CHAPTER
2

The Status of Women in 1845

THE State of South Carolina was still Young and Cotton was still King, when these two Englishmen, father and son, both Ministers of the Gospel, fired by a practical idealism, pioneered in the cause of the higher education Of women by establishing the Limestone Springs Female High School. in the Spartanburg District of South Carolina in the year 1845.

To establish a school in South Carolina in 1845 for the higher education of women was indeed a courageous venture. Some of the restraints imposed on women by social custom in vogue at the time would seem incredible to the present age were there not proof.

Public opinion in this "brave new world" of America was still holding to the Old World attitude respecting the status and the education of women. As Alma Lutz states in her biography of Emma Willard, one of the pioneers in the higher education of women, it was generally assumed that woman was incapable of comprehending the mysteries of an education beyond the mere rudiments of reading and writing and arithmetic. Her Creator had not endowed her with reason and understanding, and her wits were too weak to endure study. Moreover, she should be kept ignorant so that she might continue to be charming and virtuous. Knowledge would make her masculine; study would undermine her health and thus prove a menace to the welfare of the race. It was feared that if she once became involved in seeking an education she might forsake her infants for the solving of quadratic equations, as Thomas Woody in his study of the education of women in the United States neatly puts it.

After all—as the old myth says-the source of all Man's misfortune was not Pandora's wicked nature, but only her curiosity; therefore Woman's curiosity should be curbed, and not encouraged by education.

When Emma Willard made up her mind to take a stand publicly for the higher education of women and to make definite experiments to prove that women were quite capable of comprehending the higher branches of knowledge, she made an appeal to the New York Legislature (1819) for funds with which to build a seminary for young women; however, the thought of sending women to college appeared so very absurd to the wise lawmakers that no money for such foolishness was forthcoming from the holders of the public moneybags.

Two years later Emma Willard opened a school in Troy, New York, without State aid, and endeavored to prove by the choice of the courses in her curriculum and the thoroughness of the classroom instruction that women could master the intricacies of higher mathematics and become intelligent students of profound philosophy and still retain their health and their charm.

To those peerless people called Moravians, however, belongs the honor of establishing the first exclusively Female Seminary in the United States, "Salem Academy" in Salem, North Carolina, in 1802. At that time no college in all the world was open to women. Lucinda Foote had been declared in 1783 "fully qualified, except in regard to sex, to be received as a pupil of the Freshman Class of Yale University; hence, since her sex was not right, as a matter of course she was not admitted."

Rousseau's dictum as propounded in Emile (1762) still seemed to the nineteenth-century masculine mind the wisest attitude toward the problem that had been created when Adam lost his rib:

> "The education of women should be always relative to the men. To please, to be useful to us, to make us love and esteem them, to educate us when young and to take care of us when grown up, to advise, to console us, to render our lives easy and agreeable; these are the duties of women at all times,"

declared this famous censor of civilization.

Hampered by tradition, women were also hampered by law. Married women had no legal status; they had surrendered their legal identity to their husbands at the altar. They could not make

a will or enter into a legal contract or bring suit for the protection of their interests. A wife was not an independent person in the eyes of the law; if she happened to get involved in legal difficulties, her husband represented her in the courts. Moreover, her husband had by law the sole guardianship of the children.

The economic status of the so-called weaker sex in 1845 is equally incredible. A woman was not allowed to invade the masculine domain of wage-earning outside the home. She had to use all her feminine wiles to wheedle enough loose change from her supporting male to buy a paper of pins, much less a new dress or an Easter bonnet. The common law of England, on which the laws of America were based, gave the husband full ov,7nersbip of all his wife's property except her personal clothing, and he could squander her possessions without being compelled by law to give an account of his stewardship." "The husband and wife are one in the eyes of the law, and the husband is the one," said the old English statute, and it was part of the masculine game to keep the two one. The fashion of the day encouraged women to be delicate and weak, and to faint into the arms of some strong gentleman standing conveniently nearby:

As Alma Lutz observes in her study of Emma Willard:

> "Women bad been taught that it was unwomanly to hold opinions on serious subjects, that men admired weak, clinging, innocent women. A woman who discussed politics or government, who held unorthodox views on religion as presumed to enter the educational sphere of men, was ridiculed as unwomanly, as aping men, and was at once scheduled for moral shipwreck. The tragic life of Mary Wollstonecraft, who in England had so strongly advocated education for women, was held up as an example of the pernicious influence of higher learning upon the morals of women.
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> "The books of the day, published for the edification and improvement of women, impressed them with the virtue of cultivating their inferiority, reminding them of the Biblical authority for the domination of man. As most women were distinctly orthodox in their religious beliefs, they accepted these statements without protest. Hannah More, the English poetess, who acknowledged the superiority of men, was regarded as a model of female virtue and was freely quoted,

lauded, and held up as an example for every woman to emulate"

Hannah More's *Strictures on the Modern System of Female Education* had appeared in 1799, and the strictures were far reaching.

Tradition and prejudice from women who felt that their domestic security was being threatened by the stirrings of this new movement, as well as opposition from men, yielded slowly. Gradually, however, attempts to amend the laws that held married women in complete subjection to their husbands, with no rights to their earnings, no right to hold property, not even that accumulated by their own labor, no rights to their persons or their children, and other appalling legal injustices, gave rise to what was known as the woman's rights movement. This movement for a time endangered the education of women; for a "female politician" was regarded as no less disgusting than a "female infidel, as *The Female Friend,* a little book widely recommended for young ladies, so strongly expressed the sentiment. Because Emma Willard realized, with her remarkable vision and wisdom, that nothing should be done to hinder the pressing need of women's education, she used great caution in allying herself with the movement for women's political rights. She knew, as Miss Lutz points out, that women must be prepared for the freedom which was bound to come to them in this new country; hence she tried to help her students understand this by comparing man to the oak, and woman-not to the clinging vine supported by the oak—but to the apple tree, and by explaining to them that the oak could never be the apple tree nor the apple tree the oak, but that each could be beautiful and useful as a tree. Woman's sphere was different from that of man's, but not necessarily inferior. "Therefore, Emma Willard's 'daughters were taught to be apple trees, not oaks; to follow the example of Hannah More and Mrs. Hemans; and to stay virtuously in the distinct and separate sphere which, it was then thought, their Maker had ordained for them ."

The founder of Limestone College must have subscribed at least in part to the philosophy of education held by these women, since his "daughters" of the Limestone Springs Female High School had a literary society bearing the name of Mrs. Hemans, and another named for another friend of Emma Willard's, Mrs. Lydia Sigoumey.

Whether or not Dr. Curtis knew Emma Willard and Mrs. Hemans and Mrs. Sigourney personally is problematical, but he must have been in close touch with the experiments in education being made by Mrs. Willard and Catherine Beecher and Mary Lyon, and it is even highly probable that Emma Willard herself visited the Curtis school on her journey of eight thousand miles through the South and West, on which trip she was in

> “all the principal cities in every state, West and south of New York, with the exception of Florida, Texas, and the Far West. . . .Her reception in the South was especially gratifying, for here the majority of her pupils lived, many of them the belles of Society, many of them teachers in southern Seminaries."

She did visit South Carolina on this tour, and it is logical to suppose that she was a guest at the Seminary at the Limestone Springs, even though no corroboration of this fact has come to light, Among the ninety students who had enrolled in the Troy Female Seminary when it was officially opened in 1821 had been young ladies representing the leading families of New York State, Massachusetts, Vermont, Connecticut, Ohio, South Carolina, and Georgia.

Surprisingly enough, the South was more friendly toward the education of women at the time than the North was.

Charles William Dabney records in his illuminating history of universal education in the South:

> "In no American colony was there a deeper interest in education among the intelligent whites than in South Carolina. . . . From the earliest time there was a sincere interest in the training of the children of the poor whites, but it took the form of charity provided by societies of benevolent people. . . . The missionaries sent out by the Society for the Propagation of the Gospel included the Indians and the Negroes in their instruction. . . . The idea of education, inaugurated by the society . . . and encouraged by men of means, developed into free schools first in Charleston. . . . The first public school, in America, in the accepted sense, existed in Charleston at least as early as 1743. . . . The planters had tutors in their families or sent their sons to England to be educated."

Edward McCrady in his history of South Carolina under the Royal Government pays high tribute to the Presbyterian clergymen who came down with the Scotch-Irish immigration into the upper part of the province, where Thomas Curtis later established his school, and who were foremost in the cause of education. Wherever a pastor was located, there was likely to be a classical, school, some of which continued as academies for a considerable time. By the close of the Revolution, so McCrady says, there were eleven public schools, three charitable grammar schools, and eight private schools in the twenty-four parishes and districts into which the State was then divided, and there were about two hundred teachers, mostly from England, engaged in teaching in the province."

This was, in brief, the picture of education in South Carolina at the close of the Revolution; nor did the picture change rapidly. The "public" schools to which McCrady refers were not "public" in the terminology of a later day.

Ellwood P. Cubberly, in his study of public education in the United States, records that:

> "In 1811 the beginning of a state system of schools was made in South Carolina, with preference given to orphans and children of the poor, virtually limiting the schools to charity schools. In 1835 an Act was passed providing penalties for neglect of the Act of 1811, but was largely ineffective. In 1836, a report was made recommending a state system of charity schools, but was not adopted. In 1847 a legislative committee recommended a state system of education, but no action was taken. In 1854 Charleston petitioned to be permitted to make its schools free; this was granted two years later. The State school system dates from after the Civil War."

D.D. Wallace warns us against confusing the "free," or "pauper," schools with the private, church, or fraternal order and society-owned schools. Dr. Wallace quotes from Governor Henagan's message to the State Legislative as late as 1840 thus:

> "Who are the teachers in our free schools?..... So far as my observation extends, they are with few exceptions very ignorant, and possess a very easy morality. With the poor pay allowed them, we cannot reasonably calculate upon a better state of things..... It is now in South Carolina a reproach

to be a teacher in a free school, as it is regarded as prima facie evidence of a want of qualification."

At the time the Limestone Springs High School was opened for the higher education of women, there was no "high" school in the State of South Carolina. The young women of the planter families were still being educated in the home by private tutors.

As early as 1825 a bill bad been proposed in the State Legislature of Georgia by Duncan G. Campbell, a zealous advocate of equal, opportunity" for women, to establish "a public seat of learning in this State for the education of females." This was another great idea whose time bad not quite come. Even though passed by a large majority in the House, it was strongly opposed by the Senate, and its passage was defeated temporarily. Nine years later, 1834, Daniel Chandler, son-in-law of Duncan Campbell, made an address at the University of Georgia in which he advocated in enthusiastic terms that the same educational facilities should be accorded to women as to men.

> "Speaking of 'female education,' be said 'legislation neglects it and learning itself . . . casts upon its humble pretensions, the withering smile of cold recognition. It is now an outlaw in our State, and persecution with all its ancient rigor still impedes its struggling march . . . In our country, there are 61 colleges, containing expensive philosophical and chemical apparatus, valuable cabinets of minerals, and libraries that embrace more than 300,000 volumes—and to the disgrace of the nation be it spoken, not one is dedicated to the cause of female education."

Two years later the Georgia Female College ' later Wesleyan College for Women, was launched at Macon. George F. Pierce, its :first president, wrote in 1840:

> "'Two years ago the notion of a female college was laughed at as a Platonic idea—a mere dream—an impracticable fancy born in the reverie of some speculative mind, well meaning perhaps, but utterly ahead of sober sense and prudent wisdom. A Female College!—Anomalous, absurd. A Town Academy with its thirty or forty pupils, was the "Ultima Thule"; all beyond was fairyland."

Thomas Curtis, the founder of Limestone College, was living in Macon as pastor of the First Baptist Church at the time President Pierce wrote these significant words. In a town the size of Macon the two men could hardly have helped knowing each other. They probably talked for hours together about this "Platonic idea-this mere dream" which became a reality for both of them-for George F. Pierce in the Georgia Female College, and for Thomas Curtis five years later in the Limestone Springs Female High School.

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