A Woman's Confession of Her Real Attitude Toward a Growing Vice of Her Sex

By Lois Lee

"WILL mademoiselle have a cigarette?" asked the old French gentleman sitting opposite me at dessert. It was said with the utmost gravity and respect.

Shades of my Puritan grandmothers! A cigarette?

"Thank you, monsieur, but I have never——"

In the midst of my disavowal there suddenly arose before me, across a wide decade, the memory of a tiny garret bedroom whither my naughty twin sister and I had fled with two of the obnoxious little articles concealed under our aprons. We were scarcely 18 and still under parental authority. After locking the door we drew them forth in delightful awe and guiltiness, and laid them down in a gingerly manner on the edge of the table as though they were firecrackers. Then while my accomplice procured some matches I stopped up the keyhole and put a board over the broken window.

"Now," she exclaimed triumphantly, striking a masculine attitude and a match at the same time. But it didn't go.

"I guess girls aren't built that way," she grudgingly admitted after a few more futile efforts, and applied it to the under surface of the bureau's marble top.

With some difficulty we each got "a light," and after two or three tentative puffs were so startled at our success that we laid the little infernal machines down again and looked at each other in a sort of terrified elation not unmixed with suspense. But not finding ourselves stricken down by divine wrath nor (more fearful thought) with nausea, we took them up once more. They had gone out, and another struggle was necessary to induce the exhalation of balmy fragrance, which this time was mingled with the odor of singed hair, while unwilling tears were forced from smarting eyes as the fumes arose vertically into them.

"Tip your head back," suggested my fellow sinner, seating herself before the glass to practice nonchalant gestures with her cigarette.

"Let's lie down, so as to be all ready if it makes us seasick," I faltered.

"Pooh!" she exclaimed, turning sidewise and elevating her small feet with some exertion to the top of an old Saratoga trunk. "'Tisn't going to, I don't believe. Let's be comfortable." And she blew a most enviable smoke wreath into the air above her curly head.

Quite overcome by this demonstration of skill and daring, I threw myself on the creaking old couch and for a few minutes took only enough whiffs to keep my cigarette from going out. There hovered before me the picture of Tom Sawyer and his white-faced comrades abruptly separating after their first smoke on the desert isle. I shut my eyes in dread and laid one hand against my diaphragm. Slowly a delicious drowsiness stole over me.

"Let's have another if we can get it," presently suggested my enterprising rival, who had already finished hers. "I don't blame the boys for smoking." And going to the window, she carefully buried the stub in a pot of geraniums.

"Neither do I; it's jolly," I responded lazily, putting another sofa pillow under my feet and beginning slowly and judiciously to inhale minute quantities of the smoke. I was drifting into a sea of forgetfulness. What mattered the unwashed dishes below stairs or the next week's algebra examination? I would surprise my English teacher with a prose poem about the lotus eaters, whose dreamy somnolence was mine. The air was blue. The world was full of peace.

"By the gods!" thundered a paternal voice from the entry, followed by a terrific pounding on the wooden partition and mother's startled step from the kitchen. "My dear, what are these girls of ours doing in here? Open the door!" And we obeyed.

The grave old Frenchman was still regarding me with a look of polite inquiry, and I found myself saying:

"Really, monsieur, I fear the result might prove fatal. It is rather risque for women, is it not?"

"It is as you think, mademoiselle. I know always my place among ladies." And he straightway changed the subject.

Not long after this I was again reminded of my youthful escapade; this time by a Polish savant, who without any apologies lit his cigarette at the dinner table and nonchalantly passed the case to me.

"Do Russian ladies always smoke?" I asked in surprise.

"Certainly, my ingenue, and plenty of other ladies, too. You really ought to learn if you would be a true bohemian."

The custom of smoking had spread surreptitiously much farther than I supposed. Some pursued their new amusement in deadly secret; some had married foreigners or widely traveled men who sanctioned it; others had no hesitation about taking a few dainty whiffs now and then in the company of gentlemen who were their guests, and one of these declared that she thought it a very much more dignified form of sociability than drinking champagne with them. A number of the strong minded placed it on a par with suffrage and other masculine privileges which they were resolved to exercise courageously and indiscriminately for the mere sake of showing the sterner sex that they were not longer to be trodden upon.

But nowhere did I find a woman who derived any soulful enjoyment from her new vagary. None claimed that it aided her digestion or calmed her nerves save one old southern mammy, who puffed away at a clay pipe in the seclusion of her back porch whenever she had "the misery in her head." In no other instance was any restfulness apparent during the operation. It was merely the delightful experience of tasting forbidden fruit, and the self-consciousness which mars feminine activity in many a worthier cause is here most lamentably made manifest.

Did you ever watch a girl hold a burning match? How different her nervous manipulation of it from the caressing and familiar touch of the masculine hand. The envied tyrant shelters it closely, yet without burning his fingers, and puts it out at just the right moment—not with a vague and ineffectual gyration that is likely to ignite his clothing, but with one fell blow, which is never so misdirected as to extinguish the newly kindled spark at the same time. The smoke never gets in his eyes, his cigar draws at the first or second trial and he serenely tosses the match away and resigns himself to bliss.

It is long since I sat vis a vis with the gallant old Frenchman and was considered unsophisticated by the cosmopolitan Pole. A revival of the question mooted then has caused a furore quite out of proportion to its actual importance. The superficial element of femininity in the ranks of "the upper ten" is seeking a little cheap notoriety by doing the unusual, and mere man, as of old, essays to retard the "brutalizing effect of emancipation upon lovely woman," who will soon have left him nothing he can call his own—not even his silver ash tray.

What Might Be

In the sanctum of an evening paper the managing editor—who comes in very late, by the way—is heard to remark that the women's clubs are responsible for it all, quite omitting to mention any of the things that men's clubs are responsible for. The society editor says that as a matter of policy she contemplates learning how, for it will give her the entree to a circle of interesting people and opportunities for exclusive writeups. The telegraph editor, who hails from Kentucky, sees in the present situation an opportunity for Uncle Sam to recoup the federal revenues lost through the abolition of the liquor traffic, since a doubling of the tobacco output is now practically assured, and he says that in case of war the country will be saved. One of the younger reporters is working up a bit of doggerel to head the divorce column in which he associates "cigarettes" and "suffragettes." He smokes 20 a day and his sweetheart has dismissed him in consequence. The proof reader says that the man who handles the exchanges has sent in the same jokes on the subject no less than four times within a fortnight, and the circulation manager announces a marked falling off in subscriptions among prominent church members because of the flippant tone in which so insidious a menace is treated in our editorial section. We have been a little short on miscellany, for the enterprising apprentice threw our last installment of new plate matter in with the type metal day before yesterday, and we have no local story featured for next Sunday's edition. My chief, having heard the circulation manager's comment, asks me to furnish the necessary "dope" in the shape of a censorious article setting forth the proposition in uncompromising mathematical guise, thus:

If a given number of our feminine population persist in smoking 16 cigarettes a day, how long will it take them to consume enough to reach, if laid end to end, from New York to San Francisco? How many yards of substantial dress goods could be bought with the money expended by a hostess in treating 11 of her feminine intimates weekly throughout the year to this form of entertainment at whist parties, it being assumed that none but the choicest brands are tolerated by milady? How many garments could be made for the children of the poor if these sessions were consecrated to the diligent use of the thimble? And how many times more feminine would it not be to procure a smoking jacket for her lord with the accumulated coin? How long would it take to provide a sufficient sum for the completion of a new municipal building if the present deficiency in the public coffers were to be made good by the salutary confiscation of the funds apportioned to the purchase of the fragrant weed by every fair devotee in the local 400? How many unsewed masculine buttons will be represented by the time consumed each week in learning to roll the Mexican pitillos on the basis of 20 minutes to each of the latter five times a day, exclusive of Sundays? If the more expensive and powerful cheroot be adopted by the candidate for advanced honors in this new and dangerous cult, what will be the average annual cost per capita for complexion remedies and breath purifiers? As for the degenerate adept who has purloined the art of compounding Turkish blends and brazenly revels in the employment of an artificial maker for sheathing them, to the complete obfuscation of housewifely conscience and the desolation of the nursery, her speedy downfall is a matter of geometrical progression, to be figured out by the most casual observer. If a man is to be ruthlessly harassed 366 times during one year in his legitimate privilege of seeking balm for his shattered nerves at the end of the fatiguing day by his wife's insistence upon doing the same thing, what must be the fortnightly ratio of his diminishing affection? If it be incumbent upon the already overburdened head of the house to stand the expense of duplicating costly mouthpieces of amber, Morocco leather cases and velvet smoking caps, the depletion of his private purse cannot be made good in time for the season of Easter shopping. Even the item of matches will have its weight when considered en masse, as it were, for we must deal not only with the women of California, but with the feminine population of the United States, and, it is to be feared, of the entire world. The city editor, who is of a very sympathetic turn for so busy a man, has brought me his annual statistician and a differential calculus, also a tube of menthol which a pretty little deaconess left in the other office yesterday.

Dreams and Memories

The thing is done, and will be run, double leaded, on the first page of the supplement, with illustrations. Today's issue is already going to press. The foreman has long since ceased yelling "Copy!" The managing editor's wife called for him an hour ago in their automobile. The clicking of the telegraph instrument is stilled and the manipulator thereof gone to an Italian dinner with his chum. The solitary cub reporter is on duty at the telephone to keep up live connections with the morgue and the police station until the last moment, and has impersonally inquired why it is that women are so hard on a man when what he most needs is sympathy and forgiveness. I am inwardly revolving a converse proposition, for which biting menthol offers no solution. The air of these inner rooms is stifling and my brain is numb. Another nerve racking week is drawing to a close, with no advance in pay, no improvement in the weather, no letters, no friends near at hand, no social diners in prospect, no home, no money with which to entertain neighbors or colleagues; in short, nothing to relieve the grind. If one could but slip away into Nirvana for a little space! Back over the years memory speeds to the tiny garret bedroom, with its primitive furnishings and flowering plants. Again the quiet seclusion, the restful abandon, the blissful contemplation are mine as in fancy I watch the diaphanous clouds of fragrant smoke float just above my head.

The door behind me swings open and a small package is tossed over my shoulder on my Sunday copy. "Good night and pleasant dreams!" calls he of the menthol and the differential calculus, and is gone ere I can reply. The little box bears a Turkish emblem and contains a dozen. A swift inventory of my cramped apartment uptown recalls an old easy chair and a sumptuous lounging robe, a pot of geraniums in the window and a coil of oriental punk yet unburned, the fumes of which will preclude the need of explanation. The package is swept into my grip, the roller top is closed upon the annual statistician, the world is left behind. Once more I hie me to the realm of sweet oblivion and know again the uplifting calm of my first cigarette!