

Mother

by

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Mother

When handsome young Richard Field--he was very handsome and very young--announced to our assembled company that if his turn should really come to tell us a story, the story should be no invention of his fancy, but a page of truth, a chapter from his own life, in which himself was the hero and a lovely, innocent girl was the heroine, his wife at once looked extremely uncomfortable. She changed the reclining position in which she had been leaning back in her chair, and she sat erect, with a hand closed upon each arm of the chair.

"Richard," she said. "do you think that it is right of you to tell any one, even friends, anything that you have never yet confessed to me?"

"Ethel," replied Richard, "although I cannot promise that you will be entirely proud of my conduct when you have heard this episode of my past, I do say that there is nothing in it to hurt the trust you have placed in me since I have been your husband. Only," he added, "I hope that I shall not have to tell any story at all."

"Oh, yes you will!" we all exclaimed together; and the men looked eager while the women sighed.

The rest of us were much older than Richard, we were middle-aged, in fact; and human nature is so constructed, that when it is at the age when making love keeps it busy, it does not care so much to listen to tales of others' love-making; but the more it recedes from that period of exuberance, and ceases to have love adventures of its own, the greater become its hunger and thirst to hear about this delicious business which it can no longer personally practice with the fluency of yore. It was for this reason that we all yearned in our middle-aged way for the tale of love which we expected from young Richard. He, on his part, repeated the hope that by the time his turn to tell a story was reached we should be tired of stories and prefer to spend the evening at the card tables or in the music room.

We were a house party, no brief "week-end" affair, but a gathering whose period for most of the guests covered a generous and leisurely ten days, with enough departures and arrivals to give that variety which is necessary among even the most entertaining and agreeable people. Our skilful hostess had assembled us in the country, beneath a roof of New York luxury, a luxury which has come in these later days to be so much more than princely. By day, the grounds afforded us both golf and tennis, the stables provided motor cars and horses to ride or drive over admirable roads, through beautiful scenery that was embellished by a magnificent autumn season. At nightfall, the great house itself received us in the arms of supreme comfort, fed us sumptuously, and after dinner ministered to our middle-aged bodies with chairs and sofas of the highest development.

The plan devised by our hostess, Mrs. Davenport, that a story should be told by one of us each evening, had met with courtesy, but not I with immediate enthusiasm. But Mrs. Davenport had chosen her guests with her usual wisdom, and after the first experiment, story telling proved so successful that none of us would have readily abandoned it. When the time had come for Richard Field to entertain the company with the promised tale from his life experience, his hope of escaping this ordeal had altogether vanished.

Mrs. Field, it had been noticed as early as breakfast time, was inclined to be nervous on her husband's account. Five years of married life had not cured her of this amiable symptom, and she made but a light meal. He, on the other hand, ate heartily and without signs of disturbance. Apparently he was not even conscious of the glances that his wife so frequently stole at him.

"Do at least have some omelet, my dear," whispered Mrs. Davenport urgently. "It's quite light."

But Mrs. Field could summon no appetite.

"I see you are anxious about him," Mrs. Davenport continued after breakfast. "You are surely not afraid his story will fail to interest us?"

"No, it is not that."

"It can't be that he has given up the one he expected to tell us and can think of no other?"

"Oh, no; he is going to tell that one."

"And you don't like his choice?"

"He won't tell me what it is!" Mrs. Davenport put down her embroidery. "Then, Ethel," she laid with severity, "the fault is yours. When I had been five years married, Mr. Davenport confided everything to me."

"So does Richard. Except when I particularly ask him."

"There it is, Ethel. You let him see that you want to know."

"But I do want to know. Richard has had such interesting experiences, so many of them. And I do so want him to tell a thoroughly nice one. There's the one when he saved a man from drowning just below our house, the second summer, and the man turned out to be a burglar and broke into the pantry that very night, and Richard caught him in the dark with just as much courage as he had caught him in the water and just as few clothes, only it was so different. Richard makes it quite thrilling. And I mentioned another to him. But he just went on shaving. And now he has gone out walking, and I believe it's going to be something I would rather not hear. But I mean to hear it."

At lunch Mrs. Field made a better meal, although it was clear to Mrs. Davenport that Richard on returning from his walk had still kept his intentions from Ethel. "She does not manage him in the least," Mrs. Davenport declared to the other ladies, as Ethel and Richard started for an afternoon drive together. "She will not know anything more when she brings him back."

But in this Mrs. Davenport did wrong to Ethel's resources. The young wife did know something more when she brought her husband back from their drive through the pleasant country. They returned looking like an engaged couple, rather than parents whose nursery was already a song of three little voices.

"He has told her," thought Mrs. Davenport at the first sight of them, as they entered the drawing-room for an afternoon tea. "She does understand some things."

And when after dinner the ladies had withdrawn to the library, and waited for the men to finish their cigars, Mrs. Davenport spoke to Ethel. "My dear, I congratulate you. I saw it at once."

"But he hasn't. Richard hasn't told me anything."

"Ethel! Then what is the matter?"

"I told him something. I told him that if it was going to be any story about--about something I shouldn't like, I should simply follow it with a story about him that he wouldn't like."

"Ethel! You darling!"

"Oh, yes, and I said I was sure you would all listen, even though I was not an author myself. And I have it ready, you know, and it's awfully like Richard, only a different side of him from the burglar one."

"But, my dear, what did he do when you--"

This enquiry was, however, cut short by the entrance of the men. And from the glance that came from Richard's eyes as they immediately sought out his wife, Mrs. Davenport knew that he could not have done anything very severe to Ethel when she made that threat to him during their drive.

Richard at once made his way to the easy-chair arranged each night in a good position for the narrator of the evening, and baptised "The Singstool" by Mr. Graves. Mr. Graves was an ardent Wagnerian, and especially devoted to The Mastersingers of Nuremberg.

"Shall we have," he whispered to Mr. Hillard, "a Beckmesser fiasco to-night, or will it be a Walter success?"

But Mr. Hillard, besides being an author and a critic, cared little for the too literary cleverness of Mr. Graves. He therefore heavily crushed that gentleman's allusion to Wagner's opera. "I remember," he said, "the singing contest between Beckmesser and Walter, and I doubt if we are to be afflicted with anything so dull in this house."

Richard had settled himself in the easy-chair, and was looking thoughtfully at various objects in the room, while the small-talk was subsiding around him.

"Why, Mr. Field," said Mrs. Davenport, "you look as if you could find nothing to suggest your story to you."

"On the contrary," said Richard, "it is the number of things that suggest it. This newspaper here, that has arrived since I was last in the room, has a column which reminds me very forcibly of the experience that I have selected to tell you. But I think the most appropriate of all is that picture." He pointed to the largest picture on the wall. "'Breaking Home Ties' is its title, I remember very well. It is a replica of the original that drew such crowds in the Art Building at the World's Fair."

While Richard was saying this, his wife had possessed herself of the newspaper, and he now observed how eagerly she was scanning its pages. "It is the financial column, Ethel, that recalls my story."

Ethel, after a hopeless glance at this, resumed her seat near the sofa by Mrs. Davenport.

"There were many paintings," continued Richard, "in that Art Building, of merit incomparably greater than 'Breaking Home Ties'; and yet the crowd never looked at those, because it did not understand them. But at any hour of the day, if you happened to pass this picture, it took you some time to do so. You could pass any of John Sargeant's pictures, for instance, at a speed limited only by your own powers of running; but you could never run past 'Breaking Home Ties.' You had to work your way through the crowd in front of that just as you have to do at a fire, or a news office during a football game. The American people could never get enough of that mother kissing her boy goodbye, while the wagon waits at the open door to take him away from her upon his first journey into the world. The idea held a daily pathos for them. Many had themselves been through such leave takings; and no word so stirs the general heart as the word 'mother'. Song writers know this; and the artist knew it when he decided to paint 'Breaking Home Ties.' And 'Mother' is the title of my story to-night."

"Mother!" This was Ethel's bewildered echo, "Whose Mother?" she softly murmured to herself.

Richard continued. "It concerns the circumstances under which I became engaged to my wife."

There was a movement from Ethel as she sat by the sofa.

"Not all the circumstances, of course," the narrator continued, with a certain guarded candour in his tone. "There are certain circumstances which naturally attend every engagement between happy and--and devoted-- young people that they keep to themselves quite carefully, in spite of the fact that any one who has been through the experience of being engaged two or three times--"

There was another movement from Ethel by the sofa.

"--or even only once, as is my case," the narrator went on, "any body, I say, who has been through the experience of being engaged only once, can form a very correct idea of the circumstances that attend the happy engagements of all young people. I imagine they prevail in all countries, just as the feeling about 'mother' prevails. Yes, 'Mother' is the right title for my story, as you shall see. Is it not strange that if you add 'in-law' to the word 'mother,' how immediately the sentiment of the term is altered?--as strongly indeed as when you prefix the word 'step' to it. But it is with neither of these composite forms of mother that any story deals.

"Ethel has always maintained that if I had really understood her, it never would have happened. She says--"

"Richard, I"--

"My dear, you shall tell your story afterwards, and I promise to listen without a word until you are finished. Mrs. Field says that if I had understood her nature as a man ought to understand the girl he has been thinking about for several years, I should have known she cared nothing about my income."

"I didn't care! I'd have"--but Mr. Field checked her outburst.

"She was going to say," said Mr. Field, "that had I asked her to marry me when I became sure that I wished to marry her, she would have been willing to leave New York and go to the waste land in Michigan that was her inheritance from a grandfather, and there build a cabin and live in it with me; and that while I shot prairie chickens for dinner she would have milked the cow which some member of the family would have been willing to give us as a wedding present instead of a statue of the Winged Victory, or silver spoons and forks, had we so desired."

Richard made a pause here, and looked at his wife as if he expected her to correct him. But Ethel was plainly satisfied with his statement, and he therefore continued.

"I think it is ideal when a girl is ready to do so much as that for a man. But I should not think it ideal in a man to allow the girl he loved to do it for him. Nor did I then know anything about the lands in Michigan--though this would have made no difference. Ethel had been accustomed to a house several stories high, with hot and cold water in most of them, and somebody to answer the door-bell."

"The door-bell!" exclaimed Ethel. "I could have gone without hearing that."

"Yes, Ethel, only to hear the welkin ring would have been enough for you. I know that you are sincere in thinking so. And the ringing welkin is all we should have heard in Michigan. But the more truly a man loves a girl, the less can he bear taking her from an easy to a hard life. I am sure that all the men here agree with me."

There was a murmur and a nod from the men, and also from Mrs. Davenport. But the other ladies gave no sign of assenting to Richard's proposition.

"In those days," said he, "I was what in the curt parlance of the street is termed a six-hundred-dollar clerk. And though my ears had grown accustomed to this appellation, I never came to feel that it completely described me. In passing Tiffany's window twice each day (for my habit was to walk to and from Nassau Street) I remember that seeing a thousand-dollar clock exposed for sale caused me annoyance. Of course my salary as a clerk brought me into no unfavourable comparison with the clock; and I doubt if I could make you understand my sometimes feeling when I passed Tiffany's window that I should like to smash the clock."

"I met Ethel frequently in society, dancing with her, and sitting next her at dinners. And by the time I had dined at her own house, and walked several afternoons with her, my lot as a six-hundred-dollar clerk began to seem very sad to me. I wrote verses about it, and about other subjects also. From an evening passed with Ethel, I would go next morning to the office and look at the other clerks. One of them was fifty-five, and he still received six hundred dollars--his wages for the last thirty years. I was then twenty-one; and though I never despaired to the extent of believing that years would fail to increase my value to the firm by a single cent, still, for what could I hope? If my salary were there and then to be doubled, what kind of support was twelve hundred dollars to offer Ethel, with her dresses, and her dinners, and her father's carriage? For two years I was wretchedly unhappy beneath the many hours of gaiety that came to me, as to every young man."

"Those two years we could have been in Michigan," said Ethel, "had you understood."

"I know. But understanding, I believe that I should do the same again. At the office, when not busy, I wrote more poetry, and began also to write prose, which I found at the outset less easy. When my first writings were accepted (they were four sets of verses upon the Summer Resort) I felt that I could soon address Ethel; for I had made ten dollars outside my salary. Had she not been in Europe that July, I believe that I should have spoken to her at once. But I sent her the paper; and I have the letter that she wrote in reply."

"I"--began Ethel. But she stopped.

"Yes, I know now that you kept the verses," said Richard. "My next manuscript, however, was rejected. Indeed, I went on offering my literary productions nearly every week until the following January before a second acceptance came. It was twenty five dollars this time, and almost made me feel again that I could handsomely support Ethel."

But not quite. After the first charming elation at earning money with my pen, those weeks of refusal had caused me to think more soberly. And though I was now bent upon becoming an author and leaving Nassau Street, I burned no bridges behind me, but merely filled my spare hours with writing and with showing it to Ethel."

"It was now that the second area of perturbation of my life came to me. I say the second, because the first had been the recent dawning belief that Ethel thought about me when I was not there to remind her of myself. This idea had stirred --but you will understand. And now, what was my proper, my honourable course? It was a positive relief that at this crisis she went to Florida. I could think more quietly. My writing had come to be quite often accepted, sometimes even solicited. Should I speak to her, and ask her to wait until I could put a decent roof over her head, or should I keep away from her until I could offer such a roof? Her father, I supposed, could do something for us. But I was not willing to be a pensioner. His business--were he generous--would be to provide cake and butter; but the bread was to be mine and bread was still a long way off, according to New York standards. These things I thought over while she was in Florida; yet when once I should I find myself with her again, I began to fear that I could not hold myself from--but these are circumstances which universal knowledge renders it needless to mention, and I will pass to the second perturbation."

"A sum of money was suddenly left me. Then for the first time I understood why I had during my boyhood been so periodically sent to see a cross old brother of my mother's, who lived near Cold Spring on the Hudson, and whom we called Uncle Snaggletooth when no one could hear us. Uncle Godfrey (for I have called him by his right name ever since) died and left me what in those old days six years ago was still a large amount. To-day we understand what true riches mean. But in those bygone times six years ago, a million dollars was a sum considerable enough to be still seen, as it were, with the naked eye. That was my bequest from Uncle Godfrey, and I felt myself to be the possessor of a fortune."

At this point in Richard's narrative, a sigh escaped from Ethel.

"I know," he immediately said, "that money is always welcome. But it is certainly some consolation to reflect how slight a loss a million dollars is counted to-day in New York. And I did not lose all of it."

"I met Ethel at the train on her return from Florida, and crossed with her on the ferry from Jersey City to Desbrosses Street. There I was obliged to see her drive away in the carriage with her father."

"Mr. Field," said Mrs. Davenport, "what hour did that train arrive at Jersey City?"

Richard looked surprised. "Why, seven-fifteen P. M.," he replied. "The tenth of March."

"Dark!" Mrs. Davenport exclaimed. "Mr. Field, you and Ethel were engaged before the ferry boat landed at Desbrosses Street."

Richard and Ethel both sat straight up, but remained speechless.

"Pardon my interruption," said Mrs. Davenport, smiling. "I didn't want to miss a single point in this story--do go on!"

Richard was obliged to burst out laughing, in which Ethel, after a moment, followed him, though perhaps less heartily. And as he continued, his blush subsided.

"With my Uncle Godfrey's legacy I was no longer dependent upon my salary, or my pen, or my father's purse; and I decided that with the money properly invested, I could maintain a modest establishment of my own. Ethel agreed with me entirely; and, after a little, we disclosed our plans to our families, and they met with approval. This was in April, and we thought of October or November for the wedding. It seemed long to wait; but it came near being so much longer, that I grow chilly now to think of it."

"Of course, I went steadily on with my work at the office in Nassau Street, nor did I neglect my writing entirely. My attention, however, was now turned to the question of investing my fortune. Just round the corner from our office was the firm of Blake and Beverly, Stocks and Bonds. Thither my steps began frequently to turn. Mr. Beverly had business which brought him every week to the room of our president; and so having a sort of acquaintance with him, I felt it easier to consult him than to seek any other among the brokers, to which class I was a well nigh total stranger. He very kindly consented to be my adviser. I was well pleased to find how much I had underrated the interest-bearing capacity of my windfall. 'Four per cent!' he cried, when I told him this was the extent of my expectations. 'Why, you're talking like a trustee.' And then seeing that his meaning was beyond me, he explained in his bluff, humorous manner. 'All a trustee cares for you know, is his reputation for safety. It's not his own income he's nursing, and so he doesn't care how small he makes it, provided only that his investments would be always called safe. Now there are ways of being safe without spending any trouble or time upon it; and those are the ways a trustee will take. For example,' and here he arose and unhooking a file of current quotations from the wall, placed it in my lap as I sat beside him. 'now here are Government three's selling at 108 3-8. They are as safe as the United States; and if I advised you to buy them, it would cost me no thought, and my character for safety would run no risk of a blemish. That is the sort of bond that a trustee recommends. But see what income it gives you. Roughly speaking, about twenty-eight thousand dollars.'"

"That would not do at all,' said I, thinking of Ethel and October."

"Certainly not for you,' returned Mr. Beverly, gaily. If you were a timorous old maid, now, who would really like all her money in her stocking in gold pieces, only she's ashamed to say so! But a young fellow like you with no responsibility, no wife, and butcher's bill--it's quite another thing!"

"Quite,' said I, 'oh, quite!'"

"Richard," interrupted Ethel, "do you have to make yourself out so simple?"

"My dear, you forget that I said I should invent nothing, but should keep myself to actual experiences. The part of my story that is coming now is one where I should be very glad to draw upon my imagination."

"Mr. Beverly now ran his finger up and down various columns. 'Here again,' said he, 'is a typical trustee bond, and nets you a few thousand dollars more at present prices. New York Central and Hudson River 3 1-2's. Or here are West Shore 4's at 113 5-8. But you see it scales down to pretty much the same thing. The sort of bond that a trustee will call safe does not bring the owner more than about three and one-half per cent.'"

"'Why, there are some six per cent bonds!' I said; and I pointed them out to him."

"'Selling at 137 7-8, you see,' said Mr. Beverly. 'Deducting the tax, there you are scaled down again.' He pencilled some swift calculations. 'There,' said he. And I nearly understood them. 'Now I'm not here to stop your buying that sort of petticoat and canary-bird wafer,' continued Mr. Beverly. 'It's the regular trustee move, and nobody could criticise you if you made it. It's what I call thoughtless safety, and it brings you about 3 1-2 per cent, as I have already shown you. Anybody can do it.'" These words of Mr. Beverly made me feel that I did not want to do what anybody could do. 'There is another kind of safety which I call thoughtful safety,' said he. 'Thoughtful, because it requires you to investigate properties and their earnings, and generally to use your independent judgment after a good deal of work. And all this a trustee greatly dislikes. It rewards you with five and even six per cent, but that is no stimulus to a trustee.'"

"Something in me had leaped when Mr. Beverly mentioned six per cent. Again I thought of Ethel and October, and what a difference it would be to begin our modest housekeeping on sixty instead of forty thousand dollars a year, outside of what I was earning. Mr. Beverly now rang a bell. 'You happen to have come,' said he, 'on a morning when I can really do something for you out of the common. Bring me (it was a clerk he addressed) one of those Petunia circulars. Now here you can see at a glance for yourself.' He began reading the prospectus rapidly aloud to me while I followed its paragraphs with my own eye. His strong, well-polished thumb-nail ran heavily but speedily down the columns of figures and such words as gross receipts, increase of population, sinking fund, redeemable at 105 after 1920, churned vigorously and meaninglessly through my brain. But I was not going to let him know that to understand the circular I should have to take it away quietly to my desk in Nassau Street, and spend an hour with it alone."

"'What is your opinion of Petunia Water sixes?' he inquired."

"'They are a lead-pipe cinch,' I immediately answered; and he slapped me on the knee."

"'That's what I think!' he cried. 'Anyhow, I have taken 20,000 for mother. Do what you like.'"

"'Oh well,' said I, delighted at this confidence, I think I can afford to risk what you are willing to risk for your mother, Mrs. Beverly. Where is Petunia, did you say?'"

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