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It was in this way that the letters of Miss Helen Dempster came to light, packed into a dusty old box where they had lain for ^{over 60} nearly sixty years. She was a Dempster of Dunnichen, of the family, though not a direct descendant, of George Dempster of Dunnichen

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Dempster

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Helen was the youngest of five children.
Her brother, George Hawkins Dempster was the eldest,
and the names of ~~her~~ three sisters were Katherine,
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Helen was a child and they were adopted and brought
up by their uncle and aunt, George Soper Dempster
of Skibo, in Sutherland, and his wife, Joanna Dundas
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21/1/18

straining to master half a dozen subjects, to learn Latin and Hebrew, to study music, painting and poetry.

In 1866, George Dempster sold Skibo. He moved further south and settled at Ormiston Hall in East Lothian. The neices divided themselves between Ormiston and Dunnichen, where Kate kept house with her brother. From this time, for more than twenty years, Helen and her friend kept up a tireless correspondence, only one half of which has survived, but so closely did they keep up with one another that the lives of both can be judged from Helen's letters alone.

We think of early Victorian women as leading restricted lives, ignoring that for many the restrictions represented dignity and security; yet to struggle for independence was to be labelled as "advanced". But the Dempsters were certainly not restricted as to movement. From Skibo to Dunnichen, Dunnichen to London, London to Devonshire or to the continent and back again, they travelled

with no more fuss than we should make of a motor-trip to the Lakes. True, there was always a background of ladies' maids, butlers and footmen, and a large household was as much part of their existence as the clothes they wore; but it was railway-travel that made so many changes possible, in contrast to the generation previous to theirs, which had made infrequent journeys by Mail Coach, or if wealthy, had driven their well-upholstered carriages over the newly-made roads of England and the continent.

Life at Urmiston was very sociable, in summer and autumn there was a constant series of visitors, who came, not for a week-end, but for a fortnight, a month, or even longer. And the visitors brought their maids and valets, their children, even the governess. There were also the county neighbours. In the summer of 1866, Forfarshire was very gay, "every day we go somewhere or someone comes to see us" writes Helen. The day before the Carnegies of Lour had driven over with all their party and arrived at half past nine ^{in the} evening on an impromptu

visit.

One week there was a review of the volunteers. They had the Colonel staying with them, but Helen thought the Review was not a great success. In July they got up a monster picnic at their cottage on Loch Fethie. This had taken much preparation, she herself had sewn yards and yards of pink ruffles for the cottage curtains. There was a large party in the house and night before they had danced till one in the morning. But they were up early to see to the last preparations. and arrange the flowers for the tables.

" There was amusement for everyone" ~~wrote Helen,~~
 " The military band, bright lights and shadows on the waters of the lake, boats arriving and landing smart ladies in white, water, quadrilles and lancers being danced upon the grass at the water's edge. Rowing and fishing, and for those who were sentimental, têtes a têtes in quiet paths, and finally, a capital floor in the cottage for waltzing. Everybody seemed pleased,

and the population of Forfar, at one time nearly a thousand strong, confined themselves to the opposite side, from which, as the lake is narrow, they could enjoy the band and watch the proceedings. The final entertainment was when Mr Carnegie drove his four-in-hand ~~right round the lake~~ with all the ladies of his party on top, right round the lake, As the trees met closely overhead the poor ladies hats and bonnets were nearly swept off their heads! "

Next day the house party was photographed " and I hear it was successful". Photography still required a long pose and a whole group was apt to show movement somewhere.

They went to London and stayed at Claridges. This was very pleasant because their uncle and aunt gave them what they considered to be perfect liberty. Helen and Charlotte even went to the Watercolour Exhibition with the two Ellis girls in two handshomes! Lady Howard de Walden saw them off ! And with a most expressive gesture remarked " Well! Young ladies !

What next ?". It was considered "fast" for ladies to drive in a handsome, and this expedition was no doubt a great concession to light-hearted youth.

But Helen and her sister young enough to enjoy everything as it came. Receptions at great London houses, where they saw Royalty, both English and foreign; the Opera, where Marion was singing; the theatres--- or an afternoon at a picture gallery, where they compared Titian with Veronese or criticised the portraits of Lely and Kneller.

Back at Ormiston next year, there were more houseparties. Mr and Mrs Disraeli came to stay at Arncliffe, for a Party Meeting and a banquet in Edinburgh. Helen recounts some of the "bricks" dropped by Mrs Disraeli, the elderly adoring wife, who wore a yellow wig and dressed young in an age when middle-aged women draped lace shawls over their evening dresses.

The dinners and junketing on this occasion seem to have thoroughly upset both George, who suffered from

asthma and found his heart affected by the strain of late hours added to the over-eating entailed by long dinners.

In all these letters there is constant refer⁹ence to the frustrations and vexations endured by her friend in her quest for learning. The impossibility of study in a house full of visitors; ~~The~~ noise of the younger children at home for the holidays; or the dullness of what Helen calls the " troglydite solitude of Sutherland in winter." The picture conveyed is of a not very amiable character. " I know you despise dinners" writes Helen who is keeping house for her aunt," but I am immersed in soups and entrees, and find them very interesting." She was very happy when all the sisters were together, they had so much to say to oneanother; but her friend was irked by family life and a few years later, she broke with her family and settled in London; thus, at the age of 28, definitely allying herself with " advanced females."

Home truths are difficult to accept, even from a great friend, but never were they offered with gentler tact than in Helen's letters at that time. "You are choosing a lonely and undefended life," she points out, doubtless with an affectionate, but none the less shrewd ~~appreciation~~ ^{perception} of her friend's tendencies, ~~and~~ Family life, she owns, entails many sacrifices, but family affection makes them worth while. It was the Victorian woman's philosophy. The close-knit home circle, which, though it held the seeds of tyranny, also sustained and comforted them in ill-^{health} health and adversity, as well as adding to their happiness when all went well.

for the Dempster sisters the last years of the sixties passed peacefully enough. The casual writing of daily doings and family gossip (sometimes ~~raises vivid~~ ^{impressions} and brings the past very close indeed. We can almost smell the Gloire de Dijon roses giving out their scent on a warm summer's day. The windows are open, the lawns dappled with the shadows from the trees and the click of croquet balls and the sounds of girl's

voices hangs in the air. But more than 90 years have gone by since the croquet balls were put away after the last game and the crisp spund of carriage wheels on gravel bore away the visitors. The pointed writing on smooth white paper is left to tell of us of that summer's afternoon.

The year 1870 began with a tragedy for this family.

In Febuary there was an outbreak of scarlet fever at Dunnichen. Six members of the household caught the

infection, including Kate and Gertrude. Kate recovered, ^{but saw for her} but Gertrude had always been delicate, ^{in spite of everything, later could} She made no headway against the fever ~~in spite of everything, later could~~ ^{for xxxxxx} but died within the month.

Helen and Charlotte were in London at the time. Frantic letters passed between London and Dunnichen. The uncle and aunt went north to take charge of the disorganised household and returned, worn out with anxiety, some weeks later. Back at Ormiston in the summer, ^{in July} Helen was occupied in designing her sister's monument. ^{In July} She says nothing of the war clouds gathering over Europe.

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The next letter is written in August. The collapse of France had come like a thunderbolt. The casualties in the battles appalled them. Their days were spent collecting subscriptions and supplies for the French hospitals. They begged for old linnen from friends, which was made into shirts and bandages for the wounded. Yet, as England was a neutral, brother George, even in the midst of war, was able to slip over to Cherbourg where he had heard of a sailing yacht of 117 tons "going cheap". For ten days nothing was heard of him and the sisters were very anxious, but he re-appeared in triumph with the yacht, which was English built and called the Leonora. She was luxuriously fitted---- had a piano and two cannon--- and was a much smarter vessel than her predecessor the Balerina

Neither Helen Dempster nor her sister Charlotte had good health. After 1870 they seem always to have wintered abroad. The next two winters were spent cruising in the Mediterranean in their brother's

yacht; but George's health was now causing anxiety and after 1873, there is no more mention of the yacht.

Helen and Charlotte went to Nice in the winter of 1873-74, For £40 they were able to rent a comfortable small flat for six months. Their French cook, who came in daily, got 40 f, a month in wages, less than 10/- a week. No wonder the invalids of Britain streamed across the channel to the Riviera!

Yet Helen complained that their expenses were too heavy. No doubt Doctors and cures at ^{Aix} ~~Paris~~ les Bains ran away with a good deal of money. Help came from Helen's Godfather, and Charlotte wrote several books which had some success, particularly her book, "The Maritime Alps and their Seaboard" which had a great success in France and brought a welcome addition to their income.

~~Certainly~~ Though they had a great deal more leisure than the average woman can count on now-a-days, ^{but} Helen was always working at her German and Italian. She read

Greek and started to learn Latin and when in London went to Heatherley's for painting lessons..

And there was always the letter-writing to be got through. When the family was scattered every member of it expected a letter daily. And Helen's letters are not just scrappy notes, they cover all four sides of two sheets of paper. Of course she never thought of such mundane chores as cooking or housework. There were 17 servants to attend to the wants of the owners of Ormiston and their guests.

In the meantime Helen's friend was veering between London and Edinburgh. In her determination to live her own life, she was growing into a lonely and embittered woman. The great book was never written, the great picture was never painted. Though she had undoubted talent, and might perhaps have found happiness in a career to-day, she had not the ^etemperament that is able to ~~set aside~~ ¹ a grievance ~~on one side~~ and concentrate on the work necessary to bring any reward even to those exceptionally gifted.

*the removal & rearranging
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Her experiences as a solitary spinster began to colour her views on life and considerable differences of opinion begin to show in their letters. Margaret had become a fervent admirer of Mr Gladstone. Mr Gladstone and all his policies were anathema to Helen. There was women's suffrage too ! Nothing would have convinced Helen that it could bring any good to her sex; but it attracted her friend with a promise of greater independence for women.

Such differences were bound to affect their friendship in time. Helen could never understand how Margaret could cut herself off from all the ties of home; she herself was devoted to her sisters and as the uncle and aunt grew old she did not grudge the care and affection which they needed.

The day came when Ormiston was too large and too great a burden for the old people. A move was made to Edinburgh. The neices superintended the all the details of ~~the move~~ the move and Helen ~~personally arranged the move~~ personally arranged her uncle's library of 10,000 books. George Dempster was already in failing health when He came to live in Edinburgh. He died the following year

VICTORIAN VIGNETTE

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Member for Perth Burghs for 28 years. Throughout his long life---(1732--1818)-- Dempster laboured to assist Scottish agriculture, to forward Scottish industries, and to open up isolated parts of the Highlands by pressing for the making of new roads. In 1786, he purchased Skibo, in Sutherland, principally to further his schemes for land improvement in the Highlands.

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The day came when Ormiston was too large and too great a burden for the old people. A move was made to ~~Edinburgs~~ Edinburgh. The neices superintended all the details of the move and Helen personally arranged her uncle's library of 10,000 books. George Dempster was already in failing health when he came to live in Edinburgh. He died the following year. His wife survived him by only thirteen months.

Now, if they desired it Helen and Charlotte had complete independence. They inherited their uncle's fortune, but, as Helen says, they had lost a settled home

where they were looked for and needed..

Still, she kept up with her friend for a few more years and then the letters come to an end. For some time they can have had little in common but the associations of their almost forgotten youth. The friendship had outlived itself but the letters were not destroyed. Now they are linked with that Victorian way of life which ^{now} seems to us so placid and secure. Perhaps if ^{we} could exchange our "freedom" for their confidence in the future we might feel suffocated; but it is pleasant to read of those days when life was not so much cluttered up with the necessity to cook and house-clean