

HERLAND

Charlotte Perkins Gilman



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Herland
by Charlotte Perkins Gilman

First published 1915

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ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Charlotte Perkins Gilman, born 1860, was a successful U.S. American author of poetry, short stories, essays, non-fiction books and novels, and also a journalist, lecturer, and one of the most prominent feminist theorists and activists of her time. Though some of her views, particularly on “race,” are problematic by today’s standards, her important contributions to feminist theory are still recognized and relevant.

After a difficult childhood and a failed first marriage, her second marriage was happy and lasted 34 years. In 1935, one year after her husband’s sudden death, terminally ill with breast cancer, she took her own life. Her autobiography, *The Living of Charlotte Perkins Gilman*, was published posthumously.

ABOUT THIS BOOK

Herland is a fantasy adventure story of the “lost world” genre — it seems likely that, to some degree, it has drawn inspiration from Henry Rider Haggard’s *She*. Charlotte Perkins Gilman, though, did not write her novels to entertain, she wrote them to take part in the political discourse, to advance the cause of feminism, at a time when women in the US did not even have the right to vote (the 19th Amendment, “The right of citizens of the United States to vote shall not be denied or abridged by the United States or by any State on account of sex,” was not ratified until 1920, five years after the publication of *Herland*).

In *Herland* the author shows us a utopian society, egalitarian and non-violent, free of suffering and conflicts, but (or *and*, depending on your point of view) also free of passions, and without even a trace of sexuality. This ideal society is the background against which she highlights the failures, shortcomings and horrors of the world that we know and live in. “We,” as even a century later, despite undeniable progress that has been achieved for instance in gender relationships, much of this criticism is still sadly topical.

But different from Plato’s and Thomas More’s utopias, also created to further their authors’ agendas, *Herland* does not offer any actual political perspectives. The way by which this society has evolved — killing all men, reproduction by parthenogenesis, and two thousand years of consensual striving for perfection (which, by the way, also includes the extermination of all animals), and living in a climatically favored environment — can hardly serve as a model for progress in the real world. The book has also been criticized, not entirely without

justification, for some underlying racism, but this plays a very minor role and, sadly, has been all too common at the time. We can also critically remark that much of the inner workings of Herland are never explained — things that Gilman was clearly not interested in. This rather bucolic world features, for instance, electric motor cars, but we are not shown even a trace of the technology and infrastructure that would be needed to build and operate them, nor do we learn anything about the Herlanders' means of long distance communication, except that it exists.

In the sequel to *Herland*, *With Her in Ourland*, the two protagonists — the Herland woman and the American man — turn their backs at the world in disgust, to retreat to the secluded paradise of Herland, from where, one distant day, salvation may come to our world. But even if the *Herland* duology is an escapist fantasy rather than a call to or a blueprint for political action, is also a groundbreaking and quite readable work of early feminist fiction in its unflinching declaration of female powers, wisdom, and independence.

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1.

A NOT UNNATURAL ENTERPRISE

This is written from memory, unfortunately. If I could have brought with me the material I so carefully prepared, this would be a very different story. Whole books full of notes, carefully copied records, firsthand descriptions, and the pictures — that's the worst loss. We had some bird's-eyes of the cities and parks; a lot of lovely views of streets, of buildings, outside and in, and some of those gorgeous gardens, and, most important of all, of the women themselves.

Nobody will ever believe how they looked. Descriptions aren't any good when it comes to women, and I never was good at descriptions anyhow. But it's got to be done somehow; the rest of the world needs to know about that country.

I haven't said where it was for fear some self-appointed missionaries, or traders, or land-greedy expansionists, will take it upon themselves to push in. They will not be wanted, I can tell them that, and will fare worse than we did if they do find it.

It began this way. There were three of us, classmates and friends — Terry O. Nicholson (we used to call him the Old Nick, with good reason), Jeff Margrave, and I, Vandyck Jennings.

We had known each other years and years, and in spite of our differences we had a good deal in common. All of us were interested in science.

Terry was rich enough to do as he pleased. His great aim was exploration. He used to make all kinds of a row because there was nothing left to explore now, only patchwork and filling in, he said.

He filled in well enough — he had a lot of talents — great on mechanics and electricity. Had all kinds of boats and motor-cars, and was one of the best of our airmen.

We never could have done the thing at all without Terry.

Jeff Margrave was born to be a poet, a botanist — or both — but his folks persuaded him to be a doctor instead. He was a good one, for his age, but his real interest was in what he loved to call “the wonders of science.”

As for me, sociology’s my major. You have to back that up with a lot of other sciences, of course. I’m interested in them all.

Terry was strong on facts — geography and meteorology and those; Jeff could beat him any time on biology, and I didn’t care what it was they talked about, so long as it connected with human life, somehow. There are few things that don’t.

We three had a chance to join a big scientific expedition. They needed a doctor, and that gave Jeff an excuse for dropping his just opening practice; they needed Terry’s experience, his machine, and his money; and as for me, I got in through Terry’s influence.

The expedition was up among the thousand tributaries and enormous hinterland of a great river, up where the maps had to be made, savage dialects studied, and all manner of strange flora and fauna expected.

But this story is not about that expedition. That was only the merest starter for ours.

~

My interest was first roused by talk among our guides. I’m quick at languages, know a good many, and pick them up readily. What with

that and a really good interpreter we took with us, I made out quite a few legends and folk myths of these scattered tribes.

And as we got farther and farther upstream, in a dark tangle of rivers, lakes, morasses, and dense forests, with here and there an unexpected long spur running out from the big mountains beyond, I noticed that more and more of these savages had a story about a strange and terrible Woman Land in the high distance.

“Up yonder,” “Over there,” “Way up” — was all the direction they could offer, but their legends all agreed on the main point — that there was this strange country where no men lived — only women and girl children.

None of them had ever seen it. It was dangerous, deadly, they said, for any man to go there. But there were tales of long ago, when some brave investigator had seen it — a Big Country, Big Houses, Plenty People — All Women.

Had no one else gone? Yes — a good many — but they never came back. It was no place for men — of that they seemed sure.

I told the boys about these stories, and they laughed at them. Naturally I did myself. I knew the stuff that savage dreams are made of.

But when we had reached our farthest point, just the day before we all had to turn around and start for home again, as the best of expeditions must in time, we three made a discovery.

The main encampment was on a spit of land running out into the main stream, or what we thought was the main stream. It had the same muddy color we had been seeing for weeks past, the same taste.

I happened to speak of that river to our last guide, a rather superior fellow with quick, bright eyes.

He told me that there was another river — “over there, short river, sweet water, red and blue.”

I was interested in this and anxious to see if I had understood, so I showed him a red and blue pencil I carried, and asked again.

Yes, he pointed to the river, and then to the southwestward. “River — good water — red and blue.”

Terry was close by and interested in the fellow’s pointing.

“What does he say, Van?”

I told him.

Terry blazed up at once.

“Ask him how far it is.”

The man indicated a short journey; I judged about two hours, maybe three.

“Let’s go,” urged Terry. “Just us three. Maybe we can really find something. May be cinnabar in it.”

“May be indigo,” Jeff suggested, with his lazy smile.

It was early yet; we had just breakfasted; and leaving word that we’d be back before night, we got away quietly, not wishing to be thought too gullible if we failed, and secretly hoping to have some nice little discovery all to ourselves.

It was a long two hours, nearer three. I fancy the savage could have done it alone much quicker. There was a desperate tangle of wood and water and a swampy patch we never should have found our way across alone. But there was one, and I could see Terry, with compass and notebook, marking directions and trying to place landmarks.

We came after a while to a sort of marshy lake, very big, so that the circling forest looked quite low and dim across it. Our guide told us that boats could go from there to our camp — but “long way — all day.”

This water was somewhat clearer than that we had left, but we could not judge well from the margin. We skirted it for another half

hour or so, the ground growing firmer as we advanced, and presently we turned the corner of a wooded promontory and saw a quite different country — a sudden view of mountains, steep and bare.

“One of those long easterly spurs,” Terry said appraisingly. “May be hundreds of miles from the range. They crop out like that.”

Suddenly we left the lake and struck directly toward the cliffs. We heard running water before we reached it, and the guide pointed proudly to his river.

It was short. We could see where it poured down a narrow vertical cataract from an opening in the face of the cliff. It was sweet water. The guide drank eagerly and so did we.

“That’s snow water,” Terry announced. “Must come from way back in the hills.”

But as to being red and blue — it was greenish in tint. The guide seemed not at all surprised. He hunted about a little and showed us a quiet marginal pool where there were smears of red along the border; yes, and of blue.

Terry got out his magnifying glass and squatted down to investigate.

“Chemicals of some sort — I can’t tell on the spot. Look to me like dyestuffs. Let’s get nearer,” he urged, “up there by the fall.”

We scrambled along the steep banks and got close to the pool that foamed and boiled beneath the falling water. Here we searched the border and found traces of color beyond dispute. More — Jeff suddenly held up an unlooked-for trophy.

It was only a rag, a long, raveled fragment of cloth. But it was a well-woven fabric, with a pattern, and of a clear scarlet that the water had not faded. No savage tribe that we had heard of made such fabrics.

The guide stood serenely on the bank, well pleased with our excitement.

“One day blue — one day red — one day green,” he told us, and pulled from his pouch another strip of bright-hued cloth.

“Come down,” he said, pointing to the cataract. “Woman Country — up there.”

Then we were interested. We had our rest and lunch right there and pumped the man for further information. He could tell us only what the others had — a land of women — no men — babies, but all girls. No place for men — dangerous. Some had gone to see — none had come back.

I could see Terry’s jaw set at that. No place for men? Dangerous? He looked as if he might shin up the waterfall on the spot. But the guide would not hear of going up, even if there had been any possible method of scaling that sheer cliff, and we had to get back to our party before night.

“They might stay if we told them,” I suggested.

But Terry stopped in his tracks. “Look here, fellows,” he said. “This is our find. Let’s not tell those cocky old professors. Let’s go on home with ’em, and then come back — just us — have a little expedition of our own.”

We looked at him, much impressed. There was something attractive to a bunch of unattached young men in finding an undiscovered country of a strictly Amazonian nature.

Of course we didn’t believe the story — but yet!

“There is no such cloth made by any of these local tribes,” I announced, examining those rags with great care. “Somewhere up yonder they spin and weave and dye — as well as we do.”

“That would mean a considerable civilization, Van. There couldn’t be such a place — and not known about.”

“Oh, well, I don’t know. What’s that old republic up in the

Pyrenees somewhere — Andorra? Precious few people know anything about that, and it's been minding its own business for a thousand years. Then there's Montenegro — splendid little state — you could lose a dozen Montenegroes up and down these great ranges.”

We discussed it hotly all the way back to camp. We discussed it with care and privacy on the voyage home. We discussed it after that, still only among ourselves, while Terry was making his arrangements.

He was hot about it. Lucky he had so much money — we might have had to beg and advertise for years to start the thing, and then it would have been a matter of public amusement — just sport for the papers.

But T. O. Nicholson could fix up his big steam yacht, load his specially-made big motorboat aboard, and tuck in a “dissembled” biplane without any more notice than a snip in the society column.

We had provisions and preventives and all manner of supplies. His previous experience stood him in good stead there. It was a very complete little outfit.

We were to leave the yacht at the nearest safe port and go up that endless river in our motorboat, just the three of us and a pilot; then drop the pilot when we got to that last stopping place of the previous party, and hunt up that clear water stream ourselves.

The motorboat we were going to leave at anchor in that wide shallow lake. It had a special covering of fitted armor, thin but strong, shut up like a clamshell.

“Those natives can't get into it, or hurt it, or move it,” Terry explained proudly. “We'll start our flier from the lake and leave the boat as a base to come back to.”

“If we come back,” I suggested cheerfully.

“'Fraid the ladies will eat you?” he scoffed.

“We’re not so sure about those ladies, you know,” drawled Jeff. “There may be a contingent of gentlemen with poisoned arrows or something.”

“You don’t need to go if you don’t want to,” Terry remarked drily.

“Go? You’ll have to get an injunction to stop me!” Both Jeff and I were sure about that.

But we did have differences of opinion, all the long way.

An ocean voyage is an excellent time for discussion. Now we had no eavesdroppers, we could loll and loaf in our deck chairs and talk and talk — there was nothing else to do. Our absolute lack of facts only made the field of discussion wider.

“We’ll leave papers with our consul where the yacht stays,” Terry planned. “If we don’t come back in — say a month — they can send a relief party after us.”

“A punitive expedition,” I urged. “If the ladies do eat us we must make reprisals.”

“They can locate that last stopping place easy enough, and I’ve made a sort of chart of that lake and cliff and waterfall.”

“Yes, but how will they get up?” asked Jeff.

“Same way we do, of course. If three valuable American citizens are lost up there, they will follow somehow — to say nothing of the glittering attractions of that fair land — let’s call it ‘Feminisia,’” he broke off.

“You’re right, Terry. Once the story gets out, the river will crawl with expeditions and the airships rise like a swarm of mosquitoes.” I laughed as I thought of it. “We’ve made a great mistake not to let Mr. Yellow Press in on this. Save us! What headlines!”

“Not much!” said Terry grimly. “This is our party. We’re going to find that place alone.”

“What are you going to do with it when you do find it — if you do?” Jeff asked mildly.

Jeff was a tender soul. I think he thought that country — if there was one — was just blossoming with roses and babies and canaries and tidies, and all that sort of thing.

And Terry, in his secret heart, had visions of a sort of sublimated summer resort — just Girls and Girls and Girls — and that he was going to be — well, Terry was popular among women even when there were other men around, and it’s not to be wondered at that he had pleasant dreams of what might happen. I could see it in his eyes as he lay there, looking at the long blue rollers slipping by, and fingering that impressive mustache of his.

But I thought — then — that I could form a far clearer idea of what was before us than either of them.

“You’re all off, boys,” I insisted. “If there is such a place — and there does seem some foundation for believing it — you’ll find it’s built on a sort of matriarchal principle, that’s all. The men have a separate cult of their own, less socially developed than the women, and make them an annual visit — a sort of wedding call. This is a condition known to have existed — here’s just a survival. They’ve got some peculiarly isolated valley or tableland up there, and their primeval customs have survived. That’s all there is to it.”

“How about the boys?” Jeff asked.

“Oh, the men take them away as soon as they are five or six, you see.”

“And how about this danger theory all our guides were so sure of?”

“Danger enough, Terry, and we’ll have to be mighty careful. Women of that stage of culture are quite able to defend themselves and have no welcome for unseasonable visitors.”

We talked and talked.

And with all my airs of sociological superiority I was no nearer than any of them.

It was funny though, in the light of what we did find, those extremely clear ideas of ours as to what a country of women would be like. It was no use to tell ourselves and one another that all this was idle speculation. We were idle and we did speculate, on the ocean voyage and the river voyage, too.

“Admitting the improbability,” we’d begin solemnly, and then launch out again.

“They would fight among themselves,” Terry insisted. “Women always do. We mustn’t look to find any sort of order and organization.”

“You’re dead wrong,” Jeff told him. “It will be like a nunnery under an abbess — a peaceful, harmonious sisterhood.”

I snorted derision at this idea.

“Nuns, indeed! Your peaceful sisterhoods were all celibate, Jeff, and under vows of obedience. These are just women, and mothers, and where there’s motherhood you don’t find sisterhood — not much.”

“No, sir — they’ll scrap,” agreed Terry. “Also we mustn’t look for inventions and progress; it’ll be awfully primitive.”

“How about that cloth mill?” Jeff suggested.

“Oh, cloth! Women have always been spinsters. But there they stop — you’ll see.”

We joked Terry about his modest impression that he would be warmly received, but he held his ground.

“You’ll see,” he insisted. “I’ll get solid with them all — and play one bunch against another. I’ll get myself elected king in no time — whew! Solomon will have to take a back seat!”

“Where do we come in on that deal?” I demanded. “Aren’t we Viziers or anything?”

“Couldn’t risk it,” he asserted solemnly. “You might start a revolution — probably would. No, you’ll have to be beheaded, or bowstrung — or whatever the popular method of execution is.”

“You’d have to do it yourself, remember,” grinned Jeff. “No husky black slaves and mamelukes! And there’d be two of us and only one of you — eh, Van?”

Jeff’s ideas and Terry’s were so far apart that sometimes it was all I could do to keep the peace between them. Jeff idealized women in the best Southern style. He was full of chivalry and sentiment, and all that. And he was a good boy; he lived up to his ideals.

You might say Terry did, too, if you can call his views about women anything so polite as ideals. I always liked Terry. He was a man’s man, very much so, generous and brave and clever; but I don’t think any of us in college days was quite pleased to have him with our sisters. We weren’t very stringent, heavens no! But Terry was “the limit.” Later on — why, of course a man’s life is his own, we held, and asked no questions.

But barring a possible exception in favor of a not impossible wife, or of his mother, or, of course, the fair relatives of his friends, Terry’s idea seemed to be that pretty women were just so much game and homely ones not worth considering.

It was really unpleasant sometimes to see the notions he had.

But I got out of patience with Jeff, too. He had such rose-colored halos on his womenfolks. I held a middle ground, highly scientific, of course, and used to argue learnedly about the physiological limitations of the sex.

We were not in the least “advanced” on the woman question, any of us, then.

So we joked and disputed and speculated, and after an interminable journey, we got to our old camping place at last.

It was not hard to find the river, just poking along that side till we came to it, and it was navigable as far as the lake.

When we reached that and slid out on its broad glistening bosom, with that high gray promontory running out toward us, and the straight white fall clearly visible, it began to be really exciting.

There was some talk, even then, of skirting the rock wall and seeking a possible footway up, but the marshy jungle made that method look not only difficult but dangerous.

Terry dismissed the plan sharply.

“Nonsense, fellows! We’ve decided that. It might take months — we haven’t got the provisions. No, sir — we’ve got to take our chances. If we get back safe — all right. If we don’t, why, we’re not the first explorers to get lost in the shuffle. There are plenty to come after us.”

So we got the big biplane together and loaded it with our scientifically compressed baggage: the camera, of course; the glasses; a supply of concentrated food. Our pockets were magazines of small necessities, and we had our guns, of course — there was no knowing what might happen.

Up and up and up we sailed, way up at first, to get “the lay of the land” and make note of it.

Out of that dark green sea of crowding forest this high-standing spur rose steeply. It ran back on either side, apparently, to the far-off white-crowned peaks in the distance, themselves probably inaccessible.

“Let’s make the first trip geographical,” I suggested. “Spy out the land, and drop back here for more gasoline. With your tremendous

speed we can reach that range and back all right. Then we can leave a sort of map on board — for that relief expedition.”

“There’s sense in that,” Terry agreed. “I’ll put off being king of Ladyland for one more day.”

So we made a long skirting voyage, turned the point of the cape which was close by, ran up one side of the triangle at our best speed, crossed over the base where it left the higher mountains, and so back to our lake by moonlight.

“That’s not a bad little kingdom,” we agreed when it was roughly drawn and measured. We could tell the size fairly by our speed. And from what we could see of the sides — and that icy ridge at the back end — “It’s a pretty enterprising savage who would manage to get into it,” Jeff said.

Of course we had looked at the land itself — eagerly, but we were too high and going too fast to see much. It appeared to be well forested about the edges, but in the interior there were wide plains, and everywhere parklike meadows and open places.

There were cities, too; that I insisted. It looked — well, it looked like any other country — a civilized one, I mean.

We had to sleep after that long sweep through the air, but we turned out early enough next day, and again we rose softly up the height till we could top the crowning trees and see the broad fair land at our pleasure.

“Semitropical. Looks like a first-rate climate. It’s wonderful what a little height will do for temperature.” Terry was studying the forest growth.

“Little height! Is that what you call little?” I asked. Our instruments measured it clearly. We had not realized the long gentle rise from the coast perhaps.

“Mighty lucky piece of land, I call it,” Terry pursued. “Now for the folks — I’ve had enough scenery.”

So we sailed low, crossing back and forth, quartering the country as we went, and studying it. We saw — I can’t remember now how much of this we noted then and how much was supplemented by our later knowledge, but we could not help seeing this much, even on that excited day — a land in a state of perfect cultivation, where even the forests looked as if they were cared for; a land that looked like an enormous park, only it was even more evidently an enormous garden.

“I don’t see any cattle,” I suggested, but Terry was silent. We were approaching a village.

I confess that we paid small attention to the clean, well-built roads, to the attractive architecture, to the ordered beauty of the little town. We had our glasses out; even Terry, setting his machine for a spiral glide, clapped the binoculars to his eyes.

They heard our whirring screw. They ran out of the houses — they gathered in from the fields, swift-running light figures, crowds of them. We stared and stared until it was almost too late to catch the levers, sweep off and rise again; and then we held our peace for a long run upward.

“Gosh!” said Terry, after a while.

“Only women there — and children,” Jeff urged excitedly.

“But they look — why, this is a *civilized* country!” I protested. “There must be men.”

“Of course there are men,” said Terry. “Come on, let’s find ’em.”

He refused to listen to Jeff’s suggestion that we examine the country further before we risked leaving our machine.

“There’s a fine landing place right there where we came over,”

he insisted, and it was an excellent one — a wide, flat-topped rock, overlooking the lake, and quite out of sight from the interior.

“They won’t find this in a hurry,” he asserted, as we scrambled with the utmost difficulty down to safer footing. “Come on, boys — there were some good lookers in that bunch.”

Of course it was unwise of us.

It was quite easy to see afterward that our best plan was to have studied the country more fully before we left our swooping airship and trusted ourselves to mere foot service. But we were three young men. We had been talking about this country for over a year, hardly believing that there was such a place, and now — we were in it.

It looked safe and civilized enough, and among those upturned, crowding faces, though some were terrified enough, there was great beauty — on that we all agreed.

“Come on!” cried Terry, pushing forward. “Oh, come on! Here goes for Herland!”

**End of
sample**

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