

With Her in Ourland



Charlotte Perkins Gilman

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Part 1

Synopsis of Herland

Three American young men discover a country inhabited solely by women, who were Parthenogenetic, and had borne only girl children for two thousand years; they marry three of the women. Two of the men and one woman leave the country of Herland to return to America; Jeff Margrave remaining with his wife, Celis, a willing citizen; Terry O. Nicholson being expelled for bad conduct; and Ellador electing to go with her husband, Vandyck Jennings.

Part 2
With Her in Ourland

Chapter

1 The Return

THE three of us, all with set faces of high determination, sat close in the big biplane as we said goodbye to Herland and rose whirring from the level rock on that sheer edge. We went up first, and made a wide circuit, that my wife Ellador might have a view of her own beloved land to remember. How green and fair and flower-brightened it lay below us! The little cities, the thick dotted villages, the scattered hamlets and wide parks of grouped houses lay again beneath our eyes as when we three men had first set our astonished masculine gaze on this ultra-feminine land.

Our long visit, the kind care, and judicious education given us, even though under restraint, and our months of freedom and travel among them, made it seem to me like leaving a second home. The beauty of the place was borne in upon me anew as I looked down on it. It was a garden, a great cultivated park, even to its wildest forested borders, and the cities were ornaments to the landscape, thinning out into delicate lace-like tracery of scattered buildings as they merged into the open country.

Terry looked at it with set teeth. He was embittered through and through, and but for Ellador I could well imagine the kind of things he would have said. He only made this circuit at her request, as one who said: "Oh, well—an hour or two more or less—it's over, anyhow!"

Then the long gliding swoop as we descended to our sealed motor-boat in the lake below. It was safe enough. Perhaps the savages had considered it some deadly witch-work and avoided it; at any rate, save for some dents and scratches on the metal cover, it was unhurt.

With some careful labor, Terry working with a feverish joyful eagerness, we got the machine disassembled and packed away, pulled in the anchors, and with well-applied oiling started the long disused motor, and moved off toward the great river.

Ellador's eyes were on the towering cliffs behind us. I gave her the glass, and as long as we were on the open water her eyes dwelt lovingly on the high rocky border of her home. But when we shot under the arching gloom of the forest she turned to me with a little sigh and a bright, steady smile.

"That's good-bye," she said. "Now it's all looking forward to the Big New World—the Real World—with You!"

Terry said very little. His heavy jaw was set, his eyes looked forward, eagerly, determinedly. He was polite to Ellador, and not impolite to me, but he was not conversational.

We made the trip as fast as was consistent with safety; faster, sometimes; living on our canned food and bottled water, stopping for no fresh meat; shooting down the ever-widening river toward the coast.

Ellador watched it all with eager, childlike interest. The freshness of mind of these Herland women concealed their intellectual power. I never quite got used to it. We are so used to seeing our learned men cold and solemn, holding themselves far above all the "enthusiasm of youth," that it is hard for us to associate a high degree of wisdom and intellectual power with vivid interest in immediate events.

Here was my Wife from Wonderland, leaving all she had ever known,—a lifetime of peace and happiness and work she loved, and a whole nation of friends, as far as she knew them; and starting out with me for a world which I frankly told her was full of many kinds of pain and evil. She was not afraid. It was not sheer ignorance of danger, either. I had tried hard to make her understand the troubles she would meet. Neither was it a complete absorption in me—far from it. In our story books we read always of young wives giving up all they have known and enjoyed "for his sake." That was by no means Ellador's position. She loved me—that I knew, but by no means with that engrossing absorption so familiar to our novelists and their readers. Her attitude was that of some high ambassador sent on an important and dangerous mission. She represented her country, and that with a vital intensity we can hardly realize. She was to meet and learn a whole new world, and perhaps establish connections between it and her own dear land.

As Terry held to his steering, grim and silent, that feverish eagerness in his eyes, and a curb on his usually ready tongue, Ellador would sit in the bow, leaning forward, chin on her hand, her eyes ahead, far ahead, down the long reaches of the winding stream, with an expression such as one could imagine on Columbus. She was glad to have me near her. I was not only her own, in a degree she herself did not yet realize, but I was her one link with the homeland. So I sat close and we talked much of the things we saw and more of what we were going to see. Her short soft hair, curly in the moist air, and rippling back from her bright face as we rushed along, gave the broad forehead and clear eyes a more courageous look than ever. That finely cut mobile mouth was firmly set, though always ready to melt into a tender smile for me.

"Now Van, my dear," she said one day, as we neared the coast town where we hoped to find a steamer, "Please don't worry about how all this is going to affect me. You have been drawing very hard pictures of your own land, and of the evil behavior of men; so that I shall not be disappointed or shocked too much. I won't be, dear. I understand that men are different from women—must be, but I am convinced that it is better for the world to have both men and women than to have only one sex, like us. We have done the best we could, we women, all alone. We have made a nice little safe clean garden place and lived happily in it,

but we have done nothing whatever for the rest of the world. We might as well not be there for all the good it does anyone else. The savages down below are just as savage, for all our civilization. Now you, even if you were, as you say, driven by greed and sheer love of adventure and fighting—you have gone all over the world and civilized it."

"Not all, dear," I hastily put in. "Not nearly all. There are ever so many savages left."

"Yes I know that, I remember the maps and all the history and geography you have taught me."

It was a never-ending source of surprise to me the way those Herland women understood and remembered. It must have been due to their entirely different system of education. There was very much less put into their minds, from infancy up, and what was there seemed to grow there—to stay in place without effort. All the new facts we gave them they had promptly hung up in the right places, like arranging things in a large well-planned, not over-filled closet, and they knew where to find them at once.

"I can readily see," she went on, "that our pleasant collective economy is like that of bees and ants and such co-mothers ; and that a world of fathers does not work as smoothly as that. We have observed, of course, among animals, that the instincts of the male are different from those of the female, and that he likes to fight. But think of all you have done!"

That was what delighted Ellador. She was never tired of my stories of invention and discovery, of the new lands we had found, the mountain ranges crossed, the great oceans turned into highways, and all the wonders of art and science. She loved it as did Desdemona the wild tales of her lover, but with more understanding.

"It must be nobler to have Two," she would say, her eyes shining. "We are only half a people. Of course we love each other, and have advanced our own little country, but it is such a little one— and you have The World!"

We reached the coast in due time, and the town. It was not much of a town, dirty and squalid enough, with lazy halfbreed inhabitants for the most part. But this I had carefully explained and Ellador did not mind it, examining everything with kind impartial eyes, as a teacher would examine the work of atypical children.

Terry loved it. He greeted that slovenly, ill-built, idle place with ardor, and promptly left us to ourselves for the most part.

There was no steamer. None had touched there for many months, they said; but there was a sailing vessel which undertook, for sufficient payment, to take us and our motor-boat with its contents, to a larger port.

Terry and I had our belts with gold and notes; he had letters of credit too, while Ellador had brought with her not only a supply of gold, but a little bag of rubies, which I assured her would take us several times

around the world, and more. The money system in Herland was mainly paper, and their jewels, while valued for decoration, were not prized as ours are. They had some historic treasure chests, rivalling those of India, and she had been amply supplied.

After some delay we set sail.

Terry walked the deck, more eager as the days passed. Ellador, I am sorry to say, proved a poor sailor, as was indeed to be expected, but made no fuss about her disabilities. I told her it was almost unescapable, unpleasant but not dangerous, so she stayed in her berth, or sat wrapped mummy fashion on the deck, and suffered in patience.

Terry talked a little more when we were out of her hearing.

"Do you know they say there's a war in Europe?" he told me.

"A war? A real one—or just the Balkans?"

"A real one, they say—Germany and Austria against the rest of Europe apparently. Began months ago—no news for a long time."

"Oh well—it will be over before we reach home, I guess. Lucky for us we are Americans."

But I was worried for Ellador. I wanted the world, my world, to look its best in her eyes. If those women, alone and unaided, had worked out that pleasant, peaceful, comfortable civilization of theirs, with its practical sisterliness and friendliness all over the land, I was very anxious to show her that men had done at least as well, and in some ways better—men and women, that is. And here we had gotten up a war—a most undesirable spectacle for an international guest.

There was a missionary on board, a thin, almost emaciated man, of the Presbyterian denomination. He was a most earnest person, and a great talker, naturally.

"Woe unto me," he would say, "if I preach not this gospel! And he preached it "in season and out of season."

Ellador was profoundly interested. I tried to explain to her that he was an enthusiast of a rather rigid type, and that she must not judge Christianity too harshly by him, but she quite re-assured me.

"Don't be afraid, my dear boy—I remember your outline of the various religions—all about how Christianity arose and spread; how it held together in one church for a long time, and then divided, and kept on dividing—naturally. And I remember about the religious wars, and persecutions, that you used to have in earlier ages. We had a good deal of trouble with religion in our first centuries too, and for a long time people kept appearing with some sort of new one they had had 'revealed' to them, just like yours. But we saw that all that was needed was a higher level of mentality and a clear understanding of the real Laws—so we worked toward that. And, as you know, we have been quite at peace as to our religion for some centuries. It's just part of us."

That was the clearest way of putting it she had yet thought of. The Herland religion was like the manners of a true aristocrat, a thing

unborn and inbred. It was the way they lived. They had so clear and quick a connection between conviction and action that it was well nigh impossible for them to know a thing and not do it. I suppose that was why, when we had told them about the noble teachings of Christianity, they had been so charmed, taking it for granted that our behavior was equal to our belief.

The Reverend Alexander Murdock was more than pleased to talk with Ellador—any man would be, of course. He was immensely curious about her too, but even to impertinent questions she presented an amiable but absolute impermeability.

"From what country do you come, Mrs. Jennings," he asked her one day, in my hearing. He did not know I was within earshot, however.

Ellador was never annoyed by questions, nor angry, nor confused. Where most people seem to think that there is no alternative but to answer correctly or to lie, she recognized an endless variety of things to say or not say. Sometimes she would look pleasantly at the inquirer, with those deep kind eyes of hers, and ask: "Why do you wish to know?" Not sarcastically, not offensively at all, but as if she really wanted to know why they wanted to know. It was generally difficult for them to explain the cause of their curiosity, but if they did; if they said it was just interest, a kindly human interest in her, she would thank them for the interest, and ask if they felt it about every one. If they said they did, she would say, still with her quiet gentleness: "And is it customary, when one feels interested in a stranger, to ask them questions? I mean is it a —what you call a compliment? If so, I thank you heartily for the compliment."

If they drove her—some people never will take a hint—she would remain always quite courteous and gentle, even praise them for their perseverance, but never say one word she did not choose to. And she did not choose to give to anyone news of her beloved country until such time as that country decided it should be done.

The missionary was not difficult to handle.

"Did you not say that you were to preach the gospel to all nations—or all people—or something like that?" she asked him. "Do you find some nations easier to preach to than others? Or is it the same gospel to all?"

He assured her that it was the same, but that he was naturally interested in all his hearers, and that it was often important to know something of their antecedents. This she agreed might be an advantage, and left it at that, asking him if he would let her see his Bible. Once he was embarked on that subject, she had only to listen, and to steer the conversation, or rather the monologue.

I told her I had overheard this bit of conversation, begging her pardon for listening, but she said she would greatly enjoy having me with her while he talked. I told her I doubted if he would talk as freely if there were three of us, and she suggested in that case that if I was interested I

was quite welcome to listen as far as she was concerned. Of course I wasn't going to be an eavesdropper, even on a missionary trying to convert my wife, but I heard a good bit of their talk as I strolled about, and sat with them sometimes.

He let her read his precious flexible Oxford Bible at times, giving her marked passages, and she read about a hundred times as much as he thought she could in a given time. It interested her immensely, and she questioned him eagerly about it:

"You call this 'The Word of God'?"

"Yes," he replied solemnly. "It is His Revealed Word."

"And every thing it says is true?"

"It is Truth itself, Divine Truth," he answered.

"You do not mean that God wrote it?"

"Oh, no. He revealed it to His servants. It is an Inspired Book."

"It was written by many people, was it not?"

"Yes—many people, but the same Word."

"And at different times?"

"Oh yes—the revelation was given at long intervals—the Old Testament to the Jews, the New Testament to us all."

Ellador turned the pages reverently. She had a great respect for religion, and for any sincere person.

"How old is the oldest part?" she asked him.

He told her as best he could, but he was not versed in the latest scholarship and had a genuine horror of "the higher criticism." But I supplied a little information on the side, when we were alone, telling her of the patchwork group of ancient legends which made up the first part; of the very human councils of men who had finally decided which of the ancient writings were inspired and which were not; of how the Book of Job, the oldest of all, had only scraped in by one vote, and then, with rather a malicious relish, of that most colossal joke of all history—how the Song of Songs—that amorous, not to say salacious ancient love-lyric, had been embraced with the others and interpreted as a mystical lofty outburst of devotion with that "black but comely" light-o'-love figuring as The Church.

Ellador was quite shocked.

"But Van!—he ought to know that. You ought to tell him. Is it generally known?"

"It is known to scholars, not to the public as a whole."

"But they still have it bound in with the others—and think it is holy—when it isn't."

"Yes," I grinned, "the joke is still going on."

"What have the scholars done about it?" she asked.

"Oh, they have worked out their proof, shown up the thing—and let it go at that."