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THE WILD WOMEN AS SOCIAL INSURGENTS

WE must change our ideals. The Desdemonas and Dorotheas, the Enids and Imogens, are all wrong. Milton's Eve is an anachronism; so is the Lady; so is Una; so are Christabel and Genevieve. Such women as Panthea and Alcestis, Cornelia and Lucretia, are as much out of date as the chiton and the peplum, the bride's hair parted with a spear, or the worth of a woman reckoned by the flax she spun and the thread she wove, by the number of citizens she gave to the State, and the honour that reflected on her through the heroism of her sons. All this is past and done with—effete, rococo, dead. For the '*tacens et placens uxor*' of old-time dreams we must acknowledge now as our Lady of Desire the masterful *domina* of real life—that loud and dictatorial person, insurgent and something more, who suffers no one's opinion to influence her mind, no venerable law hallowed by time, nor custom consecrated by experience, to control her actions. Mistress of herself, the Wild Woman as a social insurgent preaches the 'lesson of liberty' broadened into lawlessness and licence. Unconsciously she exemplifies how beauty can degenerate into ugliness, and shows how the once fragrant flower, run to seed, is good for neither food nor ornament.

Her ideal of life for herself is absolute personal independence coupled with supreme power over men. She repudiates the doctrine of individual conformity for the sake of the general good; holding the self-restraint involved as an act of slavishness of which no woman worth her salt would be guilty. She makes between the sexes no distinctions, moral or æsthetic, nor even personal; but holds that what is lawful to the one is permissible to the other. Why should the world have parcelled out qualities or habits into two different sections, leaving only a few common to both alike? Why, for instance, should men have the fee-simple of courage, and women that of modesty? to men be given the right of the initiative—to women only that of selection? to men the freer indulgence of the senses—to women the chaster discipline of self-denial? The Wild Woman of modern life asks why; and she answers the question in her own way.

'Rien n'est sacré pour un sapeur.' Nothing is forbidden to the Wild Woman as a social insurgent; for the one word that she cannot spell:

is. Fitness. Devoid of this sense of fitness, she does all manner of things which she thinks bestow on her the power, together with the privileges, of a man; not thinking that in obliterating the finer distinctions of sex she is obliterating the finer traits of civilisation, and that every step made towards identity of habits is a step downwards in refinement and delicacy—wherein lies the essential core of civilisation. She smokes after dinner with the men; in railway carriages; in public rooms—when she is allowed. She thinks she is thereby vindicating her independence and honouring her emancipated womanhood. Heaven bless her! Down in the North-country villages, and elsewhere, she will find her prototypes calmly smoking their black cutty-pipes, with no sense of shame about them. Why should they not? These ancient dames with 'whiskin' beards about their mou's, withered and unsightly, worn out, and no longer women in desirableness or beauty—why should they not take to the habits of men? They do not disgust, because they no longer charm; but even in these places you do not find the younger women with cutty-pipes between their lips. Perhaps in the coal districts, where women work like men and with men, and are dressed as men, you will see pipes as well as hear blasphemies; but that is surely not an admirable state of things, and one can hardly say that the pit-brow women, excellent persons and good workers as they are in their own way, are exactly the glasses in which our fine ladies find their loveliest fashions—the moulds wherein they would do well to run their own forms. And when, after dinner, our young married women and husbandless girls, despising the old distinctions and trampling under foot the time-honoured conventions of former generations, 'light up' with the men, they are simply assimilating themselves to this old Sally and that ancient Betty down in the dales and mountain hamlets; or to the stalwart cohort of pit-brow women for whom sex has no æsthetic distinctions. We grant the difference of method. A superbly dressed young woman, bust, arms, and shoulders bare, and gleaming white and warm beneath the subdued light of a luxurious dinner-table—a beautiful young creature, painted, dyed, and powdered according to the mode—her lips red with wine and moist with liqueur—she is really different from mumping old Betty in unwomanly rags smoking at her black cutty-pipe by the cottage door on the bleak fell-side. In the one lies an appeal to the passions of men; in the other is the death of all emotion. Nevertheless, the acts are the same, the circumstances which accompany them alone being different.

Free-traders in all that relates to sex, the Wild Women allow men no monopoly in sports, in games, in responsibilities. Beginning by 'walking with the guns,' they end by shooting with them; and some have made the moor a good training-ground for the jungle. As life is constituted, it is necessary to have butchers and sportsmen. The hunter's instinct keeps down the wild beasts, and those who go after

big game do as much good to the world as those who slaughter home-bred beasts for the market. But in neither instance do we care to see a woman's hand. It may be merely a sentiment, and ridiculous at that; still, sentiment has its influence, legitimate enough when not too widely extended; and we confess that the image of a 'butching' woman, nursing her infant child with hands red with the blood of an ox she has just poleaxed or of a lamb whose throat she has this instant cut, is one of unmitigated horror and moral incongruity. Precisely as horrible, as incongruous, is the image of a well-bred sportswoman whose bullet has crashed along the spine of a leopardess, who has knocked over a rabbit or brought down a partridge. The one may be a hard-fisted woman of the people, who had no inherent sensitiveness to overcome—a woman born and bred among the shambles and accustomed to the whole thing from childhood. The other may be a dainty-featured aristocrat, whose later development belies her early training; but the result is the same in both cases—the possession of an absolutely unwomanly instinct, an absolutely unwomanly indifference to death and suffering; which certain of the Wild Women of the present day cultivate as one of their protests against the limitations of sex. The viragoes of all times have always had this same instinct, this same indifference. For nothing of all this is new in substance. What is new is the translation into the cultured classes of certain qualities and practices hitherto confined to the uncultured and—savages.

This desire to assimilate their lives to those of men runs through the whole day's work of the Wild Women. Not content with croquet and lawn tennis, the one of which affords ample opportunities for flirting—for the Wild Women are not always above that little pastime—and the other for exercise even more violent than is good for the average woman, they have taken to golf and cricket, where they are hindrances for the one part, and make themselves 'sights' for the other. Men are not graceful when jumping, running, stooping, swinging their arms, and all the rest of it. They are fine, and give a sense of power that is perhaps more attractive than mere beauty; but, as schoolboys are not taught gymnastics after the manner of the young Greeks, to the rhythmic cadence of music, so that every movement may be rendered automatically graceful, they are often awkward enough when at play; and the harder the work the less there is of artistic beauty in the manner of it. But if men, with their narrower hips and broader shoulders, are less than classically lovely when they are putting out their physical powers, what are the women, whose broad hips give a wider step and less steady carriage in running, and whose arms, because of their narrower shoulders, do not lend themselves to beautiful curves when they are making a swinging stroke at golf or batting and bowling at cricket? The prettiest woman in the world loses her beauty when at these violent exercises. Hot and

damp, mopping her flushed and streaming face with her handkerchief, she has lost that sense of repose, that delicate self-restraint, which belongs to the ideal woman. She is no longer dainty. She has thrown off her grace and abandoned all that makes her lovely for the uncomely roughness of pastimes wherein she cannot excel, and of which it was never intended she should be a partaker.

We have not yet heard of women polo-players; but that will come. In the absurd endeavour to be like men, these modern *homasses* will leave nothing untried; and polo-playing, tent-pegging, and tilting at the quintain are all sure to come in time. When weeds once begin to grow, no limits can be put to their extent unless they are stubbed up betimes.

The Wild Women, in their character of social insurgents, are bound by none of the conventions which once regulated society. In them we see the odd social phenomenon of the voluntary descent of the higher to the lower forms of ways and works. 'Unladylike' is a term that has ceased to be significant. Where 'unwomanly' has died out we could scarcely expect this other to survive. The special must needs go with the generic; and we find it so with a vengeance! With other queer inversions the frantic desire of making money has invaded the whole class of Wild Woman; and it does not mitigate their desire that, as things are, they have enough for all reasonable wants. Women who, a few years ago, would not have shaken hands with a dressmaker, still less have sat down to table with her, now open shops and set up in business on their own account—not because they are poor, which would be an honourable and sufficing reason enough, but because they are restless, dissatisfied, insurgent, and like nothing so much as to shock established prejudices and make the folk stare. It is such a satire on their inheritance of class distinction, on their superior education—perhaps very superior, stretching out to academical proportions! It is just the kind of topsyturvydom that pleases them. They, with their long descent, grand name, and right to a coat-of-arms which represents past ages of renown,—they to come down into the market-place, shouldering out the meaner fry, who must work to live—taking from the legitimate traders the pick of their custom, and making their way by dint of social standing and personal influence—they to sell bonnets in place of buying them—to make money instead of spending it—what fun! What a grand idea it was to conceive, and grander still to execute! In this insurgent playing at shopkeeping by those who do not need to do so we see nothing grand nor beautiful, but much that is thoughtless and mean. Born of restlessness and idleness, these spasmodic make-believes after serious work are simply pastimes to the Wild Women who undertake them. There is nothing really solid in them, no more than there was of philanthropy in the fashionable craze for slumming which broke out like a fever a winter or two ago. Shop-

keeping and slumming, and some other things too, are just the expression of that restlessness which makes of the modern Wild Woman a second Io, driving her afield in search of strange pleasures and novel occupations, and leading her to drink of the muddiest waters so long as they are in new channels cut off from the old fountains. Nothing daunts this modern Io. No barriers restrain, no obstacles prevent. She appears on the public stage and executes dances which one would not like one's daughter to see, still less perform. She herself knows no shame in showing her skill—and her legs. Why should she? What free and independent spirit, in these later days, is willing to be bound by those musty principles of modesty which did well enough for our stupid old great-grandmothers—but for us? Other times, other manners; and womanly reticence is not of these last!

There is no reason why perfectly good and modest women should not be actresses. Rightly taken, acting is an art as noble as any other. But here, as elsewhere, are gradations and sections; and just as a wide line is drawn between the cancan and the minuet, so is there between the things which a modest woman may do on the stage and those which she may not. Not long ago that line was notoriously overstepped, and certain of our Wild Women pranced gaily from the safe precincts of the permissible into those wider regions of the more than doubtful, where, it is to be supposed, they enjoyed their questionable triumph—at least for the hour.

The spirit of the day is both vagrant and self-advertising, both bold and restless, contemptuous of law and disregarding restraint. We do not suppose that women are intrinsically less virtuous than they were in the time of Hogarth's 'Last Stake;' but they are more dissatisfied, less occupied, and infinitely less modest. All those old similes about modest violets and chaste lilies, flowers blooming unseen, and roses that 'open their glowing bosoms' but to one love only—all these are as rococo as the Elizabethan ruff or Queen Anne's 'laced head.' Everyone who has a 'gift' must make that gift public; and, so far from wrapping up talents in a napkin, pence are put out to interest, and the world is called on to admire the milling. The enormous amount of inferior work which is thrown on the market in all directions is one of the marvels of the time. Everything is exhibited. If a young lady can draw so far correctly as to give her cow four legs and not five, she sends her sketches to some newspaper, or more boldly transfers them on to a plate or a pot, and exhibits them at some art refuge for the stage below mediocrity. It is heartbreaking when these inanities are sent by those poor young creatures who need the fortune they think they have in their 'gift.' It is contemptible when they are sent by the rich, distracted with vanity and idleness together. The love of art for its own sake, of intellectual work for the intellectual pleasure it brings, knows nothing of this insatiate

vanity, this restless ambition to be classed among those who give to their work days where these others give hours. It is only the Wild Women who take these headers into artistic depths, where they flounder pitifully, neither dredging up unknown treasures, nor floating gaily in the sun on the crest of the wave. When we think of the length of time it has taken to create all masterpieces—and, indeed, all good work of any kind, not necessarily masterpieces—if it is food for wonder to see the jaunty ease with which the scarce-educated in an art throw off their productions, which then they fling out to the public as one tosses crumbs to the sparrows. But the Wild Women are never thorough. As artists, as literati, as tradeswomen, as philanthropists, it is all a mere touch-and-go kind of thing with them. The roots, which are first in importance in all growths, no matter what, are the last things they care to master. They would not be wild if they did.

About these Wild Women is always an unpleasant suggestion of the adventuress. Whatever their natural place and lineage, they are of the same family as those hotel heroines who forget to lock the chamber door—those confiding innocents of ripe years, who contract imperfect marriages—those pretty country blossoms who begin life modestly and creditably, and go on to flaunting notoriety and disgrace. One feels that it is only the accident of birth which differences these from those, and determines a certain stability of class. It is John Bradshaw over again; but the 'grace' is queerly bestowed. As a rule, these women have no scruples about money. They are notorious for never having small change; they get into debt with a facility as amazing in its want of conscience as its want of foresight; and then they take to strange ways for redeeming their credit and saving themselves from public exposure. If the secret history of some account-books could be written startling revelations would be made. Every now and then, indeed, things come to light which it would have been better to keep hidden; for close association with shady 'promoters' and confessed blacklegs is not conducive to the honour of womanhood—at least as this honour was. Under the new *régime* lots do not count for so much. Every now and then, one, a trifle more shameless than her sisters, flourishes out openly before the world; an adept in a doubtful business—say, in the art of laying odds deliciously and hedging wisely. She is to be seen standing on her tub outing with the best; and as little abashed by the unwomanliness of her 'environment' as are her more mischievous compeers on the litical stump. She knows that money is to be made as well as lost the ring, and she does not see why, because she is a woman, she may not pick out plums with the rest.

If she has money enough—she is sure to call it 'oof,' so as to be line with the verbal as well as the practical blackguardism of a day—she has a stud of her own, and enters into all the details

connected therewith with as much gusto as a village beldame enters into the life-events of her homely world. But while a foal is one of the most interesting things in life to one of these horsy Wild Women, a child is one of the least; and what young mother, with all the hopes and fears, the fervent love, the brilliant dreams, which lie about the cradle of her first-born, comes near in importance to that brood mare of racing renown, with her long-legged foal trotting by her side? The Wild Woman is never a delightful creature, take her how one will; but the horsy Wild Woman, full of stable slang and inverted instincts, can give points to the rest of her clan, and still be ahead of them all.

Sometimes our Wild Women break out as adventurous travellers; when they come home to write on what they have seen and done, books which have to be taken with salt by the spoonful, not only by the grain. Their bows are very large, and the string they draw preternaturally long. Experts contradict them, and the more experienced smile and shake their heads. But their own partisans uphold them; and that portion of the press where reason and manliness are suffocated by the sense of sex takes them as if they were so many problems of Euclid with Q.E.D. after 'the end.' How different these pseudo-heroines are from the quiet realities, such as Marianne North, to name no other, who did marvels of which they never boasted, contented with showing the unanswerable results! They 'covered down,' they did not paint in high lights and exaggerated colours the various perils through which they had passed. The Wild Woman of the immediate day reverses the system. Under her manipulation a steep ascent is a sheer precipice, a crack in the road is a crevasse, a practicable bit of crag-climbing is a service of peril where each step is planted in the shadow of death; and hardships are encountered which exist only on paper and in the fertile imagination of the fair tourist. If, however, these hardships are real and not imaginary, the poor, wild vagrant returns broken and overstrained, and finds, when perhaps too late, that lovely woman may stoop to other folly besides that of listening to a dear loo'd lad; and that, in her attempt to imitate, to rival, perhaps to surpass, man on his rightful ground she is not only destroying her distinctive charm of womanhood, but is perhaps digging her own grave, to be filled too surely as well as prematurely.

We are becoming a little surfeited with these Wild Women as globe-trotters and travellers. Their adventures, which for the most part are fictions based on a very small substratum of fact, have ceased to impress, partly because we have ceased to believe, and certainly ceased to respect. *Que diable allait-il faire dans cette galère?* Who wanted them to run all these risks, supposing them to be true? What good have they done by their days of starvation and nights of sleeplessness? their perils by land and sea? their chances of being devoured by wild beasts or stuck up by bushrangers? taken by

brigands or insulted by rowdies of all nations? They have contributed nothing to our stock of knowledge, as Marianne North has done. They have solved no ethnological problem; brought to light no new treasures of nature; discovered no new field for British spades to till, no new markets for British manufactures to supply. They have done nothing but lose their beauty, if they had any; for what went out fresh and comely comes back haggard and weather-beaten. It was quite unnecessary. They have lost, but the world has not gained; and that doctor's bill will make a hole in the publisher's cheque.

Ranged side by side with these vagrant Wild Women, globe-trotting for the sake of a subsequent book of travels, and the *kudos* with the pence accruing, are those who spread themselves abroad as missionaries, and those—a small minority, certainly—who do not see why the army and the navy should be sealed against the sex. Among these female missionaries are some who are good, devoted, pure-hearted, self-sacrificing—all that women should be, all that the best women are, and ever have been, and ever will be. But also among them are the Wild Women—creatures impatient of restraint, bound by no law, insurgent to their finger-tips, and desirous of making all other women as restless and discontented as themselves. Ignorant and unreasonable, they would carry into the sun-laden East the social conditions born of the icy winds of the North. They would introduce into the zenana the circumstances of a Yorkshire home. In a country where jealousy is as strong as death, and stronger than love, they would incite the women to revolt against the rule of seclusion, which has been the law of the land for centuries before we were a nation at all. That rule has worked well for the country, inasmuch as the chastity of Hindu women and the purity of family life are notoriously intact. But our Wild Women swarm over into India as zenana missionaries, trying to make the Hindus as discontented, as restless, as unruly as themselves. The zenana would not suit us. The meekest little mouse among us would revolt at a state of things which does not press too heavily on those who have known nothing else and inherited no other traditions. But it does suit the people who have framed and who live under these laws; and we hold it to be an ethnological blunder, as well as a political misdemeanour, to send out these surging apostles of disobedience and discontent to carry revolt and confusion among our Indian fellow-subjects. It is part of the terrible restlessness with which this age is afflicted, part of the contempt for law in all its forms which certain women have adopted from certain men, themselves too effeminate, too little manly to be able to submit to discipline. These are the men who hound on the Wild Women to ever fresh extravagances. Those pestilent papers which are conducted by these rebels against law and order are responsible for a large amount of the folly which all

true lovers of womanly beauty and virtue deplore and fight against. It is they who hold up to public admiration acts and sentiments which ought to be either sternly repressed as public faults or laughed down as absurdities.

Unlike the female doctors, who, we believe, undertake no proselytising, and are content to merely heal the bodies while leaving alone the souls and lives of the 'purdah-women,' the zenana missionaries go out with the express purpose of teaching Christian theology and personal independence. We hold each to be an impertinence. Like the Jews, the Hindu men have ample means of judging of our Christianity, and what it has done for the world which professes it. They also have ample means of judging of the effects of our womanly independence, and what class of persons we turn out to roam about the world alone. If they prefer this to that, they have only to say so, and the reform will come from within, as it ought—as all reforms must, to be of value. If they do not, it is not for our Wild Women to carry the burden of their unrest into the quiet homes of the East; which homes, too, are further protected by the oath taken by the sovereign to respect the religion of these Eastern subjects. When we have taught the Hindu women to hunt and drive, play golf and cricket, dance the cancan on a public stage, make speeches in Parliament, cherish 'dear boys' at five-o'clock tea, and do all that our Wild Women do, shall we have advanced matters very far? Shall we have made the home happier, the family purer, the women themselves more modest, more chaste? Had we not better cease to pull at ropes which move machinery of which we know neither the force nor the possible action? Why all this interference with others? Why not let the various peoples of the earth manage their domestic matters as they think fit? Are our Wild Women the ideal of female perfection? Heaven forbid! But to this distorted likeness they and their backers are doing their best to reduce all others.

Aggressive, disturbing, officious, unquiet, rebellious to authority and tyrannous to those whom they can subdue, we say emphatically that they are about the most unlovely specimens the sex has yet produced, and between the 'purdah-woman' and the modern *homasses* we, for our own parts, prefer the former. At least the purdah-woman knows how to love. At least she has not forgotten the traditions of modesty as she has been taught them. But what about our half-naked girls and young wives, smoking and drinking with the men? our ramping platform orators? our unabashed self-advertisers? our betting women? our horse-breeders? our advocates of free love, and our contemnners of maternal life and domestic duties?

The mind goes back over certain passages in history, and the imagination fastens on certain names which stand as types of womanly loveliness and love-worthiness. Side by side with them were the *homasses* of their day. Where there was a Countess of

Salisbury, for whom not a man in the castle but would have died, cheerfully, gladly, rejoiced to carry his death as his tribute to her surpassing charm, there was also a Black Agnes, who did not disdain to insult her baffled foe, and who had none of the delightfulness which made the Countess of Salisbury so beloved—which made the even yet more distinctly heroic Jane de Montfort so prepotent over her followers. Here stands Lady Rachel Russell; there the arch-virago old Bess of Hardwicke. The one is our English version of Panthea, of Arria; the other is Xanthippe in a coif and peaked stomacher. On one canvas we have Lady Fanshawe; on the other, Lady Eldon—all the same as now we have certain sweet and lovely women who honour their womanhood and fulfil its noblest ideals, and these Wild Women of blare and bluster, who are neither man nor woman—wanting in the well-knit power of the first and in the fragrant sweetness of the last.

Excrescences of the times, products of peace and idleness, of prosperity and over-population—would things be better if a great national disaster pruned our superfluities and left us nearer to the essential core of facts? Who knows! Storms shake off the nobler fruit but do not always beat down the ramping weeds. Still, human nature has the trick of pulling itself right in times of stress and strain. Perhaps, if called upon, even our Wild Women would cast off their ugly travesty and become what modesty and virtue designed them to be; and perhaps their male adorers would go back to the ranks of masculine self-respect, and leave off this base subservience to folly which now disfigures and unmans them. *Chi lo sa?* It does no one harm to hope. This hope, then, let us cherish while we can and may.

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