

## SPERANZA WILDE

Had Jane Frances Elgee, or Speranza as she preferred to be called, lived in St. Petersburg, and if her story had been told by a Russian novelist of some talent, it might well have been the basis for one of the great and romantic novels of the day. Alas, such was not to be the case. She resided in a provincial city and was not infrequently the subject of less than total admiration. Dublin did not have the austere intellectual grandeur of the imperial capital of the Romanov dynasty. Moreover, Speranza was thought by many of her contemporaries to be comical and only rarely grand. Speranza, like Dublin, had a stately side but also a certain shoddiness and lack of order.

Speranza was the pseudonym of Jane Frances Elgee. Not unlike film stars who were given names like Mary or Mildred and became Gloria or Bette and henceforth ceased to consider themselves merely as Mary or Mildred, so Jane Frances never really imagine herself to be anything but Speranza. She claimed to have been born in 1826 but this is not a certainty; as some evidence suggests that her actual birth was a couple of years earlier. Like many people in the last century and to some extent in this present one, she romanticized about her family and its background. She claimed descent from Dante Alighieri – Elgee being a corrupted version of the Italian poet's surname. In fact, her family came from Durham and had settled in County Louth in the 1730s. Her grandfather was a Church of Ireland clergyman and her father was a lawyer of no great distinction. Her mother's family, the Kingsburys, were part of the professional establishment in Dublin. The Elgees, far from being grand, were comfortable, middle class people with a settled position in society. They were not rich but neither were they poor and they lived agreeably in a pleasant house.

Jane Francesca or Speranza did not go to school, but rather was educated by a series of governesses who seemed to have been more than unusually competent for she was well grounded in the classics – she could read both Greek and Latin – and was fluent in French,

German and Italian. At an early age she apparently confided to a friend that it was her intention to be an author and to write on Irish topics.

When she was quite young her father died; she, her widowed mother, older sister and brother moved to Wexford where they lived in somewhat modest circumstances. The governesses vanished and Jane Francesca's formal education ceased. She read avidly, however, and, like many of her contemporaries, was influenced by the romantic poets, in particular Byron and Tom Moore. It was about this time that she began to call herself Speranza.

Her brother, John Elgee, felt he had few prospects in Wexford and he went to live in New York where he established himself as a lawyer, gained a good reputation and some affluence, being later appointed to the bench. Apparently he maintained only the most casual of contact with his family in Ireland for there are no obvious indications of his interest in their welfare.

At about the same time Mrs Elgee and her two daughters also left Wexford and returned to live in Dublin, taking a house in Lower Leeson Street. This was not a particularly grand part of the city but it was respectable. The Elgees were accepted anew into society, and the family enjoyed a pleasant enough existence.

Speranza was no beauty and was not what contemporary society would have considered feminine. She was not a dainty fragile figure but rather the reverse, nearly six feet in height, with flashing dark eyes and raven black hair. Her general appearance tended to overwhelm, and like Princess Mary of Cambridge, was referred to as "a great mountain of a girl."

Speranza's early literary activities appear to have been directly inspired by her reading of Thomas Davis's *The Spirit of the Nation*. As she noted, it was then that "I discovered I could write poetry." As "a later writer observed she had contracted the historic disease of the Irish; the urge to be a bard." Oscar Wilde, Speranza's son, declared that the poetic muse had been conjured up when she saw the sorrow of the people in Dublin following the coffin of Thomas Davis as it passed "the window of her lordly house." The account is problematic as that Speranza did not live in a "lordly house" and more, Davis's funeral did not pass along Leeson Street. Speranza's account was probably the true one, her son having always enjoyed providing "artistic verisimilitude to an otherwise bald but unconvincing narrative."

She sent her writings to *The Nation*, the principle organ of liberal and nationalistic ideas which was under the editorial leadership of Charles Gavin Duffy. Rather than use her own name, she used "Speranza" or "John Fanshawe Ellis" for her prose and poetry

submissions. Her reasons for so acting obviously arose from the fact that her family were “Protestant and Conservative and there was no social intercourse between them and the Catholics and the Nationalists.” Her contributions were all accepted, and her poetry seems to have enraptured her contemporaries – posterity may be more critical. *To Ireland* contains such lines as

I can but look in God’s great face,  
And pray Him for our fated race  
And . . . crown  
Some Prophet-Leader with command  
To break the strength of Egypt’s hand  
And set them free  
Beloved Ireland

In another ode she wrote:

Oh courage! And We, too will trample them down  
The memories of power, the serfs of a crown.

A critic noted approvingly, “Her poems are largely characterized by a certain epic or scriptural largeness of utterance – a sweeping and overmastering melody and a strain of majestic thought.”

Although appearing regularly as a contributor to *The Nation* she and the editor were unacquainted. Duffy finally invited “John Fanshawe Ellis” to visit him at his office but the latter resolutely declined to accept and proposed a meeting elsewhere suggesting instead a certain house in Leeson Street, Duffy was a bit surprised that the author seemed so elusive but did agree. When he was received into the house he was astonished to discover that there was no such person as John Fanshawe Ellis but instead a statuesque female named Jane Francesca Elgee. As an Ulsterman and a Roman Catholic Duffy was much impressed and was determined to cultivate her acquaintance.

From the summer of 1846 when Speranza and Duffy, met every issue of *The Nation* had something written by the former. The tone of both her prose and poetry – it was the latter that gave her a reputation – now became increasingly radical and more hostile to the government of the day. It is not known how her family reacted to her burgeoning literary career, though it certainly cannot have been overly pleasing to her very politically and socially conservative and conventional relations.

The distress caused by the famine and the failure to get the repeal of the union caused the young intellectuals to turn to more revolutionary attitudes. They founded “Young Ireland” modeling it on the ideas and principles of Mazzini in Italy. It was thought that if necessary physical

force would be used to gain Irish freedom, Speranza was among those who were infected with the new enthusiasms, leading her to write:

Oh! That my voice, a storm above all storms  
 Could leave the earth, air and ocean, rend the sky  
 With fierce shout, "To arms! To arms!"  
 For Truth, Rome, Freedom, Vengeance, Victory!

These same sentiments were subsequently expressed in prose "do we not see advancing from their solitude and isolation those pale young martyrs of enthusiasm with souls of flame?"

Speranza was all for violence and action. The February Revolution in France sounded the tocsin, and the articles on *The Nation* became more radical. Charles Gavin Duffy was arrested. His friends were determined to carry on his work and Speranza was eager to assist. She wrote two articles, one entitled "The Hour of Destiny" and the second and the more inflammatory "Jacta Alea Est."

We appeal to the whole Irish Nation – is there a man amongst us who wishes to take one further step on the base patch of sufferance and slavery? . . . Now is the moment to test whether you value most freedom or life. Now is the moment to strike. . . . We must show the world we are fitted to govern ourselves . . . that we have not alone to break the fetters of Ireland but to raise her to a glorious elevation – defend her, liberate her, enable her, sanctify her.

Read a century and a half later this sounds somewhat preposterous but when published its effect was almost magical. Speranza gained the applause of her fellow liberals but others had to cope with the consequences of her strident clamourings. Duffy was charged with treason as were certain others of his circle; yet for some unknown reason Jane Francesca Elgee was not among them. Perhaps the authorities really thought little of her outpourings; alternatively, they perhaps recognized that she craved martyrdom and this was the last thing the government wanted. Certainly they were more sensible than they knew, for in 1916 following the Easter Rebellion some women were charged equally with the men and public reaction in London was not sympathetic and this weakened the position of the authorities.

Duffy's trial began on 15 February 1849. The government behaved abominably, "the Castle" was extremely inept and high handed. In the course of the proceedings inevitably the question of "Jacta Alea Est" was inevitably brought into evidence. What occurred at this juncture is unclear. The official version is that Speranza was prohibited from

saying anything. The second, more romantic, version, is that indeed she stood up and announced to the judge, lawyers and jury, "I alone am the culprit. I wrote the articles." If she did interrupt the official trial no notice was taken of it, and the crown and its agents pretended no outburst had taken place. Speranza may well have believed that by so doing she could serve Duffy, but her action was totally disregarded. Unlike Madame Roland in France she was not to be able to say "Oh liberty what crimes are committed in thy name!" Although Duffy was not convicted, *The Nation* as the organ of liberty was finished and Speranza as the voice of revolution was silenced. Despite that Speranza had briefly been a true Nationalist heroine. However, a new role was to be assumed that would bring her acclaim but of a very different sort and in the intellectual and social world, not that of politics. She accepted the failure of "Young Ireland" as a cause and replaced it in her enthusiasm for that of the patroness of the arts.

In 1851 she married William Wilde. How she came to meet him initially is uncertain. It has been suggested that their first encounter was that of patient to doctor. William Wilde was thirty-six and he had been born in Roscommon. Like the Elgees, the Wildes embellished their forebears and, like the former, the latter were fairly ordinary and English. William Wilde went to the local school and lived in a world that still had within it many of the elements so aptly described by Maria Edgeworth. In 1832 he began his medical studies and five years later he was granted his licentiate in surgery. As a student he had been far from a model of sobriety and propriety. On the contrary, he had several mistresses and had fathered a son who took the name of Henry Wilson and later became his assistant.

William Wilde was subject to attacks of asthma, and a friend named Robert Meiklam who had a yacht invited him to take a Mediterranean holiday. Wilde accepted with enthusiasm – the tour was of some months' duration – and as he was an amateur and enthusiastic archaeologist he vastly enjoyed seeing the ruins of classic antiquity. When he returned to Dublin he began his medical practice which was soon to be most successful. He also wrote about his travels and his studies as well as medical treatises which made him prominent in intellectual circles. Moreover, as a well-known doctor, he was received in the best society.

One drawing room that he frequented was that of the Elgee family in Leeson Street. It has been suggested that Wilde seduced Speranza and that she became his mistress. Yeats avowed that such was the case, and this might well account for the absence of her family when she and Wilde were married in November 1851. They were to make an incongruous couple – she was enormous and dramatic, he was

minute and rational – and when they were seen in public a certain amount of discreet laughter was heard. He was thirty-six when he married, she officially a decade younger. Although she was quite aware of her spouse's reputation, she accepted the situation because she was glad to have a husband and enjoyed a changed social position since the role of parlour revolutionary had rather paled.

Speranza's friends and contemporaries regarded the marriage as a satisfactory one for all concerned. She would now have a proper establishment (her lack of a fortune being compensated for by her husband's success as a medical man), and her role as a patroness of liberal and patriotic causes could now be replaced by the arts and literature. Wilde too would benefit, as he was rather past the age to continue to play the role of the bachelor libertine. He felt that it was quite time he had a proper home-life. He now had an educated and fairly sophisticated wife, an agreeable companion who would applaud his intellectual pursuits. The benefits to both did accrue.

The newly wedded couple did not go on a honeymoon, preferring to settle immediately in Wilde's house at 21 Westland Row. The following summer the couple went to Scandinavia. They visited Denmark and found its capital charming. Wilde was well known for his scholarly activities and when he went to Sweden the king of that country made him a Knight of the Polar Star, and Uppsala University gave him an honorary degree. They made an excursion to Oslo which they thought simple and unaffected. Speranza was to say "The Norse are democrats, the Swedes courtiers and the Danes artistic Bohemians".

As a coda to their trip the couple visited Prussia, which they liked less. The Germans she thought dull, commenting that those "who live on beer and cheese, are not, and never can be, politically dangerous." Obviously she was less perceptive in her comments on the Prussians than on the Scandinavians. While traveling, Speranza made copious notes about what she and her husband had seen and whom they had met. In later years the notes were expanded and appeared in book form as *The Glacier Land*. This volume was one of those popular travel books seemingly so beloved in Victorian times. Indeed almost every well known author of the day was to write at least one and many lesser figures did likewise. If travel were denied to the vast majority it was possible to enjoy "foreign parts" at least vicariously. *The Glacier Land* may well be Speranza's best literary effort. It sold well and the critic, Edmund Gosse, commented on it later, "It obviously retains far more vitality than any other work of this fervid authoress."

The salon she established flourished and most of Dublin society at one time or another were to be found in Speranza's drawing-room.

This was particularly to be the case when the Wildes moved to Merrion Square. Of the host and hostess an habituee was to write

Had she been cleaned up and plainly and rationally dressed [she] would have made a remarkably fine model of the *Grande Dame*, but with all her paint and tinsel and tawdry tragedy-queen get up she was a walking burlesque. . . . [He] resembled a monkey, a miserable looking little creature, who apparently unshorn looked as if he had been rolling in the dust. . . .

However, she had chosen a style of dress she thought suitable to her role, an example of this being that she eschewed corsets as being unsuitable for a literary lady. She wore the brightest of colours and flowing scarves, festooned with lace, sometimes a crown of laurels, and much jewellery. On one occasion “on her broad chest were fastened a series of large brooches evidently family portraits . . . and gave her the appearance of a perambulating family mausoleum.” She made an effective appearance and more so in “rooms lit by lamps and candles . . . [which were] shuttered and closely curtained even in the afternoon when the sun was shining out of doors.” The whole place was a sort of oriental bazaar and people who would never meet elsewhere were to be found in Speranza’s company on her “Saturdays.” She said, “It is quite simple. All one has to do is to get all sorts of people – but no dull specimens – and take care to mix them. Don’t trouble about their morals. It doesn’t matter they haven’t any.” It has to be recognized that male company was preferred. “I can’t stand girls or women,” she remarked. “They are so flimsy, frivolous, feeble in purpose. . . .” She expressed her distaste for those who lived “a life of vacuity, inanity, vanity, absurdity and idleness. . . .” Like her famous son she could dismiss those she did not like by saying they were insignificant and as such,

should only say what they are expected to say, and never talk of themselves, their children, servants, domestic cares or their ailments except to the doctor who is paid for listening simply because society does not in the least care for the insignificant. . . .

On another occasion when the word “respectable” was used she said

You must never use that description in my house. Only tradespeople are respectable. We are above respectability.

The social whirl was temporarily suspended when her elder son, William, was born late in 1852, followed two years later by a second

son, Oscar. Describing the situation she said "A Joan of Arc was never meant for marriage, and so here I am, bound heart and soul to the home hearth. Behold me, Speranza, rocking a cradle. . . ." She had hoped her second child would be a girl and she tended to treat her younger son rather like a daughter in his early years, which may have been part of the origins of his own sexual proclivities.

One of Speranza's admirers was Sir William Rowan-Hamilton, an amateur literateur and eminent scientist, and he was selected as god-father of the second infant. Rowan-Hamilton was also god-father to a grandson of Wordsworth, a poet whom Speranza particularly liked, and this was one of the bases of her proposal. Rowan-Hamilton declined the invitation but he was willing to be the recipient of her confidences and to act as a critic of sorts on her writings. She shrewdly played on his sentiments in a fashion that was calculated to flatter. "She won my heart very soon," he said, "by praising what she had seen of the poems of my deceased sister: whom she placed above Mrs. Hemans, but below Mrs. Browning." Her lengthy poem *Shadows from Life* he praised, and he extolled Speranza to his friends who gradually began to see her as he did. One of Rowan-Hamilton's friends, Aubrey de Vere, said that Speranza's verse was one of the special attributes of Irish national life, commenting, "For the sake both of poetry and old Ireland . . . [she must] go on writing . . . [for she had] that rare thing poetic genius." She believed herself to be something special exaggerating whatever was unusual about Speranza. A visitor to the salon, Henriette Corboran, wrote, "I've never, before or since met anyone in the least like Lady Wilde. Altogether she struck me as an odd mixture of nonsense, with a sprinkling of genius. . . ." As Rowan-Hamilton summed up his good friend nicely, "She likes to make a sensation. . . ."

In 1853 Speranza translated a novel by Marie Schwab – earlier she had translated Meinhold's *Sidonia the Sorceress* and Larmartine's *Pictures from the First French Revolution*. It was published under the title *The First Temptation* and, in fictional form, discussed the ideas of Straus and Hegel. It was thought to be very advanced in its opinions in that it rejected orthodox Christianity and advocated free thought. For young minds such a book was considered unsuitable and Speranza was criticized for purveying immoral ideas. She was quite unmoved by this reaction, believing herself to be an intellectual. Her friend, Rowan-Hamilton, was not among those who reacted negatively to her writings and she believed his comments on her work essential for her continued creativity, adding, "I am never happier than with such thoughts as you send me in all forms. Sometimes they bring tears, sometimes strength. I never 'tire' of what ministers to the mental



life. . . .” As a consequence of her vision of herself a spate of poems were published in the *Dublin University Magazine* and the *Hibernian Magazine*, many of which were to appear later in a collected volume with the title *Poems by Speranza*.

William Wilde was now one of Dublin’s most successful medical practitioners. He founded the *Dublin Quarterly Journal of Medical Science* and published significant papers on diseases of the eye. He also found time to catalogue the contents of the Royal Irish Academy – resulting in a voluminous work of three volumes – and to write as well on other varied subjects. He had accepted the post of medical commissioner for the Irish census and in 1851 he wrote the blue book *The Epidemics of Ireland* which recorded the various pestilences which had been noted in the country from very early days. He received much praise for his effort and indirectly it was one of the reasons for his knighthood.

Speranza, who in her youth had rejected Dublin Castle and all that it stood for, had now mellowed, and approved of her husband’s appointment as Surgeon Occulist in Ordinary to Queen Victoria. She now attended receptions given by the Lord Lieutenant and was willing to be “of the castle.” In January 1864 William Wilde was knighted by the Irish Viceroy, the Earl of Carlisle; Speranza became Lady Wilde and as such could be addressed as “Her Ladyship.” She was enchanted – indeed in her letters to her sons she always referred to their father as Sir William – and all of her friends rejoiced in her happiness. The press applauded the Vice-Regal Act and society was effusive in its compliments. In classical Greek drama there are often three stages, *ate*, *hubris* and *nemesis*. The Wildes had experienced the first two and the third was about to overtake them.

For some time an habituée of the household had been a young woman named Mary Josephine Travers, the daughter of a doctor and a colleague of William Wilde. Initially, Mary Josephine Travers had been the latter’s patient, and he befriended her. She was not unattractive, reasonably intelligent but very lonely and very impoverished – her father, a notorious miser, allowed her about £16-00 a year. In time she became a regular at Speranza’s “Saturdays” and became a useful appendage to the household.

Regretfully she was unwilling to accept the role that she had unexpectedly acquired; to be the paid assistant. Being a mere appendage was not enough. She was very jealous of Speranza, and had obviously fallen in love with Wilde. As a frustrated individual her feelings were more passionate and intense. It is uncertain whether these sentiments were reciprocated, as she was not the usual sort of woman with whom

Wilde had sexual affairs. He preferred the very ordinary type, often of working class origin, and to him sex was an appetite to be satisfied; lust not love was the driving force. If Speranza had any real concern she did not show it; from experience she knew Mary Josephine Travers was not a danger to the household.

This was a mistake, the younger woman decided that Speranza was unfeeling and worse, totally indifferent and overly secure. To shatter this illusion she decided to attack and wrote two reviews of Speranza's book *The First Temptation*. Both of the articles were extremely critical of the novel – the editors to whom she submitted the reviews were apparently quite unaware that Mary Josephine Travers and Lady Wilde were friends – and the motive she stated she had for writing them was that as a good practising Roman Catholic the book was highly offensive to persons of character. In fact her motivation was one of pure spite.

Mary Josephine Travers failed to make Speranza feel insecure. When the truth was revealed, Speranza assumed that Mary had become mildly insane. Moreover, she did not exclude her from “the Saturdays” or the household. This was a mistake, as in a further effort to enrage Speranza her enemy tried another tack. She began publishing anonymous and highly scurrilous pamphlets and doggerel poetry, of which the Wildes were the principal subjects. These productions amused the Dublin public and more so when Mary Josephine Travers signed them “Speranza.” Some twenty such pieces were published, and to add insult to injury the young woman sent the Wildes a series of “poison-pen letters.” In all of her writings she accused Sir William of dreadful crimes, the most serious being that he had seduced her in his own surgery.

As a sort of climax Mary Josephine Travers organized a form of demonstration on an evening when Sir William was to give a public lecture. She hired a number of newsboys to sell a pamphlet entitled *Florence Boyle or a Warning* which purported to be the story of the heroine's seduction by Wilde and gave Speranza's name as the author. Other young men purveyed another pamphlet purporting to be letters of Wilde to Mary Josephine Travers. A near riot ensued and there were actual protests during the lecture itself. The next day Speranza found copies of both publications in her own post box. Moreover, an anonymous letter was sent to *Saunders Newsletter* challenging Wilde to prove the pamphlets untrue.

Speranza could not now act as if nothing had happened; she recognized that her position in Dublin was being assailed and she was being impugned. As J.B. Yeats was to write in 1921 to his poet son on

recollecting the events, "On that occasion Lady Wilde was loyal." In a moment of rage Speranza acted. She wrote a letter to Mary Josephine Travers' father telling him of his daughter's actions and attempts at blackmail. There is some slight evidence that Travers replied but no copy of his response exists. However, he himself kept Speranza's letter and his daughter found it. At last she had a real weapon and she took the letter to a solicitor who advised her it was libelous, and a claim for £3000 in damages was made against Speranza. The latter had not told her husband that she had written to Travers and now the consequences of her exasperation would be felt. It would not only be financially disastrous but also the world could well turn against her.

A 'spectacle' of a trial ensued; Isaac Butt was Mary Josephine Travers' legal counsel and Sergeant Sullivan acted for Speranza. Both were legal luminaries in the Irish bar and the case attracted national attention. Mary Josephine Travers attempted to play the innocent while Speranza, magnificent in black, was like Katherine of Aragon before Wolsey and Henry VIII. The real cause of the whole affair was invisible. Wilde had left Ireland and had allowed his wife to defend his reputation.

For five days in mid December 1864 the public were regaled with Wilde's peccadilloes and his relationship with Mary Josephine Travers. The plaintiff found little favour with the public, who sympathized with Speranza. It was clear that a jealous, enraged female was out to injure her. Indeed, the *Morning News* observed that whatever the outcome, nothing could "dim the purity and brightness of her name, or weaken the esteem in which she is held by her countrymen." Old loyalties die hard in Ireland and Speranza's role in 1848 was not forgotten. In the witness box she was magnificent. She professed to be quite indifferent to a relationship real or otherwise between the plaintiff and Sir William. All she was concerned with was the nuisance of Mary Josephine Travers' attacks. All of the glamour of the Gavin Duffy case over a decade earlier returned.

The verdict was in favour of Mary Josephine Travers, because of Isaac Butt's advocacy, but the victory was essentially hollow. The jury found Speranza's letter libelous but awarded Mary Josephine one farthing in damages. However, the Wildes were assessed all costs which amounted to a couple of thousand pounds. Mary Josephine Travers may have won her case but society shunned her. Even those of the press and printers who had aided and abetted her in her attack on the Wildes now hurriedly disassociated themselves from her. Mary Josephine had become a pariah. Nevertheless, ruin of a sort had befallen Speranza, and her happiness in Dublin had ended.

The public has a short memory for scandal. Wilde's affairs with

women were widely known in any case, and his wife's gallant defence of him appealed to the public sentiment. She herself put on the bravest of fronts, "All Dublin called us to offer their sympathy" and her "only anxiety . . . was that foreign friends would have the story from the English papers" who had made the doleful tale a major item of news. As she was soon to be able to say, "happily all is now over and our enemy has been signally defeated in her efforts to injure us."

She continued to be "At Home" as before and her friends did not desert her – her "Saturdays" were as crowded as of yore. She wrote more poetry, though her muse was now somewhat muted. After the trial of the Fenians she observed "Has not vengeance been sated at last? Will the holy and beautiful chimes ring out the old wrongs of the past, ring in the new glories and tunes?" The sentiments that had inspired *Jacta Alea Est* seemed not totally dead. Two years after the trial a new collection of her poems appeared and the Dubliners bought copies to show their loyalty to her and support her as an Irish literary figure.

It would seem that Sir William had lost little by his absence from his wife's side in December 1864. He continued his medical practice (he does not appear to have lacked patients of either sex), and his enthusiasms for local history were unabated. He published *Lough Carrig* and *Lough Mark* in 1867 both of which attracted considerable success for its excellent account of "scenic attractions, historic associations, and antiquarian treasures." Relations between husband and wife seem to have resumed their normal course, and both attended evening parties "at home" and elsewhere in Dublin society. Yet domestic tragedy struck when their daughter born in 1859 died at the age of eight. Sorrow probably served to unite the ill-matched parents.

The Royal Irish Academy presented Sir William with its Cunningham Medal in 1873, for his work as an antiquarian and scholar. Three years later on the nineteenth of April he died, leaving his family relatively impoverished. Speranza had been loyal to the end; while he was dying she permitted a veiled woman, a former mistress and mother of two of his children, to visit. She completed his last book and wrote a preface to it extolling her late husband. When all the debts were paid little remained; her modest income was reduced because of the activities of the Land League and with it the refusal of tenants to pay rent. As a landowner Speranza despite her known nationalist opinions in the past was held in no higher regard than others in a similar position, and became a victim in the struggle for Irish Freedom.

As an impoverished widow she had to consider the future with care and with real apprehension. Initially she was exceedingly depressed

and contemplated prussic acid and suicide but her natural resilience came to the fore and she was soon quite cheerful. Encouraged by her friends to apply for a literary pension, she attempted a direct approach to Disraeli – he of all political leaders ought perhaps to have regarded another romantic with a favourable response – but nothing came of it. She was convinced the Tory party only wanted “fine cats” to “praise the English.” Her feelings were, as might be expected, commenting “*Jamais* – my descending to this level, fancy? I have stood a priestess at the altar of freedom.” The alternative was to write for money, and over the years that followed, a number of books appeared as well as poems that were published by editors who knew that she was not very well off.

After four years of widowhood Speranza left Ireland and moved to England. Both her sons were in there; William, the elder, was a journalist working in London and Oscar, the younger, was at Oxford. She really had no ties with Dublin and no home in the city. Initially she lived with William Wilde in South Kensington but she soon had her own establishment at 116 Park Street in Mayfair. “The Madame Recamier of Dublin” was once again receiving friends on “her Saturdays” from five to seven in the evening. The ambiance of Merrion Square was re-elected; “in broad daylight blinds were drawn, shutters closed, candles lit, and she sat enthroned in artificial splendor to receive her guests.” The salons were quite popular and many notables – Ruskin, Browning, Bernard Shaw (“Lady Wilde was nice to me in London during the desperate days between my arrival in 1875 and my first earning of an income by way of my pen in 1885. . . .”) – came at least once. Americans were extremely popular; Oliver Wendell Holmes, for example, was a frequent visitor during his sojourn in London. Her Irish friends were greeted with enthusiasm; the young W.B. Yeats being hailed as “My Irish Poet!” – incidentally, he admired her folklore studies and the antiquarian studies of her late husband. So successful was the salon for a time that Speranza was at home on another day – the occasion no longer just “My Saturday.”

Speranza’s looks had not altered much, and she was still very stout, heavily rouged, and dressed in fantastic flowing gowns. She “loomed up majestically, her headdress with its long streamers and glittering jewels giving her a queenly air.” However, she increasingly tended to monopolize the conversation expatriating on her pet topics. She talked, as she wrote, in a rapid and florid manner on women’s rights, Celtic folklore, the female in the arts world, Irish freedom and liberal politics.

Lack of money led to a move from Park Street to a more modest house in Chelsea. Once again the “At Homes” resumed. Although they were less glamorous but the illusion was retained; the lights were dim,

the shutters were closed and the hostess was impressive. She could still make her guests feel at ease. As one friend observed,

What matter that the rooms were small, that the tea was overdrawn, or that there was a large hole in the red curtains. Here was a woman who understood the art of entertaining. . . . Thoroughly sympathetic she entered into the aspirations of everyone who ever held a pen or touched a paintbrush! She treated all who called as 'Dear friends' but at the same time she was always the queen receiving the accolades of respect from adoring subjects.

In 1890, largely through the efforts of her younger son, she was awarded an annual pension of £70 "for services to literature." It was not much, but it was a welcome addition. Her elder son, despite his career as a journalist, gave her little by way of financial assistance. Her more famous younger son, Oscar, was not overly generous either, but he did at least pay her rent. She continued to live as before or at least as well as she could. She was still a stately figure no longer beautiful; her clothes were antiquated and she had a great black wig. When she talked, however, – and she made no allusions to her improverished state – the tiny rooms "became a great salon crowded with courtiers, and the rotten fabric of her rag-bag covering turned by a fairy's wand into cloth of gold."

Speranza had had her triumphs. She was the youthful Irish patriot, the woman defending her husband's name, but perhaps her greatest moment was her refusal to abandon her son, Oscar. Her loyalty was unshaken. Yeats has said that she played a very major role in persuading him to stay in England and face the consequences. Speranza at her best, suggested "If you stay, even if you go to prison, you will always be my son, it will make no difference to my affections, but if you go, I will never speak to you again." Oscar Wilde's fame in part rests on his martyrdom and he owes that in part to his mother's instinct. Could she have been thinking of the consequences of running away as William Wilde had done in 1864? She never saw her son again after he was imprisoned. Her "old face was gaunt and grey, and seared with a million cross-crossed lines; attached by care, sorrow and no doubt, hunger."

With the crash came further trials, and editors eschewed everything with the name of Wilde. Her poems and articles were rejected, and her literary career was at an end. Speranza or Jane Francesca, Lady Wilde died on 3 February 1896. Her son Oscar was told a fortnight later by his wife Constance, who had returned from Italy. He always believed that his behaviour had somehow caused her demise. She had

been so proud of him and he had ultimately failed her. Her funeral was a simple one, and cost less than forty guineas. It was a great contrast to that of her husband when all of Dublin had followed the cortege. The family having contracted to provide a permanent marker for her in Kensal Green Cemetery failed to do so. Some years later her remains were moved to a common, unmarked grave. There is no memorial to her in her final resting place.

She had been a fascinating figure, an Egeria to the nationalists, a Madame Roland to the liberals and a Madame Recamier to the intellectuals. She was not a great writer but her literary output had been considerable and she had a very real popularity. She is not counted today as one of Ireland's great heroines – the women of the Easter Rising of 1916 achieved the role she longed to possess – and is virtually forgotten as an early champion of liberty and as a supporter of Irish freedom. Her greatest virtue was an independence of spirit – she was always herself, always loyal, society was not able to dictate her life. Her epitaph might best be in a verse she wrote late in life

Oh! Might I pass as the silver star  
That glitters in radiant lights afar.  
Thus silent and sorrowless fade from sight;  
Lost in the days blue ethery night.