

Lydia Becker, whose grandfather and family lived at Foxdenton Hall, Chadderton, had been to a lecture in Manchester and heard Barbara Bodichon read a paper on, 'Reasons for the Enfranchisement of Women'.

Lydia knew that she had found a cause that would give new meaning and purpose to her life.

LYDIA BECKER, 1827 - 1890

A Cameo Life-Sketch

by

MARION HOLMES

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Lydia Becker

A CAMEO LIFE-SKETCH

By MARION HOLMES

The Nursery of Ideals.

IT is rather the fashion nowadays to scoff at the woman of the early and mid-Victorian period as a timid and foolish creature given to swooning on the slightest pretext, and the victim of a mysterious pride in physical delicacy and weakness. Probably the average woman of the fifties and sixties was not quite so strong and self-reliant as her sister of to-day. The average man still held to the "clinging ivy and the stalwart oak" ideal as being the best and most natural relation between the sexes, and the average woman, with the deeply ingrained habit of making herself pleasing to man, humoured him by no doubt often exaggerating her weaknesses and masking her strength.

But "God Almighty made the women to match the men" in those days as in all others, and the intellectual and patriotic men of the mid-Victorian era had no lack of help-meets fit for them : great souled women who helped to foster and bring to a vigorous youth the comparatively new-born babes of progress and reform.

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The Pioneer Women.

What a magnificent roll-call of names rings down from the fifties and sixties ! Names of pioneer women who set valiantly to work to clear the ground of the weeds and rubbish of centuries, and with infinite perseverance to beat out a path to a juster and fuller existence for their sex. One after the other the citadels of education, science, art, social service, politics were attacked, and one after the other - with the exception of the last the portals of these jealously guarded male monopolies were grudgingly opened. The weapons of abuse, misrepresentation, and personal ill-usage were all freely used against the women in the fight, but they glanced harmlessly off the shields of courage and a high, unfaltering purpose that the last-century Amazons bore. Verily, there were giants on the earth in those days - both masculine and feminine - but more particularly feminine.

The very sound of their names sets women's blood atingle to-day with pride in the heritage that has been bequeathed to them by those pioneers. They roll off the tongue like a call to arms!

Florence Nightingale, Josephine Butler, Lydia Becker, Sophia Jex Blake, Mrs. Bodichon, Viscountess Amberley, Isabella Tod, Priscilla Bright McLaren. These, and many others equally courageous, have laid down their weapons now, but there are some of their comrades in arms still fighting in the ranks - a very precious possession for the women of the twentieth century - Mrs. Fawcett, Dr. Garrett Anderson, Madame Belloc, Mrs. Wolstonholme[sic] Elmy, Miss Emily Davies, Mrs. Haslam - names indeed to conjure with.

The Leader of Votes for Women.

Lydia Ernestine Becker was pre-eminently the leader of the Women's Suffrage Movement during its early years. It was her judgement - more than any

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other perhaps - that moulded its policy, and brought this hotly contested question from a stage of general contemptuous scorn to that of an equally general respect for its inherent justice.

She was born on February 24th, 1827, at Cooper Street, Manchester, and was the eldest of fifteen children - a typical nineteenth century family. Her father, Hannibal Leigh Becker, was of German descent, his father, Ernest Hannibal Becker, being a native of Thuringia, who came to

England when quite a young man, and settled in business in Manchester. Her mother was a member of an old Lancashire family, the Duncotts of Hollinwood.

Her Early Days.

The first few years of Lydia's life were spent in Manchester, but when she was still very young the family moved to Altham, near Accrington. They lived in a large house on rising ground, with a fine view of Pendle Hill, and in this beautiful country home the greater part of her life was passed. There was an interval of some years during which they lived in Reddish, where Mr. Becker had calico printing works, but they went back again to Altham.

"Our life at Reddish was a quiet and uneventful one," writes one of Miss Becker's sisters, "in the midst of lovely scenery and flowers. The agitations in the political life of the period to some extent affected us. I remember the excitement when it was thought the Chartists might find their way to our peaceful valley; also the year of revolutions, 1848, when Louis Philippe landed in England as 'Mr. Smith.' And the stormy discussions connected with the Anti-Corn Law League were reproduced in miniature in our juvenile circle!

Interest in Science.

"In 1850 we moved from Reddish back to Altham. The drives and walks about presented great
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attractions to us, as the scenery was on a bolder, grander scale than that round our pretty valley at Reddish. Lydia entered with zest into the study of the plants of the neighbourhood. I remember her pleasure in finding some which were new to her."

Botany and astronomy were always her favourite studies; as a friend of her youth expressed it, "Lydia knew and loved every little flower that grew." The intense delight in nature cultivated during those years in the country remained with her all her life - a never failing source of pleasure and interest. "In the midst of the anxieties of her political work in London," writes Dr. Helen Blackburn in her *History of Women's Suffrage*, "she found her best refreshment in a run down to the gardens and conservatories at Kew. Visitors to the office could always know when Miss Becker was in residence by the flowering plants she always gathered round her."

A Visit to Germany.

In 1844 - when she was about seventeen - Miss Becker paid a long visit to relatives in Germany. I have had the privilege of reading the letters that she sent to her home circle during that time, and they show that she possessed even at that age unusual powers of shrewd observation and reflection. The stilted language of the period in which they are written probably makes a lack of humour and the serious bent of her mind more obvious than they would otherwise be. She frequently expresses keen appreciation of the beautiful scenery with which she was surrounded, but, on a holiday jaunt, when the heads of most girls of her age would have been filled with thoughts of pleasure and amusement, she wrote home asking for "political news." "I miss the newspapers more than all the English comforts put together." she said.

Honours from the Horticultural Society.

"When she returned home to Reddish, at the end of the year 1845, a great bonfire was kindled," writes

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Miss Esther Becker, "Soon after her return she began to give us lessons in German. As a teacher her powers were remarkable; she seemed to go right down to the bottom of things ... In 1862 (I think), she won the gold medal from the Horticultural Society of South Kensington for the best collection of dried plants made within a year. She adopted the plan of drying the plants very quickly under great pressure and in heat. The competition was open to the United Kingdom. Her pleasure in botany was intense, and her knowledge of it thorough and complete.

She had some interesting correspondence with the celebrated naturalist, Mr. Charles Darwin, in connection with some facts that she had observed in the course of her studies."

Her Training School.

In 1865, the family went to live in Manchester, and a year or two later Miss Becker tried to rouse other women to share the keen pleasure that she had found in scientific studies. She started a Ladies' Literary Society for the study of literature and science, but the results were not very encouraging, the number of members being very far short of her hopes.

All these quiet years of study and effort, however, were fitting her for the post that she was to fill in the great movement that was then attracting the attention of all the thoughtful women of the country. Her scientific pursuits had developed a scrupulous accuracy and attention to detail that proved invaluable in her organising work. They had also strengthened her naturally great intellectual ability and given her a sense of proportion that enabled her to value vexations and disappointments, hopes and wishes at their true worth in the general scheme of things - a very necessary qualification this for one who was to adopt a cause of which disappointments and rebuffs, treachery and trickery were to become the distinguishing features - as time has abundantly proved!

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The Rising of the Tide.

For many years - ever since the days of Mary Wollstoncraft[sic], in fact, who published her *Vindication of the Rights of Women* in 1792 - isolated individuals of both sexes had tilted a lance in the cause of women's emancipation; but they were few and far between. The passing of the Reform Act in 1832, however, stimulated women's attention to the power and value of the vote. The substitution in that Act of the words "male person" for "man" in the earlier Acts, first placed women under a statutory disability. Before that the franchise had not been barred to them - by law; only by the bar of non-usage. But now the custom of discouragement and disparagement that had been insidiously working for some centuries to press women back from all interest in public duties, was legalised. The prevalent idea that politics was not woman's business was ratified by Act of Parliament.

Ideas and opinions, however, have a disconcerting habit of ignoring Acts of Parliament, and many causes and events were conspiring at that time to overthrow that insulting fallacy.

The Anti-Corn Law agitation, which welcomed the co-operation of the "political nonentities," and the Anti-Slavery movement, did much to show women how deeply they were concerned in politics, whatever the legislators might say.

Women's Part in the Building of Empire.

Then in the fifties came the Crimean War, with Florence Nightingale's magnificent vindication of the ability of her sex to perform great Imperial tasks; and the Indian Mutiny, proving the sufferings and torture of women to be part of the terrible price paid for Empire. Legislation, too, - as always with advancing civilisation - began to interfere more and more in the intimate concerns of the people. (The Divorce Act,

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which legalised a different moral standard for the sexes, was passed in 1857.)

All these happenings drew thoughtful and public spirited women together; they began to voice their discontent, and the first ripples of the stream of agitation for the right to vote, that has since spread over the land like a river in spate, began to disturb the political world.

A Growing Stream.

In the sixties the question assumed a certain Parliamentary importance. John Stuart Mill - a keen and tried friend of women - was elected to Parliament in the General Election of 1865, although he took the unprecedented action of including Woman's Suffrage in his election address. Various societies for the furthering of women's interests sprang up, and petitions representing the injustice of the law respecting the property and earnings of married women, and begging Parliament to take the matter into consideration, were signed by thousands of men and women all over the country. *The Englishwoman's Journal* was floated, and Barbara Leigh Smith - afterwards Mrs. Bodichon - and Miss Emily Davies (the two founders of Girton College), Miss Beale and Miss Buss (the founders of the Cheltenham Ladies' College and the North London Collegiate School respectively), Miss Garrett (now Dr. Garrett Anderson), Miss Jessie Boucherett, Miss Helen Taylor (stepdaughter of Mr. J. S. Mill), Miss Wolstenholme (afterwards Mrs. Wolstenholme Elmy) and others, were agitating for opportunities for the higher education and the opening of further occupations to women. They formed what was known as the Kensington Society, and were keenly alive to the importance of the suffrage.

The First Petition - An Historic Roll.

In 1866 all politicians were absorbed in the proposed Reform Bill, which was to extend the franchise to house

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holders. It seemed to women suffragists that this was an excellent opportunity to press their claim to inclusion in the ranks of citizens, particularly with such a champion as John Stuart Mill in the House of Commons. A working committee of well-known women was formed to promote a Parliamentary petition from their sex. They consulted Mr. Mill about it, and he promised to present it if they could collect as many as a hundred names. In a little over a fortnight they had a roll of 1,499 signatures, which included such distinguished names as Florence Nightingale, Harriet Martineau, Frances Power Cobbe, Mary J. Somerville, Josephine Butler, Anna Swanwick, Lady Anna Gore Langton, Florence Davenport Hill, Liliash Ashworth, Caroline Ashurst Biggs, Anna Maria Fisher (Mrs Haslam), etc. Miss Becker used to say that there should have been 1,500 signatures - hers should have been there. But it was not until a few months later that she became actively associated with the movement.

The story of the handing over of this petition to Mr. Mill has been told many times, but it will bear repetition. In June, 1866, Miss Garrett and Miss Emily Davies took the portentous roll down to Westminster Hall. The size of it embarrassed them, so they made friends with the old apple woman whose stall was near the entrance, and she hid it beneath her table. Mr. Mill was nowhere to be seen, but Mr. Fawcett, who happened to pass at that moment offered to go in search of him. When Mr. Mill arrived he was much amused to find the petition hidden away, but the large number of names that it contained delighted him, and he exclaimed, "Ah! I can brandish this with effect!"

Then - and Now!

This quiet beginning of one of the greatest agitations in history forms a sufficiently piquant contrast to the great demonstrations for Votes for Women that have

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taken place in the last few years. Did those two eminent women have visions, I wonder, of the days when they would see London's grey streets aswing with banners, and echoing to the tramp of an army the like of which has never been seen in the world before? Did Miss Garrett - who fought so strenuously to open the doors of the medical profession to her sex - picture the

band of medical women, hundreds strong, who marched through London to the tune of the Women's Marseillaise? And had Miss Davies, who laboured to win higher education for girls - any prevision of that army of fair girl graduates in cap and gown, at whose approach men doffed their hats and cheered ?

What a gratifying sight those processions must have been to the women who laboured in the early days; thousands, where they had counted tens; a road beaten flat by the tramp of many feet where they had stumbled painfully over the rocks and stones of prejudice and contempt; an army of women of all trades and professions, white-capped nurses, teachers, gymnasts, writers, artists, actresses, marching to overthrow the last stronghold of the most obstinately contested citadel of all!

Lydia Becker's Initiation.

It was at a meeting of the Social Science Association held in October, 1866, in Manchester that Lydia Becker came into touch with the Cause, with which from that time forward she was to be so strongly identified. She was one of the audience when Mrs. Bodichon read a paper on *Reasons for the Enfranchisement of Women*, and she immediately threw herself heart and soul into the work.

The Petition - and Its Effect.

John Stuart Mill presented the petition alluded to above on June 7th, 1866, and organisation crystallised quickly on the heels of the interest that it aroused.

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Five important societies were formed almost simultaneously in London, Manchester, Edinburgh, Bristol and Birmingham. At a meeting held by the Manchester Society on February 13th, 1867, Miss Becker was appointed Secretary. It was soon recognised that great advantage would be gained by forming some kind of federal union, so in accordance with a resolution passed by Manchester in November, 1867, the live Societies federated, and formed the nucleus of the present large and influential National Union of Women's Suffrage Societies, which is fortunate enough still to retain the presidential services of Mrs. Fawcett, one of the original members of the Committee of the first London Society.

Votes for Women in Parliament - the First Skirmish.

Mr. Mill's hands were strengthened by two further petitions presented to the House before he moved his famous amendment to the Reform Bill of 1867. One petition was signed by 1,605 women householders, the other was from the general public and contained over 3,000 signatures.

The amendment, "to leave out the word 'man' in order to insert the word 'person' instead thereof," was moved on May 20th, in what was universally conceded to be a forcible and eloquent speech, but it was defeated by a majority of 123.

The First Public Meeting.

On April 14th, 1868, the first public meeting for Women's Suffrage was held in the Assembly Rooms of the Free Trade Hall, Manchester It was the first meeting in this country addressed by women. The chair was taken by Mr. Pochin, the Mayor of Salford, and the resolution demanding "Votes for Women on the same terms as they are or may be granted to men" was moved by Miss Becker, seconded by Archdeacon Sandford,

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and supported by one who bears a name that is now world famous - Dr. Pankhurst. Meetings in Birmingham and other large centres followed and steady headway was made in winning support in the country.

"Man," an Epicene Word.

But the greatest interest centred round an incident in the struggle that must be reported at some length. By the defeat of Mr. Mill's amendment the word "man" had been retained in the Reform Act. This gave rise to an interesting point of law which can best be described by some selections from Miss Becker's letters on the subject. "The Act of 1867 has struck out the words 'male person' from the electoral law" (these words had been inserted by the Reform Act of 1832, it will be remembered), "and substituted the generic term 'man' which even in its ordinary grammatical sense is epicene, and requires something in the context to restrict it to the male sex - e.g., 'God made *man* in His own image; male and female created He them.' Here the word man means both sexes of man." But there exists an Act of Parliament (Lord Brougham's Act, passed in 1850), which provides that, "in all Acts, words importing the masculine gender shall be deemed and taken to include female unless the contrary be expressly provided." It is not sufficient that the contrary be implied or understood, it must be expressly provided. No such provision is found in the Representation of the People Act of 1867. Accordingly the ratepaying clauses of the Act, which throughout use masculine pronouns, are applied to women ratepayers. Now we maintain that if the ratepaying clauses touch women who are ratepayers, the voting clauses must also comprehend them."

Mere "lay" persons will be prepared to admit that this seems a perfectly sound and logical conclusion; but the minds of Parliamentarians and Lord

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Chief Justices move by mysterious ways to amazing conclusions - as every-day experience proves.

The Famous Case of Chorlton v. Lings.

The Manchester Committee resolved to test the validity of the women's claim to become voters on the grounds stated above, and steps were taken to get women ratepayers on the register. Miss Becker led the campaign with the greatest zest. A house-to-house canvas of women householders in Manchester was made, and 5,346 women sent in their claims to the revising barristers; 1,341 in Salford, 857 in Broughton and Pendleton, 239 in Edinburgh, and a few more in other parts of the country followed suit. The revising barristers declined to allow the claims in a good many instances, so in order to get a legal decision four cases were chosen for appeal, and were argued before the Court of Common Pleas on November 7th, 1868, before Lord Chief Justice Bovill and Justices Willes, Keating, and Byles. Counsel for the appellants were Sir J. D. Coleridge and Dr. Pankhurst. This case was technically known as "Chorlton v. Lings."

The Second Annual Report of the Manchester National Society for Woman's Suffrage says: - "Sir John Coleridge, in a long and elaborate argument, spoke in favour of the ancient constitutional right of women to take part in Parliamentary elections. He produced copies from the Record Office of several indentures returning members to Parliament, the signatures to which were in the handwriting of women. The right thus exercised had, he contended, never been taken away by statute. He also contended that the general term 'man' in the new Reform Act included women, not only generally, but specifically, under the provisions of Lord Brougham's Act of 1850. Judgment went against the women, however, the judges ruling that they had no statutory right to be recognised as citizens until that right. was expressly conferred on them by Act of Parliament."

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Prompt Organisation.

There was a General Election in progress at the time this suit was being tried, and on the day following the decision every candidate for Parliament received a letter signed by Miss Becker

asking him if he would support a Bill giving votes to women on the same conditions as men if returned to Parliament. Thus the first note of agitation throughout the country sounded simultaneously with the announcement of the decision.

Women in the Polling Booths.

This ruling that the word "man" in an Act of Parliament included woman when it was a question of paying taxes or other duties, but not when it was a question of exercising a privilege, did not affect the few cases where the revising barristers had allowed the women's claims. With characteristic promptitude Miss Becker sent a circular to all whose names were on the register, urging them to vote, and some score of them did so. Indeed, on polling days in Manchester and Salford she was kept busy taking women voters to the booths; and "their votes," she says, in a letter to Miss Boucherett, "were eagerly competed for by the opposing candidates."

Baffled - to Fight Again.

After this interesting contest, which proved that there was no chance of getting the suffrage as a side issue, or through the ambiguous wording of an Act of Parliament, the women settled down to a steady campaign of arduous work. Large meetings were organised in all the big industrial centres. In 1869 Miss Becker went on her first lecturing tour to Leeds, Newcastle, and other Northern towns. It proved to be the beginning of a long series, for there is hardly a town of note in the kingdom in which she has not lectured at some time or other. "She was the cleverest, calmest, best balanced speaker the movement has ever produced,"

says Dr. Helen Blackburn; "one who always seized

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the salient points, who always got at the kernel of the matter." "Her public speaking was marked not only by extreme clearness of utterance," says another account of her powers of oratory, "but by its lucid statement of fact, its grasp of subject, and logical force."

It was in this year, too, that Mrs. Fawcett gave her first speech on the subject at the first Woman's Suffrage meeting held in London, on July 17th, 1869. Other speakers came forward as time went on: Mrs. Ashworth Hallett, Miss Taylour, Miss Agnes M'Laren, Miss Rhoda Garrett, Miss C. A. Biggs, Lady Anna Gore Langton, and Miss Jessie Craigen became notable orators.

" Heroism."

It required considerably more courage in those days for women to get up and speak in public than it does to-day, it must be remembered. Our sex has become perhaps a little too glib in these later years of agitation; at least, one cannot imagine a resolution of thanks to women for their "heroism in giving such able and interesting speeches," such as was passed at one public meeting in the seventies, though I daresay some nervous and inexperienced speakers would still consider it applicable!

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