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would be interested

WILL IT BE WILD?

To all my Aiders and Abettors Anonymous, many thanks.

I. The birth of dreams.

It was on one of those occasions at the turn of the century when adults and children met on terms of uneasy politeness, and the children strove to give adequate replies to a series of stock questions. How old are you? Are you enjoying the holidays? What are you going to be when you grow up? To reply, "I don't know", to the last question sounded feeble, and at the time my youthful soul revolted violently against the idea of a lifetime of domestic drudgery. I replied loftily.

"I'm not going to be anything. I'm just going to do things."

This seemed to me to be very profound and I was affronted when the inquiring adult laughed. I equated being something with being Somebody with a capital S, and it seemed to me that the only way in which a woman could be Somebody was by making a judicious choice of husband, and that sounded extremely dull. Doing things on the other hand had about it an air of independence, a faint whiff of adventure. The only trouble was that the things that women did do did not seem at all adventurous. Already women were battering on the doors of many occupations hitherto reserved for men, but the news of their preliminary successes had not yet penetrated to the nursery, and I was always being told what as a mere female I could not do.

My first ambition foundered on this rock. It was a simple ambition. I yearned to be the boy in charge of the extra horse that helped to pull the ancient tram up Highgate Road. What a glorious life! You rode up proudly on the front platform from which mere fee paying passengers were excluded. Beneath your eyes were the bobbing rumps of the three horses, an endearing sight, and all about you lay the animated life of the street. Unhitching your horse at the terminus you leapt on its back, and jingled downhill

again to put in the time waiting for the next tram in polishing the brasses till they glittered in the sun. Not for girls, they told me, and perhaps, as a lifetime occupation, it might prove a trifly monotonous. It would be nobler to become a veterinary surgeon and spend my life tending sick animals. I confided this ambition to my mother, who was herself very good with sick animals. She was sympathetic, but discouraging. Some day, she said, there would undoubtedly be women veterinarians, but a long and arduous training was required and, at the moment, this training was not available to women.

I considered the Arts. I could draw a bit, but not, I thought, very well. I had no illusions as to my musical talent. That left literature. Anyone I thought, mistakenly, could write, and the problem of getting what I had written published did not enter into my calculations at all. Opportunity to practise was at hand. My next-in age brother and I started a magazine, whose tattered remains are still extant. It begins laboriously in an untidy, childish script, blossoms forth suddenly into excellent type and delicate water colour sketches, representing a visit from an artistic aunt, and relapses into the kind of typing, still, alas, too much with me, in which the letter m does duty for a comma, there is a surprised looking rash of punctuation marks, and the spelling depends on which finger comes down first. My brother was Editor and wrote what I considered to be most professional editorials. He also did most of the illustrations. I was Sub Editor and contributed rambling stories of a highly derivative character. I also wrote poems, but these had to wait till I had a temperature. My Muse flowed best at about 104 F. But, though for the moment I wrote stories, I had a mind to something more serious. How wonderful it would be, I thought, to write about places, beautiful, wild, distant, dangerous places. But first one would have to go there. There did not seem to be any positive veto on women explorers, possibly because so few of them wanted to explore, which seemed very odd of them. Terrestrial explorers were still romantic figures, lonely and enduring and with

no nasty cracks about their being the vanguard of colonialism, the precursors of commercial greed

How far do children believe in their wilder imaginings, and how far are they merely material for play? Basically I probably saw my future self as a prosaic housewife, sitting surrounded by a large family, listening to her husband complaining about the cook, but, alone in the garden I was all the explorers I had ever heard of rolled into one. It was a wonderful garden for the purpose. There was a wide sweep of mown grass that did duty for the "boundless prairie", dense shrubberies for "impenetrable jungle", trees old enough to represent the primaeval forest, and, just outside the garden hedge, an "illimitable lake." This was in fact one of the Parliament Hill Fields' ponds, as seen from its private side, and it had the attraction of a genuine peril. You squeezed your small self through the hedge, and stood on a grassy, tree fringed bank, where the swans nested, and swans, I had been told, were dangerous when nesting. I treated those swans with immense respect and they treated me with the amiable indifference so often shown by powerful creatures to the inedible young of other species who are not actively engaged in annoying them.

About the garden hung an atmosphere of hushed expectancy. Anything might happen, a sudden attack by ferocious natives (as represented by two amiable gardeners), a stampede of wild horses across the steppe (rather small wild horses, Shetland pony size in fact, but perfectly authentic), an encounter with a black panther, lying stretched out in the sun, or with a wolf, padding across the snow on silent feet. The panther played her part very well in miniature, but it took some imagination to transform our grumpy mongrel dog into a wolf.

Or, in archaeological mood, one might investigate the two curious structures known to us as Manx and Clinx. One of them was obviously a Victorian notion of a nice shady place in which to take tea, but the other offered a wide field for speculation. It consisted of a ~~wide~~ flight of giant steps that led solemnly to the top of themselves and down the other side. A genuine

archaeologist, discovering its ruins at some future date might have been pardoned for engaging in learned, if tentative, explanations as to its possible use.

When my brothers came home from school I ceased to be an explorer and became whatever the game of the moment dictated. I had four brothers and only one sister, the baby of the family, and games with brothers tended to depend on the stage the brother a year older than myself had reached in his studies. We might, for instance, be Roman Gladiators, with short swords made from rolled up newspaper and cardboard shields inscribed with a Latin motto. "Vinci", said my brother's vaingloriously, while mine murmured humbly "Dum p̄ spiro spero."

At one point my mother seems to have felt that a little feminine company might have a civilising influence, and she started casting about for little girls for me to play with. There was one who lived conveniently just down the road. I was polished up to an unnatural degree of respectability and sent off down the road to have tea with her. In my ears rang the admonition that I was to remember that she was younger and smaller than I was, and that I was not to play rough games with her.

"What shall we play?" I asked politely.

"We will play at French and English," she replied firmly. "You will be the French and I will be the English. We will have a fight and I shall win, because the English always do."

"What about the Norman Conquest?" I asked, that being about as far as my historical investigations had led me, "And anyway it wouldn't really be a very good idea to have a fight, because I am older and stronger than you are and I couldn't help winning."

Whereat she went away and returned with a walking stick with which she proceeded to belabour me. Being in fact older and stronger than she was I removed the stick without much trouble, and she went away and fetched two sticks. Since she was now definitely overarmed, I removed the two sticks without any trouble at all, and she retired under the table and sulked. It seemed to me a singularly

dull way of spending the afternoon, and I was embarrassed at tea time how to explain to my senior hostess what my junior hostess was doing under the table. That friendship did not flourish.

My mother tried again. The second little girl was a nicely brought up child with glossy curls and the most beautiful clothes. Also with strict instructions that she was not to disarrange either of them. This set limits to the games we could play and I was reduced to scrambling, monkeywise, to the top of the toy cupboard and fetching down the dusty cardboard box in which, carefully wrapped in tissue paper, lay all the dolls with which anybody had ever presented me. I had no notion as to how one played with dolls, and, as far as I remember, we sat, each nursing a doll, and made polite conversation while the tedious minutes ticked their way to tea time. I think her mother must have doubted whether I was quite the companion she wanted for her little darling, because she too faded out.

Nothing daunted my mother produced a third little girl, the daughter of one of her closest friends. She came to lunch and I liked the looks of her; snub nosed, sandy haired, freckled faced and dressed in clothes that were obviously made to be played in. She caused consternation in the adults by announcing firmly that she never ate anything but fried fish and treacle tart, or something equally improbable, and, since these comestibles were not provided, she cheerfully ate nothing at all. I thought my elders were making an absurd fuss. It would not hurt her to go without a meal for onee. Explorers, lost in the jungle, often went without food for days, and that gave me an idea. Perhaps I had found a fellow explorer. It was worth trying anyway. Some hours later, scratched, dirty, dishevelled and content, we presented ourselves for tea, and then there was no difficulty in making her eat. Had she not been for weeks in the jungle living on nuts and berries? I was very particular about explorers' food. Anything from the kitchen garden was cheating, but you could search amongst the beech mast under our magnificent beech tree, where the endless patience of childhood might be rewarded by finding an occasional nut that had a kernel in it. Or you could penetrate a particularly scratchy

shrubbery where there grew an apple tree that was never picked. The apples were delicious, sweet, crisp and juicy, with a pale green skin that never reddened.

"You can," I said kindly to my mother, "Ask that little girl in whenever you like."

These three little girls, my baby sister and a few female cousins, seldom seen, comprised the whole of my contemporary female acquaintance till I went to school at the mature age of twelve. Till then I had been educated, like many of my contemporaries, by a governess. She came when I was seven, by which time I could read, and, as I told her proudly, knew my two times table up to eight. She was not as impressed as I had hoped by this educational achievement. I do not remember learning to read, but I have a vivid recollection of my next of age brother sitting at the nursery table, poring over a little blue book entitled "Reading without Tears," which was of the cat sat on the mat variety. Like all of us he was an audible learner, and this led to a sad downfall of my pride. On one occasion he was called upon to demonstrate his progress before an assembly of relations gathered round the dining room fire. I listened impatiently while he stumbled over the words.

"I can read too," I said.

Indulgently they handed me the book, and I was off at breakneck speed, scarcely pausing to draw breath.

"Good Heavens!" said an elder, "The child actually can read

"No, she can't," said one more observant, "We've had pages and pages of cats sitting on mats, and she hasn't turned over once."

For the first time I realised that there was something more to reading than just knowing the contents of a book off by heart, but I did wonder why, after all his mutterings, my brother did not know it off by heart too.

Most of my contemporaries seem to resent their governess education, feeling that, in missing their early years at school, they missed a valuable social training. I have no regrets. I loved

my five years with my governess. She was perhaps exceptional, passing as she did the gift of making education seem like an exciting voyage of exploration into the unknown realm of universal knowledge. She trod ahead, the experienced explorer, and I trod on her heels, the eager neophyte. In the middle of our lessons we went for a walk and again she trod ahead, her long legs carrying her over the ground in easy strides. I trotted behind, my short legs working overtime to keep up with her. We did not converse, each absorbed in our own thoughts. This suited me since I was very busy at the time trying to decide whether I really existed or not. I had no doubts about my existence as a disembodied mind, thinking about whether I existed. It was my physical existence that seemed to me so improbable, my not altogether dignified physical existence as a little girl running about on the surface of the earth. All that was needed, I felt, was concentration, and our walks offered an admirable opportunity for concentrating. I concentrated myself into a sort of trance in which I hovered perpetually on the brink of revelation, of the blinding moment of illumination when I should know finally whether I existed or not. Unfortunately I was always brought back abruptly to reality, usually through running into something.

"You impossible child," said a relation, "You never recognise anyone when you meet them, and you never look where you are going. I was walking behind you up the road, and you embraced every lamp post you came to."

My governess was a methodical woman. When we embarked on a study of English literature we started at the beginning with Chaucer in the original Middle English. Beowulf and the Anglo Saxon Chronicle would have been expecting a bit much. I revelled in it. It was great fun looking up the queer words in the glossary, and, since children often have a good metrical ear, I enjoyed the alliterative verse and learned to elide the final e with great aplomb. We were a family of diversified interests, and one of them was poetry. My father loved to read verse aloud, and read extremely well. My eldest brother, another addict,

spouted poetry ,like a fountain, in several languages, to all of which I listened with pleasure. Of the ones I did not understand I liked Greek the best. A lovely language, and who cares whether it was really pronounced like that or not. In the course of time I became a spouter too, and, when my mother was not well, we sometimes sat on her bed, favouring her with our repertory, one carrying on where the other left off. She said she liked it, but perhaps she just liked us.

Literature was fine, but English grammar flummoxed me. My governess never succeeded in getting ~~it~~ across, perhaps because it bored her, as it ~~well~~ might,, and yet, when I went to school, I found it the easiest accumulator of alpha plus in the whole curriculum. Sums went well and provided some delectable interludes. When my grandmother was staying with us, she would drift into the school room and settle herself down by the fire. This was the signal for my governess to set me some sums, while she prepared to make herself polite. I would race through the sums, leaving a little bit of the last sum, so that I could truthfully say that I was not quite finished, and then, tracing my way with the point of my pencil, I would be off on a voyage of exploration over the table cloth. The blue background was sea, rivers and lakes, and the other colours land. Dreamily I drifted amongst desert islands and along densely vegetated coasts until a peremptory note in my giverness's voice caused me to complete the last sum in a hurry.

We only had one serious disagreement, and that was over the Wars of the Roses. I was staying with her at the time at her parents' bungalow in Buckinghamshire. It was lovely weather, and I had a hundred and one important things to do out of doors. Strawberries to pick for instance. They had a fine crop and had ~~thankfully~~ ^{thankfully} turned the picking over to me, knowing my competitive instinct to be greater than my greed. Nobody was permitted to eat a single strawberry until I had weighed the day's picking. Besides strawberries, there were weeds, worms and snails. ~~The~~ If one of the womenfolk saw a worm when gardening she at once shrieked in anguish for me to remove it, poor harmless little

things. Snails I was supposed to drop into a jar of salted water, but this seemed to me to be unkind, so I poured away the water, placed the snails in the empty container, and set them free in a nearby wood. They gave me a lot of trouble, those snails. They are supposed to be slow creatures, but the pace they crawled out of that container was fantastic.

In addition to all this serious work there was Boo-Ba to play with. Boo-Ba started at one end as a genuine, old English, bob tailed sheep dog, and ended, irresponsibly, at the other in a long plume tail. He was a dog of many virtues and one failing. When not invited to partake of some toothsome delicacy, he helped himself. The family had been told that the way to cure a dog of this habit was to tie what remained of the stolen edible round its neck and to point the finger of scorn at it. So the mangled half of a cake was tied round Boo-Ba's neck and the family sat round and dèrided. Poor Boo! His tail drooped, he cringed, his brown eyes pleaded, he grovelled on the floor. That, said the family with satisfaction, had taught him a lesson. A few days later I was sent to the larder to fetch something. Boo-Ba had got there first. He was gulping down great, delicious mouthfuls from a bowl of stock set to cool on the floor. He raised his dripping muzzle and looked at me unrepentantly. There was eloquence in every line of his body.

"Let them tie this round my neck if they can." said Boo.

"They can't," I told him, "And anyway they should not have left the larder door open." And after that there was complicity in our relationship.

With so much to claim my attention I felt that, when my governess had to go out for the day, leaving me in the charge of her elderly, sciatica troubled mother, she might very well have left me to find occupation for myself. Instead of which she told me to learn all the battles of the Wars of the Roses and their dates off by heart. It seemed to me a singularly useless piece of knowledge. If you felt a passionate urge to recite them, you could always look them up in a book. Furthermore I disapproved of wars. When we small my next of age brother and I had a war. We each had an

an animal kingdom, of which the oldest toy in our possession was king or queen, the oldest toy in our joint possession claiming suzerainty. It was only fitting, my brother being my senior, that his Queen Pussy should have feudal rights over my King Camel, but on one occasion I rebelled. It was very serious, and we marshalled our toy animals in battle array, and, each taking a horse by the hind leg, we clashed them together. Mine was the toughest and his it was that broke. We were appalled by this evidence of the destructiveness of wars, and guiltily returned our armies to the toy cupboard. Disputes for the future were to be settled by arbitration. History seemed to me to be altogether too full of wars, so I did not learn all the battles of the Wars of the Roses off by heart, and, when my governess came back, I told her why. She did not appear to consider the excuse adequate.

Once, when she was ill, her sister came in her place. I admired the sister very much. Longlegged, slim, oval faced and very brunette, she was my current ideal of female beauty, but, as a governess, I preferred ~~her~~ my own. Except in one respect. Being something of an artist, she allowed me to draw maps freehand, instead of plotting them, and joining the dots as my governess made me do. No doubt this laborious process produced a more accurate map, but the freehand style was better fun and also better training. Geography in those days was taught without any imagination, and all that I retain from my early lessons is "Maidstone on the Medway, capital of Kent, which is famous for its hops." A meagre sum of knowledge. My brother does better. He can recite quite an impressive, though unrelated, list of geographical features all round the coast of the British Isles. There was nothing in this teaching to stimulate a child's mind, and my imagination fed instead on the scanty supply of adventure stories on the nursery shelves.

There was "Martin Rattler", a mine of information on tropical jungle. "First in the Field", which dealt less adequately with the Australian bush. The exciting never-never Africa of Rider Haggard and the prosy tales of Fenimore Cooper, which I loved dearly, and believed implicitly. There was that Do-it-yourself

bore, Robinson Crusoe, and the wild improbabilities of Swiss Family Robinson, which I rejected with scorn. There was also Bunyan's Pilgrim's Progress, the first of my adventure stories, which my mother read to me when I was still unable to read to myself. She read from a huge, leatherbound volume with a wonderfully terrifying picture of Apolyon bestriding the way, and the allegory passed unheeded over my head. Told in the dreary prose of our two told-to-the-children versions it degenerated at once into a moral tract, and I am, on the whole, against told-to-the-children versions of anything except scientific fact.

I arrived at school a year in advance of my age group and was placed in the top form of the lower school, where I sat, getting more and more bored for two years, it being an inviolable rule that you might not go into the upper school till you were fourteen. School depressed me. The acquisition of academic knowledge always seemed to take second place to "character formation", and I was not attracted by the kind of character they seemed to want to form.

I approached my school mates in a spirit of detached, scientific inquiry like an anthropologist who ^{817 d5} [himself] for the first time amongst a little known tribe of aborigines. There were, I perceived, two sets of rules governing this tight little feminine community, the written rules, enforced by sanctions, and the unwritten conventions, imperatives and taboos. The other girls had acquired these gradually on their way through school, but I had to swallow them at a single gulp. Some of the customs seemed to me most peculiar. A kind hearted girl took me aside and told me that the "done" thing was to have a "crush" on somebody. It could, she said, be one of the mistresses, but it was considered more chic to have a crush on one of the senior girls in the upper school. A good anthropologist ought to conform within reason to the customs of the tribe amongst which he finds himself, and, though I felt that a genuine crush was beyond me, I thought I could simulate one. There were two of the mistresses I liked, but one, an Irishwoman, was too endearingly funny to be made the subject of a crush, and the other, the headmistress, was much too sensible. It would have to be one of the older girls, and, since I had never spoken to any of them, I should have to go by

appearances. This was not easy. My ideas of female pulchritude still leaned towards the lean, elegant, greyhound type, and these young women had reached that rather unfortunate stage, when young men tend to acne and young women run to puppy fat. They were a plump lot. I found a girl who had managed to stay thin and considered her seriously. She had a sallow complexion, dark eyes with brows that met over her nose, and long, lank, black hair. I did not consider her strictly speaking as very beautiful, but I thought she might pass as romantic. So I said I had a crush on her. And nobody believed me, not for a moment. They knew a real crush when they saw one.

It was most discouraging and led me to pay more attention to the emotional graph of my school mates. There were, of course, placid girls, whose graph was a horizontal line, but, for some of them, what peaks and what depressions. It sometimes seemed to be a case of:- bosom friends on Monday, violent quarrel on Tuesday, not speaking on Wednesday, passionate reconciliation on Thursday, bosom friends again on Friday, with Saturday and Sunday off to recover. After the equable undemonstrativeness of my own family it made me feel quite dizzy. If ever I had a bosom friend, I decided, it would be for keeps, an ideal which got me into awful trouble in the upper school, where permanent friendship were regarded with suspicion as anti social.

Still I thought the tribe of aborigines into which I had penetrated an aimable enough set of people until, going unexpectedly into the cloakroom, I found two little darlings from the second class busily engaged in strangling a smaller child. They had wound a muffler round her neck and each was pulling one end. The child was puce in the face and uttering strange sounds. I descended upon them in all the majesty of my first form status and they scattered like black beetles beneath an up raised foot. This, I thought, as I unwound the scarf, is a case of systematic bullying, such as you read of in boy's school stories. I thought girls were above that sort of thing. But, once she could breathe again, the child did not seem unduly discomposed, and I wondered whether, after

all this was no case of systematic bullying, but ^{just} ~~only~~ their idea of simple childish fun. Anthropologists must be careful not to misinterpret ~~things~~ attitudes.

The first form was, of course, above this sort of thing, but I began to wonder whether their social attitudes were always quite kind.

"Don't pay any attention to her," said a girl, speaking of a classmate, "She's one of the Oddities."

It had never before occurred to me that people were odd. They were just people and it would be very dull if they were all exactly alike, but I found there were a number of Oddities and began to cultivate their acquaintance in order to find out what made an oddity odd. They were all plain girls. Obviously prettiness was a passport to ordinariness. Most of them were of poor muscular coordination, clumsy in their movements and no use at games. Academically they were average. They were all shy, but were they shy because they were oddities, or merely because they were thought odd? They were not easy to know, but, once you had broken the ice, they were very good value. They were much more original in their ideas than the ordinaries, but was this because they engaged less in idle chatter and so had more time to think, or were they considered odd because they had original ideas? It was about this time that I began to wonder whether I was not an Oddity myself. Nobody was positively unkind to them, they were just ignored. When we formed up in a crocodile to make our sedate way to our ladylike games in Regent's Park, the Oddities were always left to walk with the mistress in charge, or with one another, and this also was usually my fate. Since I did not in the least mind being an Oddity I began to wonder whether the other Oddities minded. One could not very well ask them.

Time passed. We sat in an airy classroom with the light falling correctly over our left shoulders, and the mistress droning on the dais. Sometimes we were interested and sometimes we were bored. When we were bored we doodled. The girl in front of me drew arrows, hundreds and hundreds of arrows all over everything.

Did they point the way out of this tedium? The other girl whose book I could see drew ground plans of houses. Did she yearn to be an architect, or was she merely a domestic type interested in home planning. I myself drew profiles of Indians, all straight lines, and behinds of elephants, all curves, the reason for which seems obvious. I acquired a bosom friend of my own, or it would be more accurate to say, she acquired me. I could not imagine why she had taken up with me, nor could my schoolmates. One of them told me so. What I liked best about a bosom friend was that, at long last, I had a little girl to take home to my mother. Fortunately they took to each other at sight. My mother was probably relieved that I had picked someone so dainty and feminine, and her heart was touched by the fact that she was the child of a broken marriage, handed on like a parcel from one set of relations to another. Her current guardian was an actor, and I had the thrill of going to see him and act and being taken behind the scene. I was much impressed by the air of authority displayed by the scene shifters, and the sight of the uncle busily applying more grease paint to a face that already seemed to be as colourful as a mandril's behind. Still more interesting, her father was a poet, and, when I became editor of the first form magazine, I received her poems with respect and corrected the scansion. She wandered on and I had to find another bosom friend in the upper school. By now my ambitions to become an explorer had become swallowed up in a more practical ambition to get to university.