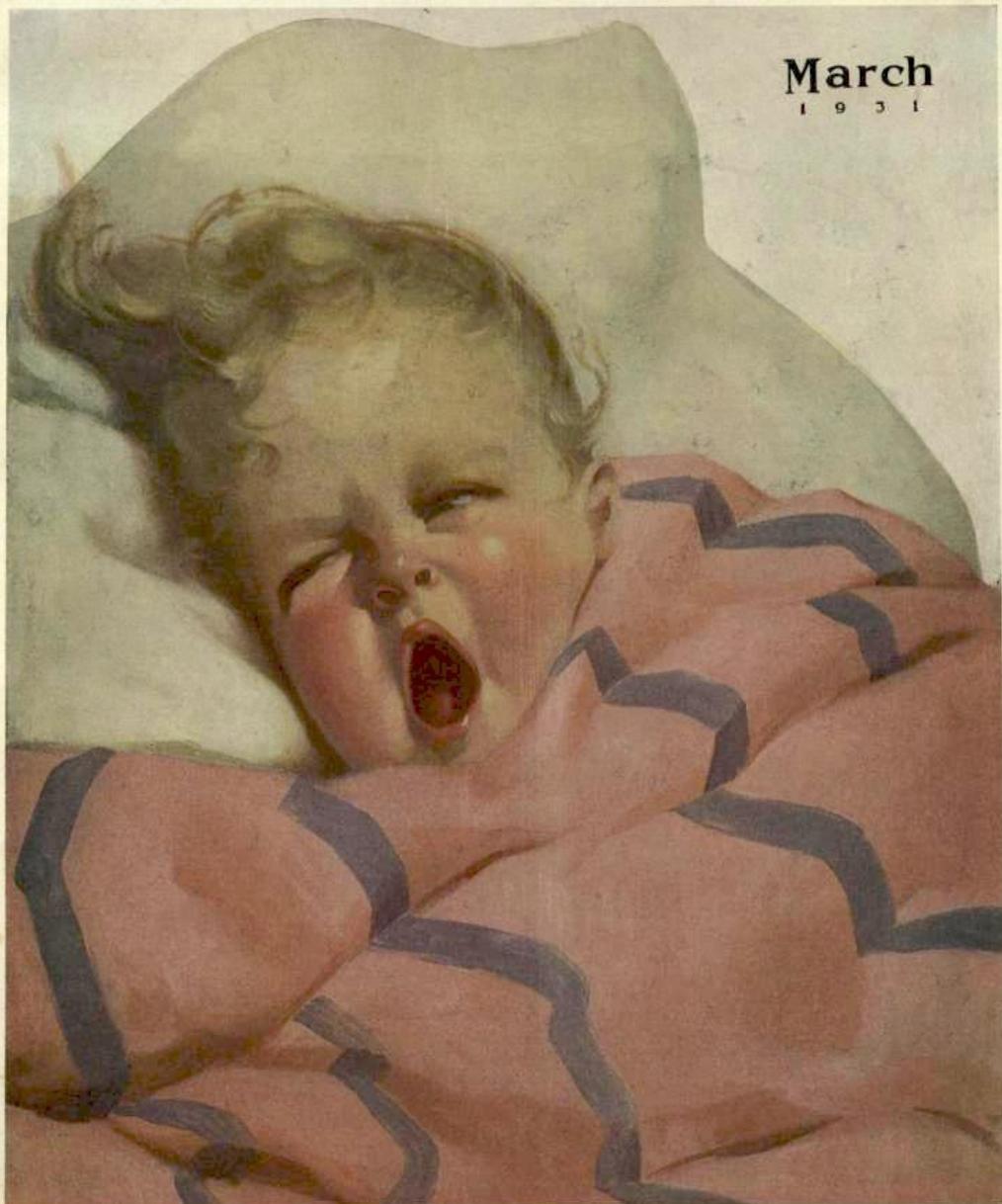


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In This Issue: "The Problem of the 'Teen Age Girl'" by L. M. Montgomery, Author of "Anne of Green Gables"

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L. M. Montgomery

Author of “Anne of Green Gables” and other books, is Canada’s most beloved writer for girls. In this penetrating discussion of mothers of daughters, she reveals her sympathy and understanding for the problems of

The 'Teen-Age Girl

First published *The Chatelaine*, March 1931.

Do you find it hard to understand your daughter? Does she shut you out of her confidence? Do you feel she is “boy-crazy”—thoughtless—selfish? Read this telling article written for mothers and daughters.

Just why *The Chatelaine* should have asked me to write an article on the relations between the 'teen age girl and her mother is, as *Lord Dundreary* used to say, “One of thoth thingh no fellow can underthtand.” I, alas, have nothing but sons. So what know I about the problems of daughters?

Perhaps it was because I have written books about girls. But, as for girls in books, you can, up to a certain point, make them behave as you want them to. It is probably a very different thing with flesh and blood creatures.

No, my only justification for complying with the editor's request must lie in the fact that I was a girl once myself and have, I believe, managed to retain, even till now a very vivid recollection of what I was, and what I wished to be and how far and why I failed. For girlhood and its problems do not change as much from generation to generation as folks imagine. The outward fashion changes, but underneath they remain basically the same. Therefore do I rush in where angels might fear to tread, unheeding the gibes that may be hurled at the perfect daughters of the daughterless woman. It is, after all, the easiest thing imaginable to tell the world what you would do in some situation in which you'll certainly never find yourself.

Perhaps it is because of long association with a minister that I have a fondness for texts. Anyhow, I do like something to tie to. So this article is just going to be a string of texts with my comments thereon. And the texts are just going to be certain things that have been said to me by mothers and girls at sundry times and in divers places all over Canada. For I want this article to be practical and helpful, dealing with the real perplexities and worries of real people.

I am, of course, taking some things for granted. I am taking it for granted that your girls are normal and that, unless you have utterly failed in your duty as a mother, they have been taught certain basic principles without which no life can be built. That honest work is the finest thing in the universe; that it is better to lose than to win unfairly; that it is a cowardly thing to lie; and that the fundamental immorality of the world from which most, if not all of the iniquities and immoralities spring, is trying to get pleasure and success without paying the price the Power and Wisdom we call God put on it—trying to get something for nothing, in short.

Now, dear mother, let us have a little frank talk together about certain things that are troubling mothers today, as they have troubled them for hundreds of years. I will be candid with you and I shall expect you to be candid with me. Above all, don't try

to pretend to me that you were a model and perfect creature when you were a young girl yourself. You may have forgotten how silly and flighty you were in your youth. I think people must forget or else their sense of humor would prevent them from saying the things they do say to their children. Your children may believe you but I shall not. Which leads me to my first text.

Only a few weeks ago I heard a mother say to her sixteen-year-old daughter, “I never did that when I was a young girl.”

I wanted to shout with laughter and I am sure it will be counted unto me for righteousness that I kept a perfectly straight face, not even winking an eye when the daughter looked at me as if seeking confirmation. But I said afterwards to her mother what now I say to you . . . are you so perfectly sure you never did things like that? It seems to me that there was a time when what “he” said and what “he” did made up a very large part of your conversation—pardon me, of our conversation. This seems funny to us now, funny and silly because we have outgrown it. But remember I insisted on candor, wasn’t it a fact? And as for “petting” . . . well, it isn’t an entirely new institution, is it? We called it “spooning.” Petting is certainly a much prettier word—so much gain for the cult of the beautiful. But tell me, dear lady, in this heart to heart talk of ours, if “he” never kissed you at the gate after he had “escorted” you home, and if both his arms were continually employed in driving the horse that drew the top buggy of the “gay nineties.” If you can answer “no” sincerely then you may be quite truthful in telling your daughter that you never did things like that. But I do not think you will be altogether wise. Because, though your daughter may believe you, she will think that times and manners—and men—have changed mightily in forty years and that you have no comprehension of her problems at all.

“Do you then approve of petting?” demands a scandalized matron. No, I do not. But I cannot see any use in saying, “Don’t.” You must try to make your daughter see that to be an aristocrat of the body is as fine a thing as to be an aristocrat of the mind or of society and that anything which degrades to amusement or habit that which should be consecrated to the service of love alone is a foolish thing to do or permit, because it means taking the third rate thing and losing the first rate. She must make her choice. She cannot have both.

“The young people of today are so selfish and thoughtless,” mourned a mother to me recently.

Selfish? Yes, they are. Just as the middle-aged of today are selfish; just as the old are selfish—and always have been. No more. Selfishness isn’t a matter of years.

I have known many ghastly instances of selfishness in older people that wrecked lives and ruined careers. Selfishness is an abominable thing but for pity's sake don't imagine it is peculiar to youth.

"Thoughtless?" Ah, I grant you that. The young are thoughtless. Naturally. You have to learn to think. Nobody is born thoughtful. Your daughter doesn't know certain things which might make her thoughtful. What is more, she has no right to know them. She has a right to her unclouded youth, revelling for a few brief, glorious years in thoughtlessness. They will pass all too quickly, dear mother. Don't grudge them to her. Wouldn't it be really nice if we could be thoughtless once again for a little while?

"My daughter doesn't tell me things—she shuts me out of her confidence," was another mother's plaint.

Is that one of your problems? And if so, are you so sure that you are not yourself to blame for it? Do you remember the time—she was much smaller than she is now perhaps—when she came to you to tell you something silly or trivial, at least, you thought it silly and trivial. You laughed at her. And now you make moan that she doesn't confide in you as you hoped for.

If you ever laughed at her I don't blame her for not taking you into her confidence. *Never laugh at her.* Don't blow her little candles out. Youth takes itself so very seriously. And laughter makes scars that never fade. I know. I have forgiven the people of my youth who advised me and scolded me and lectured me. But I have never forgiven the ones who laughed at me.

We will suppose, however, that you have not committed this unpardonable sin. And yet your daughter denies you her full confidence. What then? Why worry over it? Your daughter may be one of the many people who do not find it easy to talk to older people of intimate and personal things. "There are some things," says Ellen Thorneycroft Fowler, "so delicately made that to talk about them destroys them." Your daughter may feel that way about a good many things. You should respect her personality and never try to force her confidence. A girl's confidence is like a rosebud . . . "We must not tear the close-shut leaves apart." She has a right to her own secrets, her own inner, unshared life. I think a tremendous lot of harm is done in every relationship by this failure to respect one another's personality and in none more than in that between mother and daughter. The mother who insists that she must know every word and act and thought of her daughter is going to make a dismal wreck of what should be one of the most beautiful of all human ties. I always smile when I hear a mother say, "I know every thought of my daughter." She

doesn't. No mother does. God has mercifully arranged it thus in order that mothers may have some peace of mind.

"She had no clothes on," said a sweet old lady to me once, with a gasp of horror.

"No clothes?" I echoed.

"Well, none to speak of. No petticoat I'm certain, no stockings, nothing but a thin dress and, and knickers."

I don't know that many modern mothers are worried as to how their daughters dress but I know that some are. Some think their girls don't wear enough, some think they want too many clothes. There are battles royal waged every day about it. The foolishness of it!

Why not let your daughter dress as she wants to, even if you think it foolish? She probably wants to dress just as the rest of her set are doing and it will be torture to her if she can't. Never shall I forget how I suffered because when a girl I was not allowed to have a "bang" when every other girl had one. And because I had to wear boots and stockings when all the other girls went barefoot to school.

Never mind if you think the things she wears aren't "decent." Personally I ask only one thing about a girl's clothes—are they beautiful and do they add to the beauty of the wearer? If they are not and do not they are indecent. I always loathed too short skirts because they show the ugliest curve in the human body, the in-bend of the knee. Too low backs I dislike because nine out of ten backs are ugly and should be covered up. I have seen sadly few beautiful bare legs—they are generally too scrawny or pimply. But I can't see any other indecency save that of ugliness in them. Girls should want pretty clothes and should have them. "Dowdiness," says Oliver Wendell Holmes, "is clearly an expression of imperfect vitality."

"Oh, she's boy-crazy." So said a woman once in my hearing. I didn't know the girl to whom she referred. Perhaps she was boy-crazy. There are always a few silly girls like that—always have been, and, I fear, always will be. But, dear mother, every normal girl likes boys. "A woman," says Holmes, "would rather talk to a man than to an angel." Which is sweetly reasonable. Why shouldn't she? What point of contact would she have with an angel? I'm sure I wouldn't know what to say to such a being.

Of course there is a year or so in the teens when boys do seem to a girl more wonderful beings than they will ever seem again. This interest is a natural and healthy one and should be acknowledged and directed, not forbidden. At that last word an

old memory comes up. I hear a very small girl, wild horses will not drag from me the secret of who that girl was, saying pleadingly,

“Aunty, please forbid us to do it so that it will be fun to do it.”

That small girl did not know much but she had got hold of a powerful bit of psychology by the tail. The forbidden thing has a charm. Don't make too many things charming because of a taboo. Especially boys, who are quite charming enough without that to Sweet Sixteen. Don't let your girl pass into womanhood with nothing but starved or stolen youth behind her. Let her have some boy friends and some “dates”—even, to use a real nice, old-timey word, some beaus. If she hasn't a beau or two in her 'teens how on earth is she ever going to learn how to manage the men? I once heard a dear old lady say severely,

“I don't 'old with beaus. Either they means nothing or they means too much.”

Her daughters both ran away and married the wrong men. Naturally. They hadn't learned to distinguish for themselves between those who meant nothing or too much.

“I love her so—and I want to save her from making the mistakes that I did.”

Of course you love her. Who could help loving her, this palpitant young creature, so sweet and so absurd, as beautiful and mysterious as a summer twilight, with her flower-like face, her great, asking eyes, her body exquisite in its liteness as a lyric of spring, her every step a dance, her every gesture one of grace and virility, believing romance and happiness to be hers of right by the token of the dimple in her chin? But love isn't enough, dear lady. You must understand, too. And understanding is something very much rarer and harder than loving.

Perhaps you find it hard to understand her. Small wonder. She is an enigma—this creature who sometimes has the face of one who listens to fairy music and at other times is austere intellectual, staggering you with casual remarks about the quantum theory and the planetesimal hypothesis. Who sometimes seems to you like a lonely little rudderless ship drifting over the rim of the world, and anon is only a girl who is a star forward in basket ball and aspires to the championship in bareback riding. Who now is a living flame and again as cool as an April night, with a horror of not seeming hard as nails which a really hard person would never feel. Who is sometimes so near you and sometimes so far away that she might as well be beyond Sirius. Indeed, it is hard to understand her. But just remember what you were twenty years ago, your moods, your whims, your dreams, your aspirations. Perhaps it won't be so hard then.

It's all very well to say you want to save her from the mistakes you made. But

you can't do it. And anyway she isn't likely to make the same mistakes. She'll probably make entirely different ones. Why not cultivate that rarest thing in man or woman, toleration, and let her make a few mistakes? Our mistakes teach us more than anything else sometimes. You may be wise with the wisdom of the old. But remember she is wise with the wisdom of the young. Such a thing does exist and sometimes I feel very sorry that I have lost it. Don't try to plan her life out for her. Let her do the planning herself. Don't force her into a mold. Don't make her do something just because someone else, or everybody else—is doing it. Don't give her too much advice. Youth hates advice. Age hates advice. And our attitude to it is generally that of an old man I once knew whose daughter-in-law nagged him terribly. When he was asked why he put up with it he smiled tolerantly.

“Lawful heart, she do enjoy giving advice so much. And it don't hurt me 'cause I never takes it.”

Let her alone a good deal. Young things can stand an immense amount of letting alone if we elders could only realize it. As I said, in the beginning, teach her a few basic things and beyond that exercise a little wise forgetfulness. Having done your best don't worry. Keep a sense of proportion. I have known few if any “model” girls who have in later life made women of vitality or magnetism or success. And I have known many harum-scarum girls who turned out to be wonderfully good wives and mothers. Yourself, for example.

But oh, *do* insist that she returns the books she borrows!

This little preachment of mine isn't all for the mothers. Lastly and very briefly (more ministerial influence probably!) I do want to say a word to the girls.

You are all so youthful and charming, dears, and so much, so very much, like the girls of my own generation. You won't quite believe this of course. You can't believe that your mothers and grandmothers were ever girls like you. But it's true.

I'm taking a few things for granted, just as I did when talking to your mothers. I'm taking it for granted that you are not the kind of girl who yowls about living her own life when her mother objects to her staying out most of the night in the company of some youth about whom she knows nothing. I'm taking it for granted that you are not the kind of girl who is always sorry for herself and who calls making life miserable for everybody connected with her “developing her own personality.” All that sort of thing has a tendency to make me Dorothy-Dix-minded. No, I'm taking it for granted that you are a girl, very like what I was myself once, eager, ambitious, asking much of life and willing to give all I had to life in return. Full of faults and small vanities and quite mistaken notions about many things, the greatest mistake being that

which youth is always so prone to make, in believing that it can pounce on life like a cat on a mouse, play with it awhile, and then devour it at once. And I want, really want, to help you if I can.

“The youth of today is so fearless,” said a girl to me not long ago. “We look at life without fear.”

The darling thought her generation the only one that had ever done that. But youth is always fearless. It is unafraid because it hasn't found out what life can do to it. And it is always “modern.” It is well that it should be so. There would be no progress otherwise. Only don't mistake running around in circles for progress and don't think your mothers were absolute figureheads because they weren't air-minded and didn't talk with what you call, and perhaps believe, “stark sincerity” about certain matters. They weren't “cowards” because of that. Oh, no. Or if they were they were no greater cowards than some of you, who don't, in your secret souls, want to “pet” indiscriminatingly and smoke and drink but are afraid you'll be laughed at by your set as old-fashioned or “Victorian” if you don't.

“He was the biggest coward there is,” I heard a man say once. “He was scared not to do it.”

How many of you are cowards of that sort? Answer that question for yourselves.

Oh yes, we girls of that olden day were very much like you. There were rose-leaf girls then where there are sun-tan girls now but the difference is only in the skins. So we understand you better than you think. And I want you to believe that in nine cases out of ten “the old bromide,” “your mother is your best friend,” is true. Bromides have such an abominable habit of being true. Perhaps that is why we hate them so.

Oh, I know there is a lot of silly fiction of today dealing with “smother love” and all that. There are such cases of abnormal mothers just as there are abnormal daughters. But I'm just talking to normal girls about normal mothers, mothers whom you may think a bit fussy and faddy, as perhaps they are. But don't forget that they love you better than anything in the world and would do far more for you in a pinch than any of your “sophisticated” chums and beaux.

We all love you, dear hearts, with your starry eyes and your belief that life is one endless adventure; with your dreams of all the things that may happen tomorrow; with your thirst for “thrills,” and your firm conviction that there are only two complimentary adjectives in the English language, “priceless” and “marvellous.” We love you and we want you to have rich full lives, quench your thirst for living at the

unknown, enchanted springs we sought and could not find, do all the wonderful things we wanted and failed to do. We want you to have more real freedom, not merely more apparent freedom, than we had to develop and expand. Because, as Holmes says—I'm really quite "nutty" about Holmes and I don't know whether this generation has read a line of his delightful Breakfast Table series . . . "The truest lives are those which are cut rose-diamond fashion answering to the many planed aspects of the world about them."

That's the advantage your generation has over mine, you can be cut with more facets. And so you will have more power than we had, the power of the broadened thought, the power of the more unfettered act, the power of the spoken word, and the greatest of these is, I verily believe, the spoken word. Just one word uttered or unuttered and a whole life is changed, even, it may be, the course of history. Suppose Napoleon's mother had said "no" in place of "yes."

"Give us a standard to live by in this age of shifting faiths and ideals, when all the old traditions seem to be going by the board," you say. Ah, but can I? well, here's a try for it. Just another quotation, this time from one of my own books in which a very wise old lady says to the little Marigold,

"Play the game of life according to the rules. It's wiser because you can't cheat life in the long run. Live joyously. Do what you want to do as long as you can go to your mirror afterwards and look yourself in the face."

That isn't as easy as it may sound!

TRANSCRIBER NOTES

Mis-spelled words and printer errors have been fixed.

[The end of *The 'Teen-Age Girl* by L. M. (Lucy Maud) Montgomery]