more so than in our villages, where all schools for the education on a religious basis of the daughters of

our peasant classes are closed, contrary to the wishes of the parents, who, as a rule, were ready to make any effort against this new state of things. *Écoles libres* have been opened everywhere, numbering among their scholars many little girls formerly kept away from secular schools by the religious convictions of their parents. The same zeal on the part of our rulers is establishing in most of the great towns, colleges for girls on similar general principles to those of the new *Écoles libres*—principles avowedly non-religious, or, to put it still more plainly, godless.

The want of religious principle in these new schools is doubly to be regretted, as in other respects their introduction would have admirably responded to the recently-aroused and increasing demand for higher instruction and culture, so noticeable in girls of the present day ; but, as things are, it is not to be wondered at that Christian parents hesitate to take advantage of these new opportunities of education for their daughters. Thus in many middle-class families, girls are necessarily often thrown back on the somewhat limited resources of home-teaching, or on those obtainable in convents, where whatever the deficiencies, the instruction is at least based on sincere religious faith. In the present day, opportunities of intellectual and cultivated training are to be found at the very doors of our homes, and yet we cannot profit by them. Between us and them "there is a great gulf fixed." Will this fundamental error ever disappear, and shall we one day have the happiness of seeing our colleges for girls fitted for the daughters of thoughtful and religious-minded families? We earnestly hope that it may indeed be so, for God will not abandon those who fight with all their strength against the encroachments of infidelity and atheism.

Hitherto it has been rare for French girls to dream of seeking any other "career" than the natural one of wife and mother. Many reasons, into which we cannot here enter, have brought about this difference between the daughters of the two countries divided by the Channel ; girls with us almost always marry, whereas a great number of their English sisters tread alone the path of life ; but I may allude to one feature of our society which cannot consistently be ignored in an article on French girls. I refer to the numerous religious orders among us to which almost every Catholic family contributes one or more members. These communities are devoted to the education of the young, rich or poor ; to the care of the sick, independently of the hospitals (whose doors a blind prejudice has, nowadays in Paris, closed to all religions) ; and to various works of charity. A devoted phalanx is thus constituted the importance of which can scarcely be exaggerated. One or two figures will suffice to give some idea of their numbers. The society of the Sisters of St. Vincent de Paul, extending as it does through all countries, includes among its members more than 15,000 Frenchwomen ; and in many departments I could instance religious orders sufficing for all local needs, amounting within a restricted radius to five or six hundred sisters. In this way we meet a difficulty which elsewhere perplexes political economists, and have no reason to take thought for the future of our unmarried daughters.

If our girls like to test the thoroughness of their mental achievements by going in for examinations and competitions, or otherwise entering the lists as candidates for public distinction in ways which would have horrified the retiring timidity of their ancestresses, by all means let them do so ; no harm will come of it in the long run. The average of our women are certainly better educated than they were thirty or forty years ago, and I am glad to see that so satisfactory an improvement shows no signs of retrogression. In all directions the level is rising ; so much the better, even though it has the effect of diminishing the number of brilliant exceptions. I would only ask that side by side with this new enthusiasm girls should retain the wholesome, old-fashioned belief that the experience of their mothers is still necessary and valuable as a guide through the intricacies of life, and that mothers should beware of letting slip from their hands the reins of authority with which Divine providence has intrusted them. Let us take care lest we crush the young spirit on its first eager outlook upon life ; let us be careful to cherish in our daughters the love of home and its tranquil joys, to encourage in them the taste for sober and unsensational reading, and for those regular, though perhaps seemingly less attractive, womanly occupations which might otherwise suffer by the claims of new and more exciting outside interests. They will remember all this, and thank us for it when, in the heat and burden of the day, their first energy and enthusiasm have cooled ; more than one among our daughters will then perhaps, looking back over her past life, recall gratefully her mother's gentle warnings as she murmurs to herself, "Ah, yes, I understand it better now!"