

THE GREEK WOMAN OF TO-DAY¹

BY JACQUELINE BERTILLON

So long as Greece was merely a Turkish province there was no opportunity for its women to develop their minds and their tastes. The energies of the Greek people had been paralyzed by four hundred years of servitude, and they were incapable of any other exertion than that of paying tribute to the Sultan. Excluded from all public activity, the women of Greece had to content themselves with perpetuating the Greek language and the old Greek traditions and with instilling an ardent patriotism into their children. It was this patriotism, of course, that enabled the Greeks to endure their misfortunes and finally to win their independence. During the century and more in which liberated Greece has struggled to become an organized nation, its women have gradually taken a greater and greater part in public life. In general they are remarkably intelligent and acute, and when their intelligence is abetted by a desire to work there seems to be no achievement to which they may not aspire.

The basis of their renaissance has been the organization of a serious system of education. In the early days Greek women learned almost nothing but French, and spent their leisure time reading the most mediocre products of our literature. Education was not compulsory, and there were no schools for girls.

When Greece was freed from the Turkish yoke, the propaganda in favor

¹ From *L'Illustration* (Paris illustrated literary weekly), April 3

of education for women was so effective and the gifts of generous individuals so munificent that there are to-day more than a thousand educational institutions for girls. Five *lycées* are set aside for them. They can thus go on from elementary education to secondary study and then pass the examinations of the University of Athens. There are not a few Greek women with doctor's degrees. Mme. Perrin, who made it possible for women to be admitted to the higher schools, introduced me to her friend, Mlle. Apostolakis, *docteur ès lettres*. With her I visited the Acropolis and the ruins of Eleusis. Her eyes shining and her voice quivering with enthusiasm, she alluded to a thousand things, as we observed those ancient stones, which bore witness to a vast and profound culture. The very spirit of antiquity seemed to come alive in her conversation. Mlle. Apostolakis intends to make a study of the religious architecture of Crete, one of the most ancient in the world. I have no doubt that she will receive as much attention as Mlle. Panaiotato, whose thesis on hygiene among the ancient Greeks has been crowned by the Académie des Sciences.

If the independence of Greece enabled the women to get a thorough-going education, the vicissitudes of their country have stimulated their activity and called forth their devotion. Women who were formerly occupied entirely with their families have undertaken to found orphanages and workrooms for the victims of

Balkan wars. After the loss of Asia Minor the refugees who were driven out by the Turks arrived in Greece by the hundreds of thousands. These poor people had nowhere to live, no supply of clothing, no food, no money. The Greek women came to the help of the Government in finding shelter for them and the means of subsistence. One of the most striking figures among these philanthropic women is Mme. Anna Papadopoulo, who belongs to one of the most ancient families of Epirus. She was not afraid to spend several years at the front during the war in order to organize relief work and to care for the wounded. She played her rôle with such admirable energy and altruism that the Greek people spontaneously gave her the nickname of 'Manna' (Mamma). In her work of relieving the atrocious sufferings of the refugees she went all over the country collecting clothes and money. She organized workshops, and established salesrooms for the disposal of the products manufactured by the refugees and the small possessions of which they wanted to get rid. In the old Royal Palace of Athens she established a workshop where the refugee women could make the lace and embroidery the sale of which kept them from dying of hunger.

With the increase in the Greek working classes made by these thousands of refugees, it became necessary to protect the interests of working women. Mme. Negropante, wife of the former Finance Minister, and Mme. Theodoropoulo, professor of music at the Conservatory of Athens, took this task upon themselves. They organized the League to Protect the Rights of Greek Women, affiliated with the International Women's Council, and brought about the recognition of the great principle of 'equal pay for equal work' in public education. They also

succeeded in bringing about the passage of an equitable law on divorce.

Nevertheless there remains an important problem for which no propaganda seems yet to have been spread — the problem of the Greek peasant woman.

Some time ago some young students formed an association of 'Neo-Greeks,' whose aim was to improve the living conditions of the peasants and raise their intellectual and moral level. The members of the association promise that after pursuing university studies abroad they will live for two years in a Greek village and work there in the midst of the peasants themselves. If they are doctors, they will try to train their neighbors in hygienic practices. If they are lawyers, they will teach them the rudiments of law. If they are engineers and architects, they will teach them how to build houses and roads.

No similar attempt, however, has been made to improve the condition of the peasant women. When I was traveling through the Greek countryside I was saddened again and again to see these unfortunate women toilsomely digging in the ground while their husbands were gossiping in the cafés. On the white roads — whitened still more by the rays of an implacable sun — I sometimes met groups proceeding in the following style: the man mounted on a donkey, his wife leading the donkey and carrying a child and other bundles. This was no indication of tyranny or slavery, but only of Oriental custom consecrated by time and habit. The peasant women work like beasts of burden, and are for the most part quite illiterate; yet despite their emaciated bodies and uncultivated minds, they have great depth of feeling and charm of character.

My first observations of them date from the time of my trip to Delphos.

A carriage with four seats was waiting for me as I left the boat, and I took my place in it. I was watching the night-fall come down slowly over the wild landscape that surrounded me, when I suddenly heard cries and turned round to see where they came from. I saw some peasant women bent over under the weight of baskets and farm implements. Instinctively I stopped the carriage and made a sign to the women to get in. At first they did not dare to, and then, one of them urging on another, they finally clambered in, timidly enough. In order not to disturb me, they took up as little room as possible and made themselves as scanty as their poor tired bodies allowed. Their weary eyes were full of tears of gratitude and affection.

In the winter they spin and weave in their houses. They have no clothing, linen sheets, linen or cotton cloth that is not the work of their own hands. They card the cotton, they spin it with long distaffs in the form of rackets, and weave it on the looms that always stand just inside the doorways. These cloths, though they are very thin, are remarkably strong. But these women are not content with weaving; they also embroider their clothes in colors according to their own designs, which they improvise in constantly varying patterns. No effort is too great to make these embroideries marvels of artistic skill. They will labor at the same scarf or shirt for years on end. When, under the pressure of need, they are forced to sell the objects that have given them so much care, they do so with as much poignant regret as if they were parting with something of themselves.

Their artistic impulses are manifested also in the curious dances in which the whole village takes part in Sunday costume. The peasant men and

women take hold of each other's hands in a long line, at the end of which the director of the dance makes rhythmic motions that are communicated directly to the others. The pure features of these village women, their costumes, the Greek sky and sun, all contribute to the unique charm of this spectacle.

But the peasant women possess a gift still more remarkable than that of dancing and embroidery. Though they can neither read nor write, they are skilled in the art of impromptu verse-making. When a child is born, when a young couple are married, when an old man dies, they compose for the baptism, the wedding, or the burial, couplets of surprising poetic delicacy. Here are a few examples. A young girl welcomes her fiancé in these words:—

'When my bird is absent, all is dark. When he comes back, the mountains become green again.'

Another, whose fiancé has married a different girl, cries in her grief:—

'Basil keeps its perfume even when it fades. My lover remains in my memory even if he marries another.'

A mother weeping for her dead infant says:—

'All bitterness is bitter, and all pain is painful. But there is no other grief like the extinction of a family. Thou hast gone away, and what hast thou left me? A vial of poison. Every morning when I arise I will drink a little of it.'

However ignorant they may be, then, these women have a natural delicacy and instinctive refinement that makes them beyond any doubt susceptible of learning. It is only a matter of bringing together and instructing these open minds so that they may be able to participate usefully in the social and political life of their country.

TE DEUM OF A LARK

BY PAMELA TRAVERS

[*Irish Statesman*]

THE sun and the wind
I praise, Lord God,
and the moon ways
my feet have trod,

The nest at night
and the mating time
and little feathery
breasts on mine:

Live things of the earth,
the morning quest,
and the summer's burden
of sweet unrest,

And the long flight
to the brave South —
wind under wing,
spray on the mouth.

But more than these,
my praise, O King,
humblest praise
for the songs I sing,

For the power to ease
my heart of pain
in singing, and so
find joy again.

And I ask no death,
Lord God, but this:
Grant me, Thy bird,
a small bird's bliss —

Let me pierce the blue
one day as I sing
and touch Thy golden
feet with my wing.