

# The Mother

By Dora Sigerson Shorter

When he rushed in to beat the child, I lied to him, saying the little one had gone out with his nurse, though I felt the small hands clutching at my feet from where I had hidden him behind my dress. I cared little what he did to me, but when he touched my child I could have killed him. He might have known I was hiding something from him, I answered so gently; but he did not, and went away. I seldom speak pleasantly to him now; why should I, when I hate him? Oh, I hate him! I loathe his very mannerisms, his heavy step upon the stairs, the habitual frown he has when sitting at his meals, the click-click of his toothpick when he has finished, his personality, which seems to fill the house the moment he comes into it. I loathe all. And yet, look here! and here! These are letters I keep to laugh over, just these two.

This one, written upon the eve of our wedding:—

“My little Love,—Even to-day, the last that separates us, must I write to tell you of my love and longing for the morning that will make you mine, as I am for ever yours.”

And this! a whole month after our marriage

“My darling Wife,—When will this separation end? The week has seemed an endless one to me. I long to hold you in my arms never to part again.”

Never to part again till death comes to one of us now we have grown weary of one another. “Never to part again.” The little time granted us upon earth marked from the altar to the grave with every year a new stone bearing the one record, “Thus far have you gone upon your way,” engraved on all—the dreary monotony of days alike. I could write almost word for word and act for act my life from now until the end. Every day the same face before me, the same grumble at every dish, the same hurry to catch the train to town, the same slam of the door at parting, the rattle of the latch-key at return, the crash of the closing door, the sullen face again—and then sleep. Thus every day for ever.

Which of us is the more weary of the other? And whose fault is it that this is so. He says it is mine, and I retort that it is his. What matter now whose was the failing if only the evil could be remedied? I know he hates my face, that is growing old, my uninteresting efforts at conversation, my want of dash. He has said so often enough, reproaching me because I was not like Mrs. Lewis, or Mrs. Hunter, or any one but myself. I might be upon their thousands a-year; who knows? One can only afford to be commonplace upon a couple of hundred.

For him new faces meet him in his man’s work—if one can call it work to follow out a trade one’s heart loves—but for me nothing save the drudgery of tending on him, laying his clothes in order, marketing for his appetite, doing the endless little domestic cares that leave no mark upon the world’s scroll of fame and get no recognition at home. I too have had my ambitions and my dreams; but when a woman marries she must give up self. Yet I would regret nothing if once he would take me into his arms and say: “I understand; for me you have left your dreams, the name you thought to make in the world, preferring a dearer name in one man’s heart. The long hours that your art demanded from you, you have spent doing the monotonous duties of my household;

but I appreciate and understand.” Or if he would not speak at all, but hold me to him, knowing my heart and comforting it without words. But why dream of impossibilities when, after a day of labour, he tells me I do nothing, that women but sit at home and amuse themselves while men toil to support them? What amusement is it to me to plan meals each day without the hope of an approving word? to turn and return old gowns, or oversee servants? My friends I left far away when I came to him, and with his I have little in sympathy; yet I am glad to see them come to our house, since for a time, at least, they dispel the gloom of our domestic life; for a time the skeleton is put into its cupboard, our small cellar is robbed of its best wine, our wits are called upon to produce our most brilliant conversation. We smile, we are merry; then the guests depart, the skeleton stalks forth, the door slams. The sullen face is here again, and the peevish voice points out this fault and that, with never a word of praise. I retort. The voice grows in passion. I feel a child’s hand slipped into mine beneath the table in a mute appeal for my silence, and at the touch I am speechless. And then comes sleep. O blessed, blessed sleep! And this has been our life for six years.

God forgive me! I have forgotten my child in this railing against Fate. My darling, at once my dearest happiness and my keenest pain. What ambition did I ever have for any art compared with the longing to see the first intelligence and love wake in my baby’s eyes? What name upon the world’s lips for me so sweet as “Mother” when first spoken by my child. And yet my pain it is to see him grow up in fear of his father, to watch his frightened eyes go from face to face at meals, now pleading my silence, and again drooping before his father’s gaze, or to see him hiding in his terror of a blow as he does now.

Come forth, my darling. You are safe; your father will not return till night. Come. I will put you to bed and lie beside you. What woman had ever so beautiful a child as this? See the limbs, like a little Cupid’s, and the hair so curly that, when I draw it straight through my fingers, it springs back into a hundred ringlets. Come, little feet, till I unbutton each shoe, for your little master is my king, and I but his willing slave. Now the dress goes off and the little white gown goes on. Now we kneel together and pray, and then to sleep. A beautiful fairy stands upon our pillow and waves her magic wand, so that our eyes will not stay open. She will tell sweet dreams to my king, for I see she whispers to him already: his eyes open once, and then shut in deep, happy slumber.

Who in the night has not woke with an exceedingly bitter cry for something that they have not got? but who has cried as I have, breaking the silence? Oh, little child of hate, sleeping beside me, why have I borne you? Why have I cursed you with the heritage that must be yours? Little bond of love that keeps together two hearts that else would spring asunder, you must pay in sorrow for our sins! From hatred have you sprung, and in the home of hatred have you been reared; harsh tongues have clashed their discords around you, and hard glances fenced above your head; we have fought over you as wolves quarrel over a bone. What can save you from coming unhappiness? What disposition can you bring into the future from this home that is killing your child soul? What do you inherit from us to enable you to find joy? Your father’s evil passions, his love of wine, and my evil thoughts in you?

A man and his wife must be all to one another or nothing—there is no middle course. Yet if I thought he loved me, I could bear so much from him. If he would put his arms around me tonight, I could forget all my hate, all the dreary years past, all the harsh words, even the cruel grip of his hands. Oh, a woman’s home is her castle if she holds her husband’s heart, and he stand by her; let the world storm her gates with jeers and insults, she is safe and happy. But if her husband turn against her and shut her from his heart, though all the world protect her, she is alone indeed;

though all the world offer her shelter, she is without a home. So my nights pass with such thoughts. Sometimes I sleep and dream, and my dreams are terrible. I always dream that I am dead and watching my child from another state. I see him thrust aside by his stronger brethren, as the weak are always crushed; I see him sinking lower, his timid soul trampled out of his body by the strong, brutal wills of the base lot he has fallen among; so I cannot rest in heaven following his troubled path. Sometimes it is my keenest torture to watch his degraded life without the power to help. I see the little figure I loved to look upon grow bowed and gaunt with years and misery. The pretty, soft hands grow old and stretch for evil things. The pink feet I kissed so fondly wander in the ways of sin, the frank eyes grow clouded and shifty. The innocent soul I tried to keep pure becomes a thing forbidden in God's sight. Later his children will grow and bear the curse that was sown with his mother's unhappy union. Then I wake in tears.

And yet, though these things be dreams, I feel that they will come to pass. To-day, when I coughed, blood came into my mouth, and this means death, I know. What is there for the boy when I am gone? Perhaps some other woman will be given my place. What love will she have for my child? My child, who has been fed upon all the love of one woman's heart, at least. Will she have sympathy enough to understand and train his difficult nature? There is one way that I can save him, one way that I can be sure of his happiness, but it is so terrible that I cannot meet it. Oh, I am full of selfishness, for to me only can it bring pain, and to him it means eternal joy. To him it means the kingdom of heaven—to me it means hell, to be lost, tortured, damned, forbidden to God's sight for ever and ever and ever. I have prayed for some other solution to this question of the happiness of my child's future, but nothing comes to me but this—I must kill him.

To-day I have made up my mind. A doctor has told me I may not live a year: my disease has grown upon me; great pains shoot through my chest and quantities of blood come from my lungs at times. I do not dread the act of dying, only the parting from my child; but to-day I have made up my mind that we must part—never to meet again, not even in eternity. To-night I shall put it off no longer; my child shall suffer no more. An hour ago his father came home savage with drink and found the child had broken his favourite pipe during his absence. I would have saved the little fellow by taking the blame; but, when he heard his father's voice calling him downstairs, he went to his punishment like a hero. But his father had no admiration for his truth or pluck, only harsh words for the quaking child. I hurried downstairs when I heard my boy scream, but when I reached the door of the room where they were it was slammed and locked in my face. I heard the child call to me and the sound of hard blows above his bitter crying; every lash cut into my flesh and every blow was a knife thrust in my heart. I beat upon the door till my hands left their bloody marks upon the panels. When the door was opened at length, I bore the fainting child away. What was the use of words with a man who could ill-use a thing so helpless, who could treat a child in a way he dare not treat his dog, lest the world should cry shame upon him? But a dog will not forget an injustice, neither will a child; it is a wound that may heal, but always leaves a mark.

I rock my darling upon my heart and pray; I fold his little hands and make him repeat my words after me; then I sing him to sleep. Every bruise upon the white body appears to me like a reproach; it was not for this, my darling, that I brought you into the world. Yet nothing is more sure than sorrow; why did I not think? The room is growing dark; it seems to me as though phantoms wait in the shadows, watching my every action. I feel the air move as though fanned by invisible wings. Angels wait to bear my child to heaven; but for me dread ghosts are lurking in the darkness, and I am afraid. I feel what I cannot see; their blazing eyes burn into my soul. If

I were sure that when among the damned I should remember that my child was safe in heaven, I could find the sacrifice of my eternal life more easy to bear; but perhaps I may not remember. I do not think I shall, for then it would not be hell. What if they torture me with false dreams, making me see him in misery and misfortune? But what matter, when he shall be most blessed?

But no! it is too terrible! Can I part for ever from him? Shall I meet no more all the friends of my childhood who have passed away? My father and my mother? Shall I be shut out for ever from God's sight? Shall I have no one to welcome me in that strange country, when I stand there lone and new? Only jeering tongues and evil faces to greet me? Will it be all darkness for me, who hate the gloom? no little child to take my hand and lead me into safety and light? Yet I dare not hesitate. Heaven is yours now, my child, but as the years go on you may not be ready. Kiss me! kiss me! Good-bye, my love, my child; you shall die within my arms and against my breast. Thus—thus—O GOD!

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You who can pray, pray for me, who go forth into the darkness alone.