

# STRANGER THAN FICTION.

## Authenticated Story of a Singular Woman's Life.

London Telegraph: The very brief account which has already appeared of Mrs. Catherine Coombes, who for the past 43 years has dressed and worked as a man, gives but the barest outline of a career that will surely take rank with the two or three historic examples of those of the sex who have served in the army and navy without their secret becoming known. But the story, even in its baldest form, was remarkable enough to be interesting to any woman, and it was in the hope of gleaningsome further particulars from the lips of the heroine herself that I wandered my way yesterday afternoon to the West Ham Workhouse, in which the erstwhile "Charley Wilson" has been unfortunately reduced to seek a temporary shelter. The matron, to whom, of course, I had to explain the object of my quest, was only too ready to assist it, for, as she sympathetically remarked, the more that could be known of the case the better would be the chance of securing some practical assistance for a woman who has fought her own battle unaided, in her own way, through life; and she kindly said she would bring Mrs. Coombes to her own room, where she could talk more freely than in the women's day wards.

Dressed in the simple uniform of the West Ham Union of blue linen, with white apron, and cap upon her short iron-gray hair, Mrs. Coombes entered briskly and alertly, and would certainly have been set down as not more than 50 years of age, though she is over 63. She is by no means tall, and in her masculine garb must have appeared both short and slight. Her voice sounded unusually deep for a woman, but, as she explained in subsequent conversation, she had cultivated its lowest registers till she had come to use them habitually; and she also expressed herself with a terseness and vigor not quite characteristically feminine. She was not disposed, at first, to speak fully of her life, saying, modestly, that to some it might not seem a very edifying one; but by degrees, and with the help of a leading question or two, she unfolded her extraordinary history, and as she talked it became evident that she had enjoyed considerable educational advantages. To her possession, in fact, of these is due the unhappy beginning of her life. As she explained, she was born at Axbridge, in Somersetshire, of comfortably circumstanced parents, who sent her to the Cheltenham Ladies' College, which, half a century ago held, as it does today, a leading place among girls' schools, and while there she was far better taught than were the majority of girls at that time. It has been stated that her husband was a curate, but that is not the case. He was a schoolmaster, and a cousin of her own, considerably her senior. Thinking that her knowledge would be of assistance to him in teaching, he pressed for a very early marriage, which proved a disastrously unhappy one, until his efforts to live upon her parents and his personal violence to her compelled her not only to leave him, but to take steps to prevent his ever finding her again.

### HOW SHE FOUND WORK.

Then it was that the problem of existence presented itself to her in its plainest form. There were not the "openings for women" five and forty years ago that there are today, and, to put it in her own words, she saw that the choice lay between a man's clothes and labor and destitution. She elected the former and but for an accident would probably have carried her secret to her deathbed. She succeeded in effecting an outward transformation in humble lodgings at a Birmingham coffee house. Her next step was to find work, and she started as a learner in the house painting trade at 4s. a week. Her aptitude soon showed itself, and after three weeks this modest remuneration was raised, until in a few months she was able to earn "a living wage." In the earlier days of her career she worked a great deal in Yorkshire and bore her part in the internal decorations of many of the finest mansions of the landed and titled people there. I interrupted her narrative to ask if she had never felt afraid in these times of some gesture or inadvertent speech that would betray her to her "mates," and her answer showed how well she turned the power of observation to account. "I knew I must never lapse into carelessness," she said, "and how little it would take to give me away, from a very small episode. We had had our luncheon while we were decorating a fine house, and the gardener, thinking to give us a treat, brought in a basket of choice apples. He was in a hurry, however, and to those at the further end of the hall he threw the apples, and a young boy, sitting down, who, I suppose, had been in the habit of wearing an apron at his work, extended his knees apart to make a lap in which to catch the fruit. There was an old Yorkshire foreman close beside him, who at once laughed at the boy and said, 'Yon lad's learnt 'ow t' wench'es play.' I had played cricket, so I knew how to catch mine, but I did not forget the lesson." "Charley Wilson" went twice to Paris on special jobs for "his" employers and had an exceedingly good offer on one occasion to go to America.

Perhaps the most remarkable fact of this woman's business capabilities was her employment for over 13 years by the Peninsular & Oriental company. It is with considerable pride that she mentions that with the exception of the last two or three ships built, there is not a vessel in that stately fleet which cannot show her handiwork. She had a large share in the redecoration of the saloon of the Rome after the big alterations that were made in her hull for her improvement. The ornamentation of the music saloons of the Victoria, the Oceana and the Arcadia, which are especially elaborate and rich, was almost entirely carried out by her in enameling, and this, it should be added, is rather a distinct branch of the painter's craft, for, as she says, "a ship's painter may paint a house, but a mere house painter can't paint a ship." During her engagement with the firm which did this work for the company, and subsequently when the Peninsular & Oriental company did its own painting, she enjoyed a particularly good character for her punctuality in arriving at her work in the morning.

### HOW SHE TALKED WITH MEN.

"But how did you bring yourself to talk as men talk when they are alone?" I asked. "Well, you see," she answered, "I never mixed with them. From the first I saw my safety would lie in maintaining a rather proud, rather 'stand-off' demeanor. My work, I may say without vanity, was so good that that was my claim to the master's notice. The men wondered a little who I could be that chose to keep so much to myself, and so they dubbed me 'the gentleman painter.'" As Mrs. Coombes talked it was easy to see that she held strongly religious and devout opinions, though without any ostentation or tendency to obtrude them, and in this way, too, she could save herself from offense. "I have often," she continued, "had to speak my mind out straight when a man working under me has been lazy or careless, but I can safely say I have never used a blasphemous word or an expression that would be jarring on a woman's lips. And as far as talk about me went, I never hesitated to show that I disliked coarse and irreverent and vulgar conversation. My mates soon learned this, and would often say, if it seemed likely to drift offensively far in that direction, 'Ere atow that, Charley Wilson?' Earning such good wages as she did she could live in comfort, and had a nice little house in Camden Terrace, near the Victoria docks. Two people, how-

ever, knew her secret, one being her mother, who, though bitterly regretting that her daughter should have regarded it necessary to assume the disguise, never said an unkind word to her on the subject; and the other was a niece, who for two and twenty years kept house for her, and was believed by all the neighbors to be "Charley Wilson's wife." It was a very quiet and respectable street, and her little garden and several cage birds were the chief recreation and pleasure and a constant source of admiration in the district.

"Again, as you say you were sent often to the country on jobs, how did you manage for lodgings?" I inquired.

"Now that I look back," she answered "It does seem remarkable that I have never once found it inevitable to sleep in the same room with a man. I used to go to cottages rather than public houses, for, though I have never been a teetotaler, the accommodation of the village inn is often very objectionable. One time when I was on some work in South Kensington, I met a man I had known, and he said, 'Charley, old chap, there's a first rate thing some of us are going down to. It's near West Grinstead—the whole of Sir William Burrell's mansion to be decorated, and there's a vacancy still.' I hesitated a little, but it seemed a good thing, so I offered myself and went. We all got down there, and while they were sitting round their lunch I strolled out, saw a nice old fellow smoking over a gate, and said: 'Know where I could get a room? I'm here for the painting of the big house.' 'Don't know as we couldn't do with you ourselves,' and he took me in and showed me a clean and comfortable room, which I immediately engaged, and, fearing lest any of my companions would want to share it, I said I would have 'my wife' down also and my niece; and I had as healthy and comfortable a summer in the country as you could have wished."

About two years ago, Mrs. Coombes' niece suddenly left her, and, womanlike, she fretted very much in private over this. As she said, her life was a strangely isolated one, and she loved her younger relative very dearly. It was altogether a blow to her to be deprived of this one bit of family affection, and she lost heart and nerve in consequence. Working at Kingston in the summer, she fell from a scaffolding and fractured some ribs. She made a good recovery, but no suspicion even then was raised as to her sex by the doctor who set them and attended her, any more than it had been when she fell down a ship's hatch and fractured her kneecap. On this occasion, however, the doctor had said one day: "What curiously small hands you have for a man, Wilson." Looking, too, at them, well formed and even white, it is almost a wonder that these never did raise any inquiry. But her savings were soon exhausted, and, for the past few weeks, work was unobtainable. For two days and two nights this brave-hearted woman tramped the streets with no more than a halfpenny roll to eat, and at last she was fain to seek the shelter of the workhouse. She clung to a hope that somehow she might evade the compulsory stripping, but it was impossible, and feminine modesty revolted even to yielding up the secret she had kept so long.

"But I hope I shall not have to stay here long," she piteously said. "My eyesight is not as good as it was, and I fear I shall not be able to undertake high-class painting work again; but I could act as caretaker, I could keep a lodge, and should be very thankful if I could hear of any position of trust. I am doing my best while I am here, and the matron is very kind to me, giving me only some stockings to darn and sheets to hem, instead of sending me to scrub or wash. And I feel very uncomfortable in these clothes, though you would not find me wanting any half-and-half 'bloomers' if I can't have my old coat and trousers," she added, with a bright laugh. "Yes," she said, in answer to a further question still. "I have friends among the men I've worked with, whom I've helped when times have been good with me, and bad with them, and I really wish you could have seen my meeting here with that man," pointing to a painter who was busy with brush and pot at the front door of the matron's quarters, "he 'could only gasp, and say, 'Charley Wilson, as I'm alive! Well, that beats all! But if you'd come to me and told me how it was, I wouldn't have said anything outside, only you shouldn't have come in here to this.'" It is too much to hope that some kind hand will be stretched out to help this remarkable woman to end her days in quiet and away from anxiety or that some gentle lady may find her a post after the storm and stress of more than 40 years of isolation from the friendship and the sympathy which women hold so dear?

## SPANISH DONS AND UNCLE SAM.

### FEELING THAT AMICABLE RELATIONS WILL OBTAIN.

#### Spain's Reply to the Offer of Mediation Hopes the United States Will Act Loyal and Correctly.

Madrid, Nov. 2.—Marshal Blanco, the new captain general of Cuba, has sent a cable message to the Spanish government saying he has formed a favorable opinion regarding the prospects for the pacification of Cuba. Replying to the offer of mediation made by the United States, Spain says she hopes the United States will act "loyally and correctly in helping Spain to pacify Cuba, especially in view of the fact that such an extended form of autonomist government is to be sincerely granted." The general feeling here is more hopeful of a peaceful outcome of the situation between United States and Spain, especially since Marshal Blanco's arrival in Havana, as it is expected his presence will greatly further the solving of the Cuban problem. At the same time it is pointed out that the submission of the insurgents cannot be expected "unless they are entirely abandoned by the United States."

### BLANCO'S RULE.

#### Military Orders Issued—Taylor's Article on Cuban Affairs.

Havana, Nov. 2.—Marshal Blanco has issued orders to the effect that all money found upon the persons of killed or captured insurgent officers is to be deposited in the fund for the relief of invalid Spanish soldiers.

Orders have been issued that all Spanish troops are to leave within two months the unused churches in which they have hitherto been housed for lack of other accommodations.

Special dispatches received here from Madrid say that the recent article of Hannas Taylor, the former minister of the United States at Madrid, on Cuban affairs, in the North American Review, has produced an unpleasant feeling at the Spanish capital.

Cleveland Plain-Dealer: "Yes, ma, and when we set down to dinner, Mr. Briggs said a blessin', and Mrs. Briggs asked me if we didn't say a blessin' at our house, and I said no, we didn't, but I could say one easy enough if I was asked."

"Yes, ma'am, she did."

"Good gracious! And what did you say?"

"I said that blessin' that pa always gets off when his collar button rolls under the bed."

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