

# Easy and Fun: Elin Wägner's Light-Hearted Articles in the *Helsingborg Post*

## Helena Forsås-Scott

introduced and with translated extracts by  
Sarah Death

With a mixture of pleasure and heavy heart I introduce this, the last of Helena Forsås-Scott's many collaborative projects for *Swedish Book Review*. Fortunately we had already agreed to do this project together and discussed which columns I would translate before she was diagnosed with leukaemia last year, and even as her health deteriorated she completed her part of the work with impressive steadfastness. I hope it will cheer those who miss her friendship and huge store of knowledge that her last published piece is about the early creative steps of one of the authors whose work she truly admired.

Helena and I struggled to find a pithy translation for the neat Swedish *kåseri* (causerie, light-hearted column or sketch) so I have experimented with a number of variations. The pseudonym 'Cafour', used by Wägner for the two columns which follow the essay below, goes back to an Arabic word meaning 'all-forgiving'. An earlier pseudonym Wägner used in her columns, 'Pytia' (Pythia), was the name of the priestess better known as the Oracle at Delphi.

My thanks to Linda Schenck for reading and commenting on drafts of the article and translations.

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Today the Swedish writer Elin Wägner (1882-1949) is known as a radical pacifist and pioneering ecofeminist. But she began her career as a journalist on a conservative newspaper.

In an article written to mark the 50th anniversary of *Helsingborgs-Posten*, in 1938, Wägner played down her work at the paper during the first few years of the twentieth century, claiming that she had been of little use due to her lack of experience and training. By the late 1930s she had established herself as one of Sweden's leading writers, the author of more than twenty novels and also a prominent journalist and essayist. The remarkable ecofeminist

Elin Wägner as a young journalist in the offices of *Helsingborgs-Posten*.

Photo credit:  
Kvinnsam (formerly  
Kvinnohistoriska  
samlingarna),  
Gothenburg  
University Library



essay *Väckarklocka* (Alarm Clock) was to appear in 1941 and the acclaimed biography of Selma Lagerlöf in 1942-43. But when Wägner, commenting in 1938 on her light-hearted columns in *Helsingborgs-Posten*, maintained that in so far as they were still of interest, it was because of their flavour of the era when they were written, she clearly was not doing justice to her work. It is not just the irony and satire that make many of them worth reading today: some of them also convey ideas that are both bold and provocative (and still strikingly relevant), especially in light of the political stance of the paper that published them.

Wägner's first contribution to *Helsingborgs-Posten* was a short story published under the signature 'Ingen' (Nobody) in August 1901, when she was just nineteen. Later that year, she began to review books, and in late 1902 she signed a permanent contract. She was to stay until spring 1904.

In summer 1903, Helsingborg hosted a big industrial exhibition, and if we are to believe Wägner's article of 1938, it was this event that saved her as a journalist despite her inexperience: she spent the winter and spring writing about the preparations and then the summer writing about the displays, stand by stand – with the exception of those featuring hard liquor and tobacco which she, in the opinion of her male colleagues, was not qualified to assess. But as we might suspect, Wägner is exaggerating. She actually wrote about a wide range of topics, including the local labour market, a visit to Helsingborg by Danish students, a home for mentally ill patients, women's suffrage meetings, the start of a new term at the town's High School (where her father was the headmaster), a widow with four children and no means of supporting them, the local hospital, and countless charity events.

It has been calculated that by 1913, almost a decade after Wägner left *Helsingborgs-Posten*, the proportion of female journalists in Stockholm had reached eleven per cent. Outside the capital, the figure would have been much lower, and Wägner did not have a single female colleague at the paper. But, she says in her article of 1938, her male colleagues showed her



Elin Wägner (centre) and two suffragette friends outside a newspaper kiosk.

Photo credit: Kvinnsam (formerly Kvinnohistoriska samlingsarna), Gothenburg University Library

nothing but solidarity. They would protect her when 'huge directors of bone meal factories or leaders of shooting associations', feeling offended by something she had written, arrived at the paper wanting to kill her. And while her male colleagues were often awfully sleepy at their desks in the mornings, she would turn up bright-eyed, bushy-tailed and always on time, and wake them up whenever she heard the footsteps of the editor-in-chief. More importantly, while Wägner was not to join the Swedish women's suffrage movement until 1908, many of her pieces in *Helsingborgs-Posten* clearly illustrate the point made by press scholar Birgitta Ney about the role of female journalists for women's emancipation around the turn of the century 1900: at a time when middle-class women were still largely confined to the home, the profession of the female journalist effectively provided a ticket to the public sphere.

The *kåseri*, or light-hearted column, a genre combining entertainment and influence, played a relatively important role during the first decade of Wägner's career. Following her sketches in *Helsingborgs-Posten* in 1902-04, she wrote a serial in the form of light columns for the humorous weekly *Puck* in 1907, and another serial, *Fru Hillevis dagbok* (Mrs Hillevis's Diary), for the upmarket women's weekly *Idun* (at which she was by then assistant editor-in-chief) in 1911-12. Birgitta Ney has argued that at this time, the light-hearted column often gave the female journalist a freedom she would not normally have, and this is certainly noticeable in some of Wägner's humorous sketches in *Helsingborgs-Posten* and also in the serial in *Puck*, which explored issues of gender in terms that were both bold and provocative.

Thanks to Elin Wägner's correspondence with Ruth Schnell, a friend from her school days, we are fairly well informed about aspects of her work at *Helsingborgs-Posten*, including her perspectives on writing light-hearted columns. In September 1902 she told Ruth that she had made her first attempt at such a column and sent it to the paper. If it were accepted, she said, she would quite like to continue in this genre 'because it's both easy and fun. You don't need to have anything to write about, it works fine all the same'. But by July 1903, when Wägner was employed at the paper and the industrial exhibition was in full swing, the task of producing the lighter pieces had become rather more onerous:

In addition, and for well over a month, I have had to write a light-hearted column under the title 'I Helsingborg' [In Helsingborg] every day. Not having tried it, you have no idea how difficult it is to find something every day. Life is a struggle for everybody, but most of all, I think, for journalists.

If Wägner sometimes struggled to find suitable topics, this is not apparent from the published columns. So what did she write about?

Not unexpectedly, the town of Helsingborg is central to many of these columns. With a population in 1900 of just over 24,500, it was big for a Swedish provincial town, and its position on the straits of Øresund also made it outward-looking: on 21 November 1903, Wägner devoted her sketch, still entitled 'In Helsingborg', to the ongoing household exhibition in Copenhagen. But it is the streetscapes of Helsingborg and also its surrounding areas that form the backbone of many of Wägner's witty columns. Her texts take us along streets with a range of shops, sometimes detailing the displays in the windows and, in one inspired piece, the monotony of the shop signs, with the author arguing for innovative shapes and bold colours. These closely observed streets are depicted in shifting light and at different seasons, with one column expanding on the bright winter weather and the red-cheeked spectators that 'E.W.' had planned to have as the framework of her text about Helsingborg's festival of winter sports in February 1903 – a festival that the unseasonably mild weather had reduced to water and mud.

Another cluster of pieces focuses on the columnist herself. The topics are sometimes trivial, as in the text about how she found herself in a blizzard wearing her new summer hat and caught a cold, but mostly they are rather more substantial. The ambition to write and get published is a recurring topic. In one column (24 Feb. 1903), signed by 'Pytia', one of Wägner's several pseudonyms in *Helsingborgs-Posten*, the author is appalled by the quality of some of the essays by school finalists a teacher friend of hers has just marked, only to be told that far too many of those who cannot write and/or have nothing to say go on to publish books nevertheless, having persuaded themselves that authorship is their vocation. No more than five weeks later, 'Pytia' published a column entitled 'Min bok' ('My Book', 3 April 1903), which has verbal echoes of the February column and sets out in no uncertain terms her ambition to write a book and get it published:

Initially my mind was reeling as I faced this lofty task, and it was only my conviction that I /.../ must not be responsible for keeping the world in ignorance of what I am feeling and thinking that kept me going ...

The exaggerations of this text combine with the exalted language to create a deeply ironical perspective on the columnist's ambitions. One of the light-hearted columns published later the same year, about a poor-looking man who comes to the newspaper offices asking to buy old newspapers to the value of 5 öre, develops a sobering perspective on the transience of journalistic writing.

Ten of Elin Wägner's columns from the period 1903-04 appeared in:  
*Både lätt och roligt. Elin Wägner kåserar i Helsingborgs-Posten*, (Easy and Fun. Elin Wägner's Sketches in the *Helsingborg Post*) edited and with an introduction by Helena Forsås-Scott. Elin Wägner Sällskapets Skriftserie, 25/2014.

Ney, Birgitta, *Reporter i rörelse. Lotten Ekman i dagspressen vid förra sekelskiftet* (Reporter in Motion. Lotten Ekman in the Daily Press at the Turn of the Last Century), Nya Doxa, 1999.

## 23 Nov. 1903

A mere month – then Christmas will be here. We all know very well what that means. It means piles of yuletide literature, more than ever this year, and heaps of Christmas magazines with all the usual stories about lost sons coming back to make a splash in the rice pudding on Christmas Eve, etc. It means all the shops avidly gearing up, and generally a great bustle all round.

And it means feverish embroidery within the world of women.

‘A month,’ we exclaim, with the air of those anticipating a prolonged sojourn in the underworld as soon as that period has elapsed, ‘a month, how am I to finish all my needlework?’ You count on your fingers: three tablecloths, five hangings, two egg cosies, nine newspaper holders, sixteen workbags – and one, just one, month.

To an outsider, the situation appears desperate. But in this case, as in so many others, the ladies prove to be possessed of exceptional energy. They set about the impossible, and they succeed. The sacrifice of their time, money, health and eyesight is of lesser importance. Rather than take the easy way out and reduce their embroidery workload.

I have often wondered why this is the case and can only assume that the ladies are convinced that the continuance of society, or at the very least the happiness and comfort of its homes, depends on the number of embroideries completed.

If they are right, all our homes will very soon be counted as miniature paradises. Admittedly, of course, even the most beautiful pieces of needlecraft are susceptible to the ravages of time, but whenever one is finally discarded – though that can take time, for ladies display a remarkable reverence for old embroidery – then seven more will immediately take its place.

If this continues for a period, our homes will in all probability be completely covered in embroidery, and if it goes on much longer than that, we will find ourselves embroidered out of our own rooms.

And as there is no prospect of the appetite for embroidery projects diminishing, we should be able to calculate approximately when we will attain the coming state of supreme and divine bliss.

Every Christmas is a major step on the way to achieving that aim.

Cafour

## 20 Feb. 1904

My partner at the dinner table informed me politely but firmly that he despised women.

‘Imagine that,’ I replied, a touch distracted.

He regarded me with the air of a little boy who has tried to provoke a dog on a chain and finds to his surprise that the wretched creature hasn’t the sense even to let itself be provoked.

So he repeated his words even more emphatically.

‘That’s rather a pity,’ I said – now awake – and added resignedly: ‘But I suppose we’ll have to try to bear it.’

‘I don’t exactly object to the idea of a woman existing,’ he said encouragingly,

having noted my dejection.

'I'm glad to hear it,' I replied with relief.

'In that respect,' he went on, 'I am not at all of the same mind as Tertullian, Father of the Church, who exclaimed: "O woman, you are the gateway to Hell". Although one does to some extent understand the feelings that led to his outburst. That is, *you* don't understand them. You, of course, like all other women, are totally lacking in self-knowledge and incapable of impartial judgment. I would wager that you delight in reading the prize specimens of women's protest literature, only to scream blue murder when anyone actually gives an impartial appraisal of your sex.'

'On the contrary,' I said, 'on the contrary. I would more than welcome an impartial appraisal of that kind. Please be so good as to begin.'

So he did.

'If we start with her intelligence, then, it is merely further proof of her foolishness that she attempts to set it on the same level as ours. I, at any rate – this said without any thought of self-promotion – have yet to meet a woman who is my equal in intelligence. I do not reproach them for it, nobody can help being endowed with meagre gifts, but nor should they then have expectations and make such sweeping claims to equality. This is what provokes the ire of men.'

'Oh yes, I understand very well. You mean that a little more modesty and humility – – –'

'Exactly so, exactly so. When one is of no better situation in life than that which gave rise to a statement such as – such as that made by Erasmus.'

'But perhaps I shouldn't quote it, as one who always insists on the greatest *courtoisie* towards the ladies.'

'Oh please, be my guest,' I said. 'What of Erasmus?'

"'Woman,'" Erasmus says – presumably you know who Erasmus was? – "is a foolish and silly creature, but nevertheless amusing and pleasant." It sounds a little uncharitable, perhaps, but you must remember that we agreed on an impartial appraisal.'

I smiled in assent.

'If we then move on to morality, I believe we can best elucidate the situation in the words of a Frenchman, La Bruyère, who maintains that "the majority of women have no principles of their own," and adds that they "depend for their own conduct upon that of the men they love". But I can see from your expression that you find that rather unpalatable.'

'One has to tell the truth, unpalatable or not,' I replied. 'But one might of course imagine that both times and women have changed for the better since the days of the gentlemen you are quoting. Tertullian – – –'

'Ah,' he said, 'if you are not convinced I can quote Goethe, Heine, Schopenhauer, Tegnér, Strindberg. Schopenhauer says – – –'

'Thanks,' I put in, 'you are too kind, but I don't think I can take much more for the time being. Thank you anyway, it was extremely interesting.'

He gave me a thoughtful look and said approvingly:

'You seem a very sensible person – for a woman.'

'Oh, come come,' I said in that conventional, self-deprecating way, but did not entirely succeed in concealing my satisfaction.