

EDUCATION FOR WOMEN
AT OXFORD.

MANY of those whose schooldays have long since passed away, and whose leisure for study and self-improvement is limited by many demands of a practical nature upon their time, are inclined to envy those of the rising generation the many educational advantages they enjoy. This has been forcibly impressed upon me during a short visit to Oxford, where the thoughts of many are devoted, not only to the education of undergraduates, but to that of girl students also. In the first place, there is the beautiful new building erected some years ago for the accommodation of the High School for Girls. This now numbers over two hundred pupils, and when by the kind permission of Miss Bishop, the head mistress, I spent several mornings in the school, I could only wish that I had been born rather later in the century, that I might have shared its advantages and pleasures; for that the girls take great pleasure in their studies cannot be doubted by anyone who sees them at their classes. High schools are, however, becoming so numerous now that I need hardly dwell on the sound education given in them, on the large well-ventilated class-rooms, the nice little desk with seat attached supplied to each girl, the small platform from which the mistress teaches her class, often illustrating her lecture on a black-board. These and other details are probably well known to many of our readers. But perhaps a visit to Somerville Hall, one of the colleges for women, lately established in Oxford, may be more of a novelty to them. Let them, then, come with me a little way along the Woodstock-road till we reach the old gateway of Somerville Hall.

Passing up the drive on the right are some small old-fashioned buildings, in which some of the students, for whom there is not room in the larger house, reside. We then reach a large, old-looking white house, to which a new wing on the left has been added. Entering the hall, we are ushered into the drawing-room. This is the general sitting-room for the students, and each, in turn, undertakes for a few days to keep it neat and decorated with flowers. Opposite is the dining-hall, with shelves at one end, filled with a good and ever increasing library for the use of the inmates. Here all take their meals; breakfast at eight, luncheon when they like between one and half-past, dinner at seven o'clock. Afternoon tea, that essential of modern life, is provided in the drawing-room, but the students may have it in their own rooms if they prefer it, and many a snug little tea-party goes on upstairs. Let us go up and see their rooms. As we are ushered from one to another, we feel inclined to ask, "Where do the students sleep? or do they work so hard they do not give time to sleep, as we ordinary mortals do?" Each room looks like a pretty sitting-room. Most are of medium size, some smaller, some larger. During the day the beds are hidden by chintz covers, which transform them into sofas! Wash-hand stands are concealed with equal cleverness, and each student finds herself in possession of a nice study for the day, in which she takes great pride. Pictures, photographs, brackets, bookshelves adorn the walls, and in most of the rooms we observe flowers in pots or vases. As our visit is paid in the morning, the writing-tables are covered with books and papers betokening hard work. The house is surrounded by a nice garden, in which are two lawn-tennis courts, where many a good game is played in the course of the afternoons, for the students know that really hard brain work should be accompanied by plenty of exercise in the open air.

This, then, is the home provided in Somerville Hall, under the kind and able care and superintendence of Miss Shaw Lefevre, for girls and women who wish for a course of study after they have left school; and that there are many only too glad to avail themselves of it is proved by the fact that it is quite full—indeed, it has needed some contrivance this term to take in all who wished to come. No one is admitted under the age of 17, and, in the usual course of events, a girl should remain three years at the Hall. The wish of the promoters is that all should remain at least two years, but exceptions are made to this rule. No instruction or lectures are provided at the Hall itself, but the "Association for Promoting the Higher Education of Women" in Oxford makes arrangements for lectures and private tuition for the students. These are given by men and women, the former being lecturers attached to the University.

And now we come to the burning question of the day. Hitherto examination papers have been set, corresponding closely to those given to the undergraduates; but women have not been admitted, as at Cambridge, to the University examinations, and the certificates given to them have had no recognised value. It has long been felt that this placed the women of the Oxford Halls at a disadvantage, as compared with those of Girton and Newnham, at Cambridge, whose names appear in the class lists of the University. The advocates of the higher education of women have therefore for some time tried to bring about a change in this respect. The question has been repeatedly brought before the Council of the University, and the arguments in favour of granting to women at Oxford the same privileges as they enjoy at Cambridge have gradually influenced many minds. At length it was proposed in "Congregation"—that is, at a meeting of Masters of Arts residing in Oxford—that women should be admitted to the University examinations. Twice was the question discussed at length, and finally the statute was passed by Congregation. But this was not enough. Every statute must also be passed by "Convocation"—i.e., a meeting to which any Master of Arts who is a member of the University, whether resident or not, may come and record his vote in favour of, or in opposition to it. Great was the hue and cry that arose when the new proposal became known. Many conservative minds were sadly upset! Here was an innovation indeed. Was this ancient University founded for the sole benefit of men to invite the women to compete with their lords and masters? Surely they were meant to sit on a pedestal high above all the strife and competition of the world. If this step were taken the women would be "unsexed," there would be no more good wives and mothers for England! Would they not begin to "swagger" and vie with the other sex in more ways than one? Then, too, did not everyone know that women were incapable mentally and physically of bearing such a strain? So spoke the opposition. But the advocates of the scheme replied that many women had long ago been compelled to come down from this imaginary pedestal and to join in the strife and competition for bread, and that every possible advantage should be given to them in that strife. That there was no swagger or masculineness in the modest demeanour and quiet ways of the students of Somerville and Lady Margaret's Halls, and that it still had to be proved that they could not bear the strain of examination. That if they were not admitted to them here, they would go elsewhere to obtain the proofs that they were fitted to go forth into the world as teachers, and they pointed out that those who have taken the ordinary degrees in London or the certificates of Cambridge are

much more readily accepted as teachers by headmistresses than those who have either no certificate or one given exclusively to women. For example, two girls, daughters of a widowed mother in straitened circumstances, have both won distinction in a Cambridge Tripos. This at once secured them educational openings with an income 40 or 50 per cent. higher than anything they could have obtained without it. Thus they have been enabled to provide a young brother with a good education, and their mother with a home free from care.

So the arguments raged in the London papers, in the Oxford papers, and on the lips of all those interested in the matter. Each side made strenuous efforts to secure a majority of votes at the meeting of the Convocation. At length the momentous day arrived, Tuesday, April 29th. Nothing more could be done. The result only could be eagerly awaited. A special train was chartered to bring from London all those who would vote in favour of the ladies. Many came from Liverpool, Manchester, and other distant places. Deans and canons, schoolmasters and authors, members of Parliament and country clergymen assembled in great numbers. By a quarter to two the place was swarming with dignitaries of all kinds in caps and gowns. With some difficulty we secured seats in one of the lower galleries of the Sheldonian Theatre. This is one of the University buildings, designed by Sir Christopher Wren, and built at the expense of Archbishop Sheldon in 1669. There "Commemoration" is held every year.

The upper gallery was crowded with undergraduates, prepared to be facetious on the smallest provocation; the area was crowded with Masters of Arts in their gowns, caps in hand. And when the result of the voting was announced it was found that 464 votes had been recorded in favour of, 321 against, admitting women to the University examinations. Great was the triumph of the successful party, loud the congratulations, hearty the handshaking over the victory, and enthusiastically was the news received by the girl-students at the Halls who had not been present in the theatre.

Thus a further advantage has been conferred on the girls of the present day by Oxford, as well as the sister University. This will not, however, lead to any great changes in the career of the students at the Halls; the subjects for examination and the course of study will remain practically the same—there will be no increase in the number of the examinations, in their difficulty, or in their details. The girls will be examined in a room apart, and their names will be published, as before, in the *University Gazette*. But, and herein lies the great difference, their certificate when gained, instead of being useless to them, as it is now, will be generally appreciated at its proper value. Oxford will now give to young women endowed with unusual abilities a recognised certificate which may alter all their prospects in life; for not the most ardent advocates of education would recommend all girls to go in for a University education; but for those of ability, and those who are obliged to earn their own living, they consider it a great advantage. Some of these may say, "I can never afford three years' residence at Oxford or Cambridge;" but this is not necessary, the work may be done at home, or elsewhere, it being only obligatory to go to Oxford for the examinations.

So this great crisis in the history of the education of women at Oxford has passed. Some twenty years hence, when it has become a commonplace event for women to enter for these examinations, we shall look back with interest and amusement on the great struggle and the triumphant victory of the champions for the Higher Education of Women.