



Letters of an Old Housekeeper to Her Pretty Married Daughter

MY DEAR DAUGHTER— OUR THOUGHTS ARE ALL ON CHRISTMAS

December 3, 1915.

(EIGHTH LETTER)

MY DEAR DAUGHTER,—

It is so near the Christmas holiday season that all one plans to do for the next five or six weeks to come is tinged with the yuletide thought.

The spirit of festivity is bound to be dampened by the thought of the sadness in thousands and thousands of homes, where there is mourning for those who have been snatched away by the awful carnage that has swept away fair homesteads and the peace of simple hearts and lives. The birthday of the Prince of Peace will have once more a sad dawning, it now seems.

There are those, though, about us, on every side, to whom the day must be made to mean something, if it is only to take to them a message of hope and good cheer, and our household, like all others in which there are womenfolk, is busy with Christmas preparations. We are doing our shopping early, as I think should be done whenever possible, so as not to crowd the shop folk too much in the last few days before the holiday. The girls are making all sorts of comfortable things that are to go into boxes to be shipped to those who need such articles sadly, and there is now plenty of work for woman's hands to do. The Christmas ships are taking away great stores, and the whole of the peaceful world now has its wonderful chance to show that spirit of goodwill and helpfulness that is locked in every human breast and only needs the proper moment to bring it forth. I know that you, too, are busy at this season, and it always pleases my heart that you are so circumstanced as to be able to do the many kind things for others that your heart prompts. The woman with means at her command, even moderate means, has great opportunities for doing good to others, and she can always find some sister less fortunate than herself. There are so many women this year whose hearts will be in the battlefields, so many mourning sons and husbands gone, so many praying that the Christmas stars may shine down upon the peace of the world and bring loved ones safely home once more. It is the mission of every woman who has about her her loved ones to bring all comfort possible, if she can not bring cheer, to the hearts of her sorrowing sisters in the season of goodwill. Let us not take our gifts to those who already have an abundance, but to those whose lives know sorrowful lack, and there are many, many such. My appeal to all women would be to spend their holiday allowances where they will do real good, and not upon the foolish little trifles that are only so many added luxuries to the many to which they are sent. Of all years in the calendar of the world this holiday time should be one of practical giving.

In my last letter, I remember, I promised to tell you something of Elizabeth's life at the present time, and of the step which she has taken in her rôle of independence.

I have seen the offending "shingle." It hangs just at the side of the porch where the passer-by on the road may see. I have told Elizabeth that in summer time it is bound to be obscured by the vines, and she perched her pretty and shapely head on one side, squinted her eye and said if it were she would move it then. The vines about the little porch have dropped almost all of their leaves now, and in dry flock go hurtling down the garden walk. The "shingle" is, then, plainly seen from the road.

Elizabeth has stout boots, practical gowns, heavy storm coats and durable, driving gloves. There is a stately bearing about her, one that commands respect and attention.

"I have told Harold," she said, as she led the way to her charming sitting room, "that I did not see why I should not practise my profession—you know I did not give up the idea easily, when he persuaded me to marry him."

"But you did give it up," I reminded her.

"Yes," Elizabeth agreed, "but I think down deep in my heart there must have been a reservation, though I was honest about it at the time. Harold had said I must take my choice, give him up, or the idea of practising medicine. There was my degree, earned through no easy effort, of course, and I had to my credit some honors as a student. Now I have told Harold that I believe there is no reason why a woman may not follow a professional career and yet be just as good wife and housekeeper. There is no reason why we may not work side by side. He is engrossed with his wonderful philanthropies—you have seen the great laboratories which he has built for scientific research?"

Elizabeth, drawing off her driving gloves—for she had just come in from a round of visits—stepped to the window and looked out. My eyes followed hers over the hill. The towers of the great building were just visible among the almost bare trees.

"And Harold objects, my dear?" I queried.

"Worse than that. He simply remains silent. If he would only openly object I might reason his objections away.

As it is he remains silent, allows me to pursue my way without any interference, provides me with ample means with which to carry out any of my plans, and is unfailing in his courtesy to me. But, of course, I will admit, that I miss something of that old petting and cuddling that he used to lavish upon me, but what self-respecting woman wants to be made simply a doll of?"

Elizabeth stood before me so straight and proud, and sure of herself, of Harold's love and the strong foundation of her home. But through my heart shot the question: "Is Harold growing indifferent?" When a man is indifferent he does not protest and complain. The woman to whom he is bound by the most sacred ties may do as she pleases. Will Elizabeth at some time awaken to this realization? And it is the fear that the awakening will come, that has caused me to watch Elizabeth's declaration of independence with something of uneasiness.

We had luncheon, Harold joining us, but I missed

way. I do not see why my husband and I may not stand shoulder to shoulder in our work in the world. He is becoming distinguished as a scientist. I do not see why I may not also become distinguished as a physician and surgeon. You have no idea how little regard he has for my opinions."

"That is the way of our menfolk, my dear," I comforted. "They wish to possess all the knowledge and have us look up to them, and—"

But my sentence was interrupted. Elizabeth's eyes flashed. I wondered if this little lightning flash was not the remainder of a storm or two that I had not witnessed.

"That is just it," she said. "And why should we, pray, take the pose that we have not as good and orderly brains as men have, when we know we possess them?"

"Well," I soothed, "that is the valuable part of the woman-game, the game we must play from the cradle to the grave if we are to be happy women, wives and mothers, and that is what we look to and lean upon men as the possessors of such knowledge as will pilot us all—women, home and children—safely through life."

Elizabeth looked at me for one intense and almost startled moment, and then returned to her ground.

"Well, I do not propose to do it, and you will see how well in my case it works out. Harold was just coming to think that I lived for his comfort and convenience. I do believe he was reaching the point when he would have told me to 'run upstairs and fetch him his slippers.'"

"Perhaps, my dear, he was very tired when he came home at the end of the day. You know he is contributing a lot to the world, you should be very proud of him."

But Elizabeth was preparing a paper to be read before a medical society, and I knew that I must not intrude upon her time further with just my old-fashioned home-and-mother talk.

The afternoon wore away in Elizabeth's pretty sitting-room. No one came to disturb me. I heard Elizabeth's little electric car whir up to the door and I knew she was gone for the balance of the day. Harold presently closed the library door and left for town by trolley. The servants below stairs went about their duties, and the ticking of the big clock at the head of the stairs echoed through the house. I thought of how many times Harold must have reached home before Elizabeth and had only the ticking of the clock for company. I thought of how your Father always calls "Mother" as soon as he comes in the door, and of how many times, just to tease him, I have not answered him at once, and how he has gone from room to room calling and questioning the children as to my whereabouts. Often I have been happy to see the light of contentment sweep over his face when he found me, perhaps tucked away in some corner busy with a bit of sewing, and he would pinch my cheek knowing that I had only was missing. It could not be that the world demanded the sacrifice. It could not be that her call to be of help to her fellowmen would take her away from the sacred duties of home!

I determined to stay to dinner—it was my "afternoon off." I knew I would be missed, but I could make up for what seemed to be a bit of selfishness another day, and so I telephoned that I would dine with Elizabeth—I told a little white fib, that I had something important to discuss with her, and could only see her at dinner time. My staying, though, did have an element of importance in it, I felt that at some time I might serve Elizabeth if I knew and understood fully her life as it is to-day.

Harold did not arrive until the big clock had softly chimed seven, the dinner hour, and Elizabeth was a little later. Neither had time to make any change in toilet, and the beautiful little dining-room, with its abundance of shining glass and silver, its exquisitely fine and glossy damask, seemed to lack something—a woman, I think, presiding at the table in a pink or blue or white gown. There were flowers on the table, but they were from the day before, sad and droopy looking little roses.

The dinner chat was pleasant. Harold and Elizabeth always have worlds of interesting things to talk about, but there was no nice, cosy little after dinner talk between Elizabeth and me about new gowns and commonplace housekeeping matters which would give Harold a chance to say in manly fashion that he would go to the library for a smoke until we had finished our dress discussions.

Harold went to the library, to be sure, but only to again bury himself in books, and Elizabeth said she would not slip into a negligee, though she expected to be in for the evening, until she should see if she had a call to go any where, that she had declined an invitation that evening to address a working girls' school in the south end of the town upon the subject of "Hygiene in the Home," because she had that

(Concluded on page 26)



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Elizabeth's pretty, fluffy little morning gown. She wore her practical, tailored dress to luncheon, because she had a round of visits to make in the afternoon, and patients to receive in her home office before going out. After luncheon she left me to amuse myself according to my own whim, and Harold went to work in the library. I had come to spend the afternoon, and told Elizabeth so. She explained that of course she did not allow herself time for afternoon visits now, but could always see her friends at dinner time in the evening, unless she had some important visit to make. I smiled, and told Elizabeth that I did not mind, that I was going to spend the afternoon any way, and felt sure she must have something that I could do for her—mend her stockings, darn her laces or something of the sort. Elizabeth's pretty eyes gleamed. She told me there were a whole lot of things in the sewing room that she had not had time for months to attend to, and so I went there, gathered up an armful, and finding the right threads and needles, took them to the sitting room, where I could sit before the cheerful fire burning there. A cold drizzle had begun to fall, and the flickering firelight was most inviting.

Harold looked in for a moment, and with much enthusiasm told me of some of his plans. I fancied he talked more freely than he had at luncheon time, when Elizabeth was present.

The house seemed very quiet. I missed the little rippling melodies that Elizabeth always played on rainy afternoons as I used to sit and sew when she was first married. The canary did not seem to hop about and sing in such lively fashion. The plants in the window, I noticed, appeared to be a little droopy, and I got up and placed them row after row on the wide sills of the little balcony jutting out from the sitting-room window.

The house was now, distinctly, that of two professional people.

Of course, Elizabeth has told me that she does not practice for the sake of earning money, though she feels that all those who can afford to must understand that professional services should be paid for. The poor she attends without charge.

"Could you not," I ventured to ask, "do this good work without going along regular professional lines?"

Elizabeth straightened her shoulders and looked at me.

"No," she answered. "That is where women make a mistake. They do not go about their work in a professional