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FACTS WERE HER PASSION

(From a talk on BEATRICE WEBB, broadcast from 3YA by Nellie F. H. MacLeod)

IN the death of Beatrice Webb, wife of the first Baron Passfield, at the age of 85, Great Britain and the world have lost a woman who has been described as one of the two most skilled and best informed investigators upon the earth. The "other one" of these two investigators was her husband, Baron Passfield himself, better known as Sidney Webb.

When one considers the gifts by which women have won fame in the past and present, the achievement of Beatrice Webb seems unique. Many have been remembered for beauty, like Cleopatra and Lady Hamilton, many for superlative courage, like Grace Darling and Florence Nightingale, and still more for artistic originality or skill. Madame Curie is one of the few women who have won eminence by scientific discovery. Insofar as Beatrice Webb's achievement can be attributed to one predominant characteristic, it is best described as a triumph of reason, and I emphasise this point because women in general have

not been noted for the exercise of cool and disinterested reasonableness, especially in personal and social matters.

Her Father And Mother

Beatrice Webb, who began life as Beatrice Potter, was the eighth of nine daughters in a capitalist family typical of the rich industrialist classes of the nineteenth century. Her father was a director of railway companies, and a capitalist-at-large, a man of great winsomeness, integrity and ability, with a simple religious faith but, Beatrice decided, without any clear vision of the public good. He adored his wife and daughters, and believed women to be superior to men. Yet, oddly enough, every one of his daughters began life as an anti-feminist! Mrs. Potter was an austere, aloof disciplinarian, whose own intellectual ambitions had been frustrated. She disliked women, and was embittered by the loss of her only son, who was born when Beatrice was four and died when she was seven. As a re-



BEATRICE WEBB
Hers was a triumph of reason

sult, Beatrice suffered from a feeling of neglect, and spent most of her childhood hours among the servants, educating herself, in the main, by her own reading. Her mother sincerely believed and practised the Victorian code "that it is the duty of every citizen to better his social status, ignoring those beneath him and aiming at the top"—yet every one of her daughters refused to be educated, and defied class conventions.

Shakespeare Bored Her

The first 15 years of Beatrice's life were spent in seeking a creed by which to live. From her mother's side she had inherited a strain of melancholy, and in times of ill-health (and in childhood these were frequent), of loneliness, or of stress, she was tortured with sleeplessness and depression. Reading was her chief occupation, and she learned to find an outlet in writing in her diary, that last resort of loneliness. The habit lasted, and the publication of these diaries will later on be a major literary event. She lacked any form of artistic ability, hated the then idolised Tennyson, and was bored by Shakespeare. For recompense she possessed a tireless intellectual curiosity, and a double dose of will-power—but these, she felt, were not attractive qualities in a woman. Actually her friends and her photographs both testify to her real beauty and attractiveness.

Of the society life of London she soon tired, finding it morally degrading and physically enervating, as may be seen in her autobiography, *My Apprenticeship*. But the stimulus of the great men she knew there, of Cardinal Manning, Sir Joseph Hooker, Huxley and George Henry Lewes, upon her knowledge-craving mind sent her from strength to strength of study. At 24 her mother's death left her head of a large household, and now she was more than ever tossed and torn between her social duties and her intellectual ambitions. She managed by rising at 5 a.m. and studying till 8 a.m., and these, she said, were the happiest hours of the day.

From Religion to Science

Meanwhile, her spiritual outlook had been revolutionised, and her feeble hold of Christian orthodoxy replaced by what scientists then called "The Religion

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