

IN MAN'S ATTIRE

CATHERINE COOMBS WORKED WITH MEN FOR YEARS.

In a London Workhouse, in Her Old Age, She Tells of Her Too Early Marriage, Her Husband's Abuse, Her Description of Him and Her Adoption of Masculine Garments the Better to Hide From Him—Not in Forty-Three Years Was Her Sex Suspected—Known as the "Gentleman Painter."

New York, Nov. 11.—Catherine Coombs is entitled to the unique distinction of being a woman who has for forty-three years successfully masqueraded in male attire, and under the name of "Charley Wilson" worked with men in the masculine trade of a painter. Through an accident her sex was discovered, and she is now in the West Ham Union, London, where she was recently interviewed by the London Telegraph, which prints her strange story:

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. Coombs entered briskly and alertly, and certainly would not have been set down as more than fifty years of age, though she is over sixty-three years old. She is by no means tall, and masculine garb must have appeared 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 expresses herself with 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 to the unhappy beginning of her life.

As she explained, she was born at Axbridge, in Somersetshire, of comfortably circumstanced parents, who sent her to 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.

Then it was that the problem of existence. 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 attire and labor and destitution. She elected the former and but for the accident would probably have carried the secret to her deathbed. She succeeded in affecting 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 four shillings 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 land 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 that I must never lapse into carelessness," she said, "and how little it would take to give me away, from a small episode. We had our luncheon while we were decorating a fine house, and the gardener, thinking to give us a treat, brought a basket of apples. He was in a hurry, however, and to those at the farther 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 how t' wench's play.' I had played cricket so 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 thirteen years by the Peninsular and 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 decoration 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 Ocean and the Archada, which are especially elaborate and rich, was almost entirely carried out by her in enamelling, 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 house painter can't paint a ship." During her engagement by the firm who did this work for the company, and subsequently when the Peninsular and Oriental Company did its own painting, she enjoyed a particularly good character for her punctuality in arriving at her work in the morning.

"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 might say without vanity, was so good that that was my claim to my 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. Coombs 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 under me has been lazy or careless, but I can safely say that 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.

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

"Now that I look back," she answered, "it does seem remarkable that I never once found it inevitable to sleep in the same room with a man. I used to go to cottages rather than to public houses, for, though I have never been a teetotaler, the accomodation of the village inn is very often 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 we were sitting round thir 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 accomodate you ourselves,' and he took me in and showed me a clean and comfortable room which I immediately engaged, and fearing any of my companions would want to share it, I said I would have 'my wife' down, also my neice; and I had as comfortable and healthy a summer in the country as you could have wished."

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 these never did raise any inquiry. But her savings were soon exhausted, and, for the last two weeks, work was unobtainable. For two days and two nights this brave hearted woman tramped the streets with no more than a half penny roll to eat, and at last she was fain to seek the shelter of the workhouse. She clung to the 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 have hope that 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 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 and wash. And I feel very uncomfortable in these clothes, though you would not find me wearing any half-and-half 'bloomers' if I can't have my old coat and trousers."