

The Chatelaine

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AN OPEN LETTER

from a

Minister's Wife

Lucy Maud Montgomery

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L. M. Montgomery, Author of "Anne of Green Gables," and one of the most noted minister's wives in the Dominion answers the question: —"*What does the minister's wife expect from the women of the congregation?*"

Illustrated by Edith McLaren

When, twenty years ago, I married a minister, my friends groaned in unison, “So much is expected of a minister’s wife!” I was not ignorant of this, having been brought up in a community where I had heard several ministers’ wives discussed, favorably and unfavorably. I had, indeed, a pretty clear idea of what was expected of a minister’s wife. Moreover, I admitted that I thought the congregation had a right to expect certain things from the mistress of their manse. I have never had any sympathy with the point of view expressed in the statement, “The congregation doesn’t pay me a salary, so they have no right to expect anything in particular from me.” There are certain things that cannot be expressed in terms of dollars and cents. The leadership which the minister’s wife can give, especially in rural communities where it may otherwise be lacking, is one of them. From my viewpoint, the minister’s wife has a special opportunity for service which is a privilege and not a duty.

But nothing is one-sided. If the congregation has a right to expect certain things of the minister’s wife she has an equal right to expect certain things of them. This is what *The Chatelaine*—May her shadow never grow less!—has asked me to write about, and I will try to present as briefly as possible the “minister’s wife’s” side of the expectations.

In the first place, while a good deal may be expected from a free and unencumbered manse mistress, no congregation should expect anything more from a wife with a young family and no help than from a “lay sister” in the same position. She has a right to this consideration from them. This understands itself, as the French say. And she has a right to expect that if some lynx-eyed mother in Israel discovers a button missing from the ministerial vest on Sunday, she will not be condemned too hastily, but that due allowance will be made for the teething baby or the croupy Junior.

She has a right to expect loyal and intelligent co-operation on the part of the women of her husband’s congregation. The minister’s wife cannot do it all when it comes to church societies. She can only give a little leadership and guidance. For success and forward marching good team work is necessary for all. It is a joy to work with sweetly reasonable women, but one crank on the executive can embitter the existence of the minister’s wife and wreck the work of the organization woefully.

Also I would humbly suggest that she should not have her perfect and incomparable predecessor cast in her teeth too often. In days to come, when she in her turn will be gone and rainbowed with the iridescence of the past, she, too, will be remembered as a flawless and competent creature. But that will not take away the sting of the present comparison.

She expects that the congregation will concede to her a right to her own

opinions, tastes, methods of housekeeping and child training. To be the target of endless criticism along these lines would take the joy out of any life.

She expects that they will be willing to overlook her blunders and mistakes. She is not flawless any more than they are. She cannot at twenty have the wisdom of sixty. And, after all, the woman who never makes mistakes may be an admirable woman but somehow I think she would be an unlovable one, too. The minister's wife may sometimes fail to recognize the right time to be silent, or she may bungle in trying too hard to be an inspiration. The path of perfection is narrow and few there be that find it. In short, she expects that her husband's people will remember that she is a human being.

She has a right to dress to please herself. This should not worry the women of the parish—or the men either. For women are not the only offenders in this respect. I once heard it asked what a certain good and reverend elder had died of.

“Heart failure,” said one neighbor.

“Not at all,” said another. “He really died of the minister's wife's bobbed hair.”

And I knew of a case where a whole session refused to call a minister who had pleased them in every respect, because his wife, who unwisely accompanied him when he came to “preach for a call,” had a gay red rose in her hat.

Let the minister's wife's clothes alone. It is not likely that on the average minister's salary she will have more pretty things than are good for her. Besides, even if her dress were dowdy and her hat swore at her nose, she wouldn't be a bit the better wife to the minister or help to the congregation.

Then, too, the congregation should remember that the minister's wife likes a little fun, especially if she has been cursed with an inconvenient sense of humor. What agonies I have endured betimes when I was dying to laugh but dared not because I was the minister's wife. How did I keep a straight face when a dear, kindly soul remarked that her husband hadn't been able to attend a certain funeral because he had such a headache that “he knew he wouldn't enjoy himself if he did go!” Or when another equally good and sweet woman groaned behind me at another funeral, as we passed the flower-heaped casket, “Oh, poor man, I hope you are as happy as you look”—more as if she hoped rather than believed it!

She has a right to expect that they will respect her confidences as they expect her to respect theirs. And she has a right to expect that when people tell her about B's faults they will tell her about B's virtues at the same time. But this, I realize, is a counsel of perfection.

If at times the minister's wife is a bit absent-minded or preoccupied or “stiff,” the

congregation should not imagine that she is unfriendly or uninterested or trying to snub them. She has a right to expect that they make a few excuses for her. Perhaps she is so tired that she is not quite sane; perhaps she is one of those people to whom it is torture to show their feelings—dead and gone generations of sternly repressed forefathers may have laid their unyielding fingers of reserve on her lips; perhaps she is wondering if anyone could sell her a little time; perhaps there are many small worries snapping and snarling at her heels; perhaps she has had one of those awful moments when we catch a glimpse of ourselves as we really are; perhaps she has the odd feeling of not belonging to this or any world, that follows an attack of flu; perhaps she is just pitifully shy at heart. Or her own feelings may have been hurt. Because ministers' wives have feelings that are remarkably like the feelings of other women, and injustice and misunderstanding hurt us very keenly.

For my own part, when I recall the happenings of my own twenty years as mistress of the manse, I conclude that on the whole this is a nice kind of a world even for a minister's wife. The roses have outnumbered the thorns by thousands.

I look back and see many lovely things. They crowd into memory in a curious medley. Charming vanished households from which no one ever went away without feeling better in some way. Homes that were hospitality incarnate. Houses that always seemed pleased to have you come to them. Frank, ungrudging tributes, appreciative, priceless words that cast a sudden rainbow over existence. Dear gentle souls who never once made me feel that I had said the wrong thing. Silent, gentle handclasps of sympathy that heartened when life was grey. Camp fires of young folks like fiery roses of night. Little friendly, neighborly offerings now and then—the jar of cream or jelly, the box of eggs, the root of an admired perennial, the bouquet that brought to the manse the loveliness of old-fashioned gardens.

And the dear, dear women I have known! Mrs. A., who was always like a comfortable fire on a warm hearth. Mrs. B., who had something about her capacious maternal bosom that made you want to lay your head on it and whisper your troubles. Mrs. C, whose memory comes as a balm whenever I recall her. Mrs. D, whose words were always of things lovely and of good report Mrs. E, dear soul, who told me so simply and sweetly, that she had been praying that my lost, beloved pussy might be found. And darling Mrs. F, with ageless sorrow and patience in her eyes, who, when someone remarked to her, "You've had so many troubles, poor thing," flashed back, "Yes, but think of all the fun I've had between times." A meeting with these women and many more like them always made me feel as if the day had given me a purple gift. I have received far, far more than I expected or had any right to expect from the people among whom it has been my lot and privilege to

work.

TRANSCRIBER NOTES

Mis-spelled words and printer errors have been fixed.

Death date of the illustrator Edith McLaren is unknown; illustrations have been omitted.

[The end of *An Open Letter from a Minister's Wife* by L. M. (Lucy Maud) Montgomery]