

OMAHA LETTER

Dear Eleanor:  
Faith dies hard, last of all things, I believe. We are born with that grain, perhaps no larger than a mustard seed, yet withal a hardy thing. We all, secretly, believe in a lot of things, which we would not acknowledge because it really seems rather superior to be cynical.

When Mr. Welch ran up the black flag a short time ago, and predicted a 30 or 40 degree drop, I actually believed him in spite of former experience, and I got my sealskin out of pawn and took a bad cold by way of demonstrating my faith, and it kept getting warmer. Today nips a bit, and Nature has veiled her eyes and there is a hint of snow in the air. I sing a continual requiem for summer. If only I might I would follow her the wide world over to whatever land she flies, there to dally with and smile upon new lovers.

The naked woods and wailing winds simply set my teeth on edge and I feel like hurling daily Jeremiahs at things in general. I know this is not very bad, but it is certain to be worse, before it is any better, which you will admit is not cheering. Have you any legitimate reason for having translated my original remark "Don't shoot the organist" etc., into "Don't shoot the vagrant?" Why "vagrant," I wonder, rather than turkey buzzard, or wash-woman? This is not fault finding, it is simply curiosity. What sort of a Thanksgiving did you have? Mine was a bit depressing. To begin with mother sent me to the hospital with some flowers and jelly. Oh! my dear, my dear, why do able bodied people with a fair share of health, ever complain? As I walked along the rows of narrow white beds, and saw the bandaged arms and legs, the drawn faces and nerveless hands, I felt as if I ought to spend the rest of the day singing hymns of praise for my whole condition. There were painstricken features, and eyes al-

ready shadowed by the dark of the grave. One woman, the sister told me, would hardly live the day out. She lay with her face toward a window, her eyes upon "a little tent of blue, that prisoners call the sky," and yet I think she saw nothing. Outside the world was so alert, so buoyant in the golden light, and little birds chirped and bells called sweetly, it was so hard to believe that the death angel brooded near.

In one ward I saw a little girl, perhaps seven years old, who interested me, and I stopped to speak with her, asking her name. "Agnes," she told me. Agnes something, such a collection of consonants, chiefly "z's" that I concluded that it must be Polish or Russian. "Why are you here, Agnes?" I asked. "Cause I have fits, but I'm goin' home pretty soon, 'cause the doctor, he says I can't never get well." I was a trifle taken back at the cheerfulness of her tones and the smiling light in her big, black eyes.

"Have you any brothers and sisters?" "Yes, ma'am," she replied. "I got 'leven."

"Dear me, that is a great many; are your papa and mama at home?"

"Oh! yes, they are at home now, but my mama is coming to take me away. My papa, he can't come 'cause he gets drunk. He got awful drunk one time and pushed me down stairs, and that's why I get fits, and I won't never get well."

Clearly to her little mind, the fits were a great distinction, and I think she was inclined to regard a person without them a trifle patronizingly.

"You didn't never have fits, if you?" she asked me. I was obliged to confess that I had never had them. As I moved on I said, "Well, good bye, Agnes, I hope you will get better."

I realized it was not the tactful thing to say, when she replied reproachfully, "No, I won't. I ain't never going to get well, the doctor said so."

When the great doors of the hospital closed behind me, shutting in the pain, disease and death, I stood a moment drawing in deep breaths of the tonic

air. The clean arch of the sky swept around the earth. Here and there the grass showed green, some hardy flowers bloomed at the south of a house near by, and I was alive, alive. I think a little prayer crept out of my heart, it matters little whether it was one of thanksgiving or a cry of mercy.

We had with us at dinner that day about the most unsophisticated specimen of humanity it has ever been my good or bad fortune to meet with. He is a youth, who has come here to study at the school of pharmacy. Mother offered a sort of lame explanation, as to why the family dinner was invaded in this manner. Something about papa's having business dealings with the youth's father, a letter of introduction, necessitating attention on our part. "But mother," I remonstrated, "why Thanksgiving? Couldn't it have been on some wash day, when life isn't worth living, anyway?"

"Penelope," mother replied, a bit sternly, "You grow more selfish every day; this poor boy has never been away from home before, and just imagine how forlorn and diffident he must feel."

I admit my selfishness without a struggle but the youth's diffidence exists entirely in mother's mind. His name is Jim Whiteley, and he has never in all his 20 years of life been outside a town of 300 inhabitants before. His people are very well to do, and rather prominent in their section of Nebraska. This youth has spent his gentle existence where he was about the most important cog in the wheel. He has known everybody by name within a radius of 25 miles of his home. So just fancy a product of that description being suddenly transplanted into city life with no apparent conception that conditions are changed. "How do you like Omaha?" mother began, while we were yet at soup.

"Oh! I like it all right, or I will in a week or two, when I get acquainted with the folks. Who lives over across there in that big house?"

"A gentleman by the name of Mr. Yates," mother replied cautiously. "Well, I saw some nice looking girls

going in there. I want to get acquainted with them. I'll have to know some nice girls to take to dances this winter, 'cause I don't intend to do nothing but study this winter. Oh! you just ought to have been down to our place the night McNally's gave their big dance. I danced every dance and didn't get home until 3 o'clock in the morning."

So on ad infinitum, during the entire dinner. Mother looked as if she had done a hard day's ironing by the time it was over. Gertrude suggested that mother ought to take the young man out to call some place in the evening, which I heartily concurred in.

Although mother did not really say so, she looked as if she thought we had another guess coming. When Gertrude and I left for the theatre, the young man was still discoursing for mother's entire benefit as father had escaped.

I have just finished Gilbert Parker's "Right of Way," in fact I did not put it down Sunday except to eat my dinner, until I had devoured the last word. How people differ about the question of the right in it. Women's clubs pretty generally disapprove, and not women alone. I heard a man denounce it quite warmly, saying it was utterly unnatural and that no man would sacrifice a being he loved for the sake of two he did not care for.

Far be it from me to uphold the theory that men are ever very devoted slaves at the shrine of duty, but I do not believe it altogether impossible that a man could or does exist whose apotheosis would place honor or duty, or an expiatory sacrifice, before his inclination toward the being he loved.

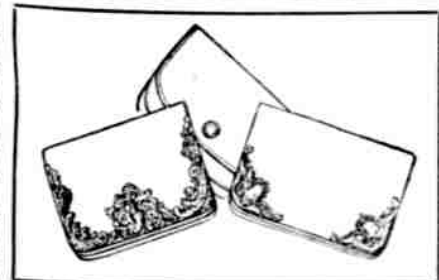
I am painfully conscious that this is a very poor excuse for a letter; my wits have been wool gathering half the evening. I would drag out a line or two, and then stare a space at the wall paper, and the divine afflatus is totally wanting. Gertrude below stairs is playing Nevin's "Good Night." One almost hears the words, "the light is going, good night." There is something so appealing in his music. The front door closes, and I hear on the night air the unmistakable whistle of Gertrude's young man; sure sign that the hour is late. "To sleep—perchance to dream." Good night. PENELOPE.

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