

## The New Woman and the Old

Where is this New Woman, this epicene creature, this Gorgon set up by the snarly who impute to her the faults of both sexes while denying her the charm of either—where is she to be found, if she exist at all? For my own part, until I make her acquaintance I shall believe her to be the finest work of the imagination which the newspapers have yet produced.

I saw a lady the other day standing beside a bicycle on a country lane. She was a young creature, slender, elegant, admirably built, her figure, set off to the best advantage by the new cycling costume, being evidently undeformed by compression of any kind. Judging by what the papers say of the effect of this costume on the female character, I really should have been afraid to accost her. However, she spoke to me, very courteously asking her way, which she had lost. I directed her, and then she prepared to mount.

"Oh! wait one moment," I exclaimed, emboldened by the charm of her manner. "Do pardon me for asking, but are you the New Woman?"

"I'm sure I don't know," she answered, laughing. "I only know that I enjoy every hour of my life, and that is a new thing for a woman. But pray excuse me. I am hurrying home to put my baby to bed, and get my husband's tea."

She whirled away, leaving me at first under the impression that, of course, she could not be the New Woman. On second thoughts, however, I felt pretty sure that she was—the New Woman and the Old too—new in the perfection of her physique, old in her home-loving proclivities: a stronger, better, more beautiful creature than the blockhead majority can conceive. You may know her for certain by her manners, for she is always gentle and serene. It is the Old Woman who shrieks. Her most prominent characteristic is disloyalty to her own sex. She heaps abuse upon the New Woman whom she does not know; but the New Woman bears her no ill-will for her attacks, which are fine samples of what ought not to be, and help notably to point her own moral. The New Woman is magnanimous by nature, and she can well afford to be so, for all that makes life worth having is hers:—"Give me a large heart: an unloving nature is an unlovely nature," she says. "Make me conspicuous for gentleness, for courtesy and kindness to

young and old, men and women, rich and poor. Give me the country to live in, with the sea in sight, and ample leisure. Give me the society of my fellow creatures to enrich my human nature; and give me hours of sacred solitude to strengthen that in me which is divine. Love me! love me! and let me love you! Laugh at me, and let me laugh back. Laugh with me then. Let us see the fun of it all, and laugh without bitterness; life and love last longer, and are the better of such laughter." So she prays; and all her prayers are answered.

The New Woman confesses that she is full of faults. Doubtless in some phases her vanity is overweening, her knowledge ill-digested, and her grammar shaky; what can you expect of the child? She will improve in time, especially if the Old Woman will kindly continue to bark at her whenever she makes a mistake. So let the Old Woman be reassured; the glory of grammar will not be diminished. Not that there are always faults where the Old Woman finds them. The sentences stand the test of analysis, but doubtless they took the Old Woman's breath away when she read them, and so she paused in the wrong place, which rendered the sense obscure. But, at any rate, the New Woman is progressing, and there are plenty to help and encourage her. She sits down to her work with a smile, for she has won the great heart of the people, and knows that they will like her worst better than the best which the Old Woman has to offer them. Head without heart goes a very small way, and only intoxicates, like stimulant without food; but in the matter of heart the New Woman is well endowed. Altogether she is well endowed. Her health is radiant, her manners charming, her wit taking, her morals unimpeachable, and her will a quantity to be reckoned with. Her faults are the overflow of her exuberant spirits, as, for instance, when the Old Woman is more than usually censorious, and she plays her a trick, she wagers that with a word she will have her out on her quill in a hurry, and waits ready to receive her with a shout of laughter when she appears.

The Old Woman has no notion of progress. She ridicules everything to which she is unaccustomed, as is the way with the ignorant. She is unaccustomed to the practice which the New Woman has adopted, of exposing the sores of Society in order to diagnose its diseases, and find a remedy for them: unaccustomed to the creed that there is still boundless better in men and women to be developed. This is the creed of the New Woman, and the Old Woman ridicules it. Her

own belief is that evil will always continue, because it has always been; and she is too conservative to wish it otherwise.

The New Woman's strength of expression has shaken the Old Woman, and she accuses her of indelicacy, although, in the same breath, she herself stigmatises some of her own sex with one of the foulest epithets in language. But inconsistency was the keynote of the Old Woman's character, and the weathercock her emblem. The New Woman does not blame her, however, for using the right word on occasion. There are times when elegant phraseology is out of place. A knock-down blow is not to be dealt with dainty fingers. Strong words do good when used with that intent; they disgust us with coarse things. It is the coarse idea elegantly veiled in choice language so as to render it attractive that corrupts the mind, and you will find this done in the Old Woman's works to perfection. When she happens to be by way of improving us, she is apt to be a solemn person, and deadly dull, taking herself far too seriously. The New Woman errs perhaps on the other side. Her sense of humour is always on the alert, and she not only sees when other people are ridiculous, but acknowledges it with a grin when she has made herself so. Good humour is another of her attributes. She cultivates it, and hopes to see the day when nothing will have power to ruffle her equanimity. As it is, she will meet you sympathetically on any ground you like, oppose you with a will, and then make a salve for your wounded feelings, if you get the worst of it, or expect you to do as much for her if she does. She cannot for the life of her comprehend why people should differ with bitterness. The Old Woman has no sense of humour. Search her books through and see if there is a flash of it to relieve the reeking sensuality. She uses sentimentality instead of humour, as an artist sometimes uses a brilliant fugitive colour instead of a duller permanent tint, just to gain the glory of its first effect. Sentimentality is a fugitive effect: it is a disease of the nervous system which finds a different expression of itself in every age. A sentimental person will be kind to a dog and cruel to a child. But humour is ousting sentimentality out of the world, and sentimentality, suffering from the indignity, calls it a coarse proceeding.

The Old Woman cares only for others in so far as they have it in their power to add to her own pleasure in life. She resents the intrusion on her luxury of any mention of the working man. What is he to her but a machine to cultivate her roses? an ugly machine, that should be shut up in a shed directly it is done with. Of course it must have oil

enough to keep it from creaking, because the plaintive sound distracts her, but she smiles derisively at the notion that it is worth any other attention, or that it would be possible to polish it if you tried. What is it to her if the man ache in her service, and have no time for any joy in life, and only bread enough to make muscles to work out her whims—he gets his wages. Toil for him, ample leisure for her, only disturbed by anger because some beautiful creature that might have made her happier if alive has been slaughtered. The bird that might have delighted her eyes has been made a feather in another woman's cap, and therefore she is indignant; the weary working-man never costs her a thought so long as he does not disturb her, but if he complains he becomes a bore to be banished. With the New Woman it is different. She sorrows for all who suffer, from the slaves of service to the seals of commerce, from the hunted otter to the humming-bird persecuted for fashion's sake. To be consistent, she and the Old Woman should both be vegetarians, and even then should mourn because the lovely cabbage leaves are cut off in their prime to be boiled; but the New Woman will wager her share of humour against the Old Woman's sentimentality, that if either of them carried their principles to the point of starvation it would not be the Old one.

When man jeers at the Old Woman we resent it for the honour of our sex; but we must confess that she gave him good cause. See how she reasons! Because Bismarck is great, therefore there is no fault to be found with any man!<sup>1</sup> Because Lady Jane Grey, the daughter of a duke, was taught Latin and Greek, and otherwise enjoyed the advantage of the best education of her time, therefore it is absurd for modern women to clamour for any privilege they have not got!<sup>2</sup> The Old Woman has no sense of comparison, and is a prey to confusion of thought. She would have us believe, in the face of all evidence to the contrary, that the ordinary girl of ability has always had within her reach the necessary means of culture: that the Vicar of Wakefield's wife and daughters were as carefully educated as his sons, or if they were not it was their own fault. She contends that women have nothing to complain of in the way of opportunities, and illustrates the point by insisting that the curate's clever child, living untaught in a country village, without a penny to buy a book, or a friend from whom to borrow one, would succeed if she had it in her, because George Sand, a woman of birth and position, besides being a genius born, succeeded.<sup>3</sup> But even she did not succeed till she gave herself a man's opportunities to develop her powers. Our

Old Woman also maintains that the village doctor's daughter, a girl with a big brain and no occupation, should be satisfied to see her stupid brother sent to school, to enjoy advantages which would have made her life worth having, but are only lost upon him. Mrs. Somerville,<sup>4</sup> having every opportunity, every book, every instrument, and every encouragement, made her mark as also did Elizabeth Barrett Browning under similar circumstances; therefore the Old Woman thinks the village doctor's daughter has nothing to complain of. Was ever B more admirably compared to a bull's foot? Pattis are doubtless born, but where would the perfection of their method be but for the making?<sup>5</sup> Singers have a tale of training to tell that is second to none in severity. No reasonable being could suppose that talent was enough without the means to develop it; but one must not expect too much of the Old Woman; she was never supposed to be a reasonable being. She is of settled prejudices, settled virtues, settled vices, a creature of custom, who has come to a standstill. The New Woman, on the contrary, is altering always. She is progressing by degrees. Attempts are made to check her with theories, but she declines to be bound by these until they have been put to the test of experiment, and their value demonstrated. With her as with other creatures, part of the process of development is unlovely. She is apt to be angular when only half grown, and to exhibit the peculiarities which provoke the abuse which the Old Woman, mistaking her for a full grown specimen with her usual want of discernment, levels at her. Much that the Old Woman says of her then is true, but what I say of her is also true; she is the most complex, most interesting creature on earth. Her progress is in obedience to the law, and the law leads upwards. There is a wee dash of boy in her to relieve the insipidity, but all that is not boy is gentlewoman. Her superiority to the Old Woman shines in her versatility; she can do so many more things in a womanly way. When she takes up a new pursuit the Old Woman derides her. She makes every step in advance painful for her: but when the step is taken, and another advantage gained, the Old Woman comes in cautiously, and seizes more than her share of it. Twenty years ago women were held in such low esteem, in consequence of the tactics of the Old Woman, that they were not safe from insult in the public streets, could not drive in a hansom, mount to the top of an omnibus, live alone in cities, without loss of caste, or make their livelihood in a hundred honest ways now honourably open to them; but the New Woman came, exacted respect,

and won it. The Old Woman opposed and bespattered her so long as the struggle lasted, but when the wind changed and the rising tide of public opinion carried the New Woman on triumphantly, then the Old Woman followed her, greedily reaping the benefit of her success, but not giving thanks. The Old Woman is a creature of clothes, and she will adopt any ridiculous or indecent fashion that comes to her by way of the fashion papers; but she cannot be taught to dress herself. She has shown as much of the upper part of her body unclad as she dare for generations, and she has gazed complacently at the bare legs of the ballet too, but she hisses the new bicycling dress like the goose she is. When the battle of the bicycling dress is over, however, the Old Woman will discover that it can be worn as modestly as riding habit or bathing dress, and then she will adopt it, mean Old Woman!

The New Woman is much purer even as she is much greater of nature. She can live on occasion among crowds of human beings without a thought in her mind to sully her delicacy. She believes that men and women can meet together, be herded together for the moment, if you will, under circumstances of the closest intimacy by exigencies of occupation or travel, and not have an objectionable thought among them, and so believing she creates about herself the moral atmosphere she prefers. Grossness is in the mind that entertains it, the nasty mind. The New Woman does things which the Old Woman could not do without thought of evil because the New Woman lives in a more rarified moral atmosphere than the Old one. She knows that thoughts are things, that mind moves mind insensibly, and so she banishes the corrupt mind from her presence, as she banishes the corrupt work from her bookshelves. The Old Woman has not attained to this knowledge, and is satisfied with restrictions imposed upon language. We agree that a nasty-minded young person should neither be allowed to travel nor to associate at college with her superiors. She should be shut up in seclusion with the Old Woman. Nasty-mindedness is contagious, but so also is refinement; and the woman who knows and is not tainted is a finer creature than the one who is not enlightened because she cannot be trusted.

The Old Woman knew her own sex as little as she cared for it—that is to say, not at all. She only recognised other women in their relation to men, and that only in the one sense, the sexual. She sees in our sacred humanity evidence of one function only, and deals with that principally in a state of perversion. Hers were the three-bottle days of

sexuality. The New Woman despises any intemperance; besides, she has no time to do more than sip a wholesome draught. She is a well-balanced creature, with innumerable interests in life, and enjoys them all without excess. The Old Woman depended on Man for her pleasures. She liked to be made love too [sic], and so does the New Woman when it is delicately done, and there is not too much of it. But to live only to be loved in that way would be too much sweet to be wholesome. That was the mistake the Old Woman made; she was limited. She had only the one great interest in life, and strove always to prolong it. Her paradise was the passion period; she had no great sympathy with any other phase of nature—which made her a monotonous person, in whom one's interest soon became exhausted. The whole aim and object of her existence was sensual pleasure. The New Woman is a nobler creature. Her face softens at the thought of the little ones. Man may be dear as her lover, but he is dearer still as the father of her children.

The New Woman can be hard on man, but it is because she believes in him and loves him. She recognises his infinite possibilities. She sees the God in him, and means to banish the brute. She has full faith in his ultimate perfection, otherwise she would not tolerate him for a moment. And, alas! for the Old Woman, after the way in which she laid herself out to attract him, man likes the New Woman best. He suffers no pin-pricks of a petty mind in her company. Her admirable temper and fine physique are a lasting charm; and he likes her confidence in him, her frank camaraderie, her sincerity; but more especially is he surprised and delighted to find that she does not pillage him. She is a loyal lady, and wholesome-minded. Her bosom friends need not keep one eye on her and the other on their husbands. Her kisses are for her own, and for the children; and that is more than the Old Woman could say as a rule.

The Old Woman has had her day. Let us hope she enjoyed it. She has taught us what to avoid in life, many thanks to her, although no one is more disgusted than she is at the effect of her works upon us. Gawain was agreeable to the Old Woman doubtless, but only Galahad is good enough for the New. She is arrogant in that; she asks for the best man, and means to have him.

But what the New Woman demands specially is what every man worth the name is glad that she should have—fair play. She objects to the cowardliness which will trade upon a young, ill-educated girl's indolence, love of luxury, and mistaken notions of life; who knows her

nature while she herself is kept in ignorance of it, and uses his knowledge to degrade her. That is not fair play. There is no need to interfere between men and women of the world; let them regulate their relations as they please, and take the consequences—they know what they are doing. But the mother in the New Woman aches to protect the young—the young girl from being brutalised by man, and the young boy from falling into the woman's hands after all that was angelic in her has been destroyed by evil association.

Does the Old Woman really think that we, without foreseeing a better day to come, would leave the sacred solitude of our woods, leave the gladness of summer seas, the glory of summer sunset, the songs of birds, the perfume of flowers, the companionship of our friends, and all the ecstatic joys of seclusion, and go forth to fight for any motive but the highest? You, who are not unacquainted with the horrors of lust, stand aside for us. Love is our God, and we go forth at his bidding to deliver his message; but let no one shame himself by saying that we do not suffer in the going.

The Old Woman draws her hood over her head, and sits in darkness that she may not know us for what we are. We are the new generation mentioned by the Master, and already we are knocking at the door. Our knocking is the knell of the Old Woman. No wonder she shudders! But it is useless to resist. She must go. That is inevitable—and it is also pathetic.