

AS IT SEEMS TO ME

BY A PRISONER OF HOPE

I used to go to school with a girl whom we called Niobe, because she shed so many tears. On "examination days" her emotions overflowed, like the waters of the Nile, and her tears not only soaked her own pocket handkerchief, but the whole class was expected to contribute additional ones for extended soakings. The demand, in this instance, failed to create the supply, and many tears were lost.

That the tears were bitter, no school girl pretended to doubt. They were the unadulterated flowing brims of remorse. Verily our Niobe "wept her spirit from her eyes," because she had not improved her opportunities.

Only she had studied with more diligence, worked harder, been more faithful! But the month was gone. In vain the more optimistic, or less sensitive of the class suggested courage for a better day. Niobe was gripped for that which was gone.

It has been a long time since Niobe's examination paper fluttered about under eyes that had in them a curious mingling of scorn and sympathy, but the other day I found on my desk a letter that began to read: "The old days the very moment my glance touched it."

We get so used to having letters that we forget what wonderful things they really are. That somebody, somewhere can make a few characters on a bit of paper, and have the bit of paper conveyed to me, that my eyes with the letter before them are able to carry to my brain the message shaped into the characters, is wonderful.

But this plain white envelope with a name and address traced in little certainly aceson with each line drooping forlornly at the end, appealed to a sense that is more subtle than sight.

Somewhat the old study hall grew around me, and the faces of half-forgotten girls peeped it, and among these the old Niobe, with the bit of paper in her handkerchief, stood out in bold relief.

And why Niobe? In the passing years there had been no trace of her. Almost had memory failed to keep her in reckoning. But now she was here, called up by the drooping, undeciphered lines written across an unopened envelope.

The letter inside was like one of the examination papers of the old days, and Niobe's name was on the last sheet. It was a character, and she had to write only her first name, worrying after the letter was gone because she had not been more careful, since the years and the women named like her are many. It was easy to know all this, having known Niobe, even before the postcard, following fast upon the heels of the letter, explained.

And the letter? Well, Niobe has come to middle age now, and she bitterly regrets the wasted years that are behind her, including those marked by the miserable examination papers, of course.

Her children have antonished and dismayed her by growing up. Her daughter's engagement and her son's long trousers are the shocks that have aroused her. She regrets that she has not enjoyed her children more, now that they have gone from her life. She is sorry that she was not a better mother to the boys and girls who are little children no longer.

The letter is blistered on every page by Niobe's ink, and the ink is soaked out of the words and washed out into the spaces by the overflow, so that the meaning has to be fished out by a patience that is sorely tried.

Niobe has read somewhere that youth is the time to acquire knowledge, and she didn't acquire any. And now she sits like a little desert island in a sea of tears and bemoans her fate.

It would be of no use to suggest to her that the little desert island might yet be clothed with beauty. The tides of that tear-sea literally wash away each seed of happiness that the generous winds of heaven bring. Nothing has time to take root.

Now it seems to me that if Niobe failed as a school girl, if she has failed all the way from that to this, she might even yet hope to become something very worth while.

She is what we call middle aged now. That is a complimentary term applied to persons who are growing old. It is a courteous way of letting you down easy, if you please, a friendly reminder that you are old. I like the expression. Middle aged, half way between the follies of youth and the weakness of age. On the safe, high middle ground. It is an excellent place to be, a delightful stage of the journey—home.

It is the autumn of life, the great harvest time, when we can look over our store and cast out the chaff and treasure the grain. Autumn is the time to get ready for winter. Middle age is the preparation for old age.

Niobe might even yet make of herself a blessing so rare that many live and die with no knowledge of such a benediction. She might become a beautiful old lady. It seems to me that this would be the ambition of every middle aged woman.

Most women dread old age, not because it is a near approach to the inevitable end, but because it has in it so little that womankind values most.

Youth and beauty, the little court of admirers that falls to the lot of every girl, the promise of unloved years are all gone. They have slowly receded to the vanishing point. They are no more.

It is futile to cling to any shred of them, worse than vain to hope that one's friends, or one's self, may be deceived by any pitiful deception. The best of the woman is left. It is a pity to spoil the beauty of middle age with an artificial semblance of the mere prettiness of youth.

If Niobe gathered up knowledge in the old days, she might make up for it by garnering wisdom now. And wisdom is better than knowledge.

When a good housekeeper finds her pantries empty that she should be when the days shorten, she casts about to find something to take the place of what she missed. And it happens sometimes that this after-ath harvest is richer and sweeter and more satisfactory than the regular gathering.

Niobe might learn a deeper and truer philosophy in these quiet middle-aged days than it was possible for her to understand long ago, when the word suggested a certain black and blistered book, the bans of her existence.

Remembering the unlearned lessons, she might develop a large sympathy for others who fall. And the giving out of this sweet, true sympathy would be an investment in-uring quick returns. Knowing the

at hand. There are so many things that she would not have to bother about.

Now if she should set about making of her middle-aged self a young lady, there would really be no end to her trouble, and she would come out just as old in these examinations always a failure. I have seen it tried. Perhaps you have. After all the trouble there is no hope of success.

I heard someone who went a long way to see the immortal Sarah, say of her: "It is positively uncanny, that appearance of youth. One gets the creeps and forgets the play." Few women are so successful as this one in retaining the semblance of youth to the very brink of old age. But the world looks upon the marvel only to wonder.

There is one beauty of youth and another, quite another, of age. The beauty of youth is of the flesh, the beauty of age is of the spirit. The one fades, the other endures, and both are good, for God will it so.

If Niobe should create of herself the ideal old lady, what a unique beauty she would bring into the lives of those about her. The question would not be: "Whose duty is it to take care of that wretched, disagreeable old woman?" But "Into whose home shall the blessing of her presence be?"

For she would understand the erring, and weak. She would know the whys of so many failures, and she would be so gentle and pitiful and selfless, so ready to excuse and forgive and pardon, that she would be a blessing to all who came in contact with her. She would be tolerant and trustful and full of hope and the peace that passeth understanding.

It seems to me that Niobe need not dread old age. Even the loneliness of the quiet hours, for that, the young know nothing about, and the quiet is full of music that they may not hear.

When Niobe is old she will want so little, and she can give so much. Not in work, perhaps, nor in money, but in sweet and kindly thought and in love. She can make old age less a time of horror than it seems now to those who may be obliged to live it out. And this will be worth the use to write all this to Niobe? Will she miss the very last examination and be sorry—somewhere, that she failed as an old lady? Some women do fail.

HOMESPUN PHILOSOPHY

By THE CRICKET ON THE HEARTH

"Now isn't she simply darling," said Pandora, following the Devoted Mother with ecstatic eyes till the door closed upon the shabby little visitor. "Such sacrifice, such self-abnegation, such foresight, such divine mother love!"

"Happen to know the Fortunate Daughter?" asked the Optimist, watching Pandora's radiant smile.

Pandora's smile began to curl in at the edges as if it might be going to come off "Birdie" Why, yes, of course we all know Birdie."

"Sort of frowzy, and not exactly trim, a trifle mopy about the head and rather blown about," the Optimist murmured, reflectively. "I think my mind is holding the right idea. Heard her—at the musicale the other night. Let me see, was she doing something like bird punts. Wonder if it's going to pay?"

With the last word he withered away under the glance of Pandora, and the return of the Motherly Woman from the last good-bys to the Devoted Mother covered his confusion.

"It seems awfully grand in that little bit of a woman," Mother Hubbard was saying. "She was telling me only yesterday what a very small allowance they permit themselves for actual necessities so that Birdie may have every advantage at school. Why, they all went without flannels last winter, and made out with one flannel that none too generous. And those little ones, you know, and the old man rheumatic and the mother such a frail little thing."

"I was down there one day and she seemed to take a great deal of comfort in all their suffering, and I thought she felt quite proud of their privations."

"It's all for Birdie," she said. "We are determined to surmount every obstacle and break down every barrier and open up every highway for Birdie, that her life may be a grand success. Ten years from now, she went on, with her eyes sort of walled up in that happy, unearthly way she takes. Ten years from now she'll make a name for herself. And he made a little child. It won't make any difference that I'm tired and aching to-day, and that the house is in disorder. But it will make a great difference to Birdie that she has had every advantage. Why, she simply takes the whole thing."

"Curious what sort of things people can bring themselves to enjoy," beamed the reverent Optimist. "I like that. One thinks of a martyr clothed in flames and an heroic smile. Fancy one of them writing and screaming—"

"She is such an unselfish, far-seeing little woman," Pandora mused approvingly. "The thing of it is, she's a future rather than of the family's discomfort."

"But why should the daughter's future be more considered than the present comfort of the family?" asked the Scribbler, quietly.

"Well, I couldn't help thinking of that when I was there," Mother Hubbard said. "Of course, it seemed very weak and ignoble of me right in the face of such rapturous self-denial. But the old man works pretty hard, and the mother sees day and night and the little ones do look awful. I felt almost as guilty as Herod when he slaughtered the innocents. I wish I could wish that the little ones had never found their way into the family, since it felt obliged to use itself alone for Birdie."

"But later on Birdie can help them," defended Pandora.

"May there not be any—later on," now is the accepted time," ventured the Optimist. "I wouldn't be 'prevented," condensed Pandora.

"We can all see that Birdie is to save the family. They are making an investment."

"What is she going to do?" asked the Scribbler.

"Oh, I don't know," Pandora answered. "How can a girl who is so young decide? She is being beautifully educated in a very popular college, and you'd be surprised how securely she holds her own with the set she belongs to. Her mother dresses to dress her well, and she keeps up all right."

"Do they think," asked the Plain Little Woman from her window, "that the family fortunes are to be improved by giving to one member a fancy education?"

"They are, as I understand it, people who have no resources. They must work. She is one of them. Is she doing useful work, or being trained for it? I should think that would be the question."

"I put in the Quiet Man. Making a fashionable young lady of the girl is not going to improve conditions at home. It is a mistake. She ought to be in her place there beside her mother, learning to bear the plain every-day burdens of a woman who must work with her hands, or a seag should be to somewhere learning a trade or profession."

"I was ashamed to think 'that' confessed Mother Hubbard, dashing quick tears from her honest eyes, "but I did feel it. Now, it seems hard to think of a girl like that, but she is a good thing, that shall fall easily to others, but it comes about that way."

"The good things have to be paid for, and she is thinking of that the day I went to Birdie's home. It's all right if one can fill out a check and let it all that. But this family is paying Birdie's tuition and expenses in something worth more than money and diamonds."

"That little home out there needs comfort in it. The old man needs something beside the hope and promise of a young lady of fashion and higher education in his home. The little children and the mother—"

"A bit of a sob broke the gentle voice. "I agree with you," said the Motherly Woman. "I believe in educational advantages. But after a certain point I think about a girl like Birdie may go too far. She has a special talent, no extraordinary gift. She will be merely a college girl come home, when she gets back."

"If she were coming into some pleasant social circle it would be all right. But she is coming into an ordinary home to live with rather plain people. I wonder if she will be happier for her college life?"

"That would depend, don't you think, not only upon what sort of education she is receiving, but upon what her learning means to her?" said the Gardener. "Do you think people are a little like plants, or haps? Roses are always roses and nettles are always nettles, and culture never confuses the qualities. If this little girl is a rose everybody will be knowing, and provided the

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