



***ELLA WHEELER
WILCOX***

***A WOMAN
OF THE WORLD:
HER COUNSEL
TO OTHER
PEOPLE'S
SONS AND
DAUGHTERS***

Ella Wheeler Wilcox

A Woman of the World: Her Counsel to Other People's Sons and Daughters

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Table of Contents

[To Mr. Ray Gilbert](#)
[To Miss Winifred Clayborne](#)
[To Edna Gordon](#)
[To Miss Gladys Weston](#)
[To Clarence St. Claire](#)
[To Miss Margaret Riley](#)
[To Miss Gladys Weston](#)
[To a Young Friend](#)
[To Wilfred Clayborn](#)
[To Miss Elsie Dean](#)
[To Sybyl Marchmont](#)
[To Miss Diana Rivers](#)
[To Nanette](#)
[To The Rev. Wilton Marsh](#)
[To Mrs. Charles McAllister](#)
[To Mrs. Charles Gordon](#)
[To Mr. Alfred Duncan](#)
[To Mr. Charles Gray](#)
[To Walter Smeed](#)
[To Sybyl Marchmont](#)
[To Mrs. Charles Gordon](#)
[To Mrs. Charles Gordon](#)
[To Miss Zoe Clayborn Artist](#)
[To Mr. Charles Gordon](#)
[To Mrs. Clarence St. Claire](#)
[To Young Mrs. Duncan](#)
[To a Young Man](#)

To Mrs. McAllister

To Mr. Ray Gilbert

To the Sister of a Great Beauty.

To Mrs. White Peak

To Maria Owens

To Mrs. St. Claire

To Miss Jessie Harcourt

To Miss Jane Carter

To Mr. Ray Gilbert

[Table of Contents](#)

Late Student, Aged Twenty-three

Were you an older man, my dear Ray, your letter would be consigned to the flames unanswered, and our friendship would become constrained and formal, if it did not end utterly. But knowing you to be so many years my junior, and so slightly acquainted with yourself or womankind, I am going to be the friend you need, instead of the misfortune you invite.

I will not say that your letter was a complete surprise to me. It is seldom a woman is so unsophisticated in the ways of men that she is not aware when friendship passes the borderline and trespasses on the domain of passion.

I realized on the last two occasions we met that you were not quite normal. The first was at Mrs. Hanover's dinner; and I attributed some indiscreet words and actions on your part to the very old Burgundy served to a very young man.

Since the memory of mortal, Bacchus has been a confederate of Cupid, and the victims of the former have a period (though brief indeed) of believing themselves slaves to the latter.

As I chanced to be your right-hand neighbour at that very merry board, where wit, wisdom, and beauty combined to condense hours into minutes, I considered it a mere accident that you gave yourself to me with somewhat marked devotion. Had I been any other one of the ladies

present, it would have been the same, I thought. Our next and last encounter, however, set me thinking.

It was fully a week later, and that most unromantic portion of the day, between breakfast and luncheon.

It was a Bagby recital, and you sought me out as I was listening to the music, and caused me to leave before the programme was half done. You were no longer under the dominion of Bacchus, though Euterpe may have taken his task upon herself, as she often does, and your manner and expression of countenance troubled me.

I happen to be a woman whose heart life is absolutely complete. I have realized my dreams, and have no least desire to turn them into nightmares. I like original rôles, too, and that of the really happy wife is less hackneyed than the part of the "misunderstood woman." And I find greater enjoyment in the steady flame of one lamp than in the flaring light of many candles.

I have taken a good deal of pride in keeping my lamp well trimmed and brightly burning, and I was startled and offended at the idea of any man coming so near he imagined he might blow out the light.

Your letter, however, makes me more sorry than angry.

You are passing through a phase of experience which comes to almost every youth, between sixteen and twenty-four.

Your affectional and romantic nature is blossoming out, and you are in that transition period where an older woman appeals to you.

Being crude and unformed yourself, the mature and ripened mind and body attract you.

A very young man is fascinated by an older woman's charms, just as a very old man is drawn to a girl in her teens.

This is according to the law of completion, each entity seeking for what it does not possess.

Ask any middle-aged man of your acquaintance to tell you the years of the first woman he imagined he loved, and you will find you are following a beaten path.

Because you are a worth while young man, with a bright future before you, I am, as I think of the matter, glad you selected me rather than some other less happy or considerate woman, as the object of your regard.

An unhappy wife or an ambitious adventuress might mar your future, and leave you with lowered ideals and blasted prospects.

You tell me in your letter that for "a day of life and love with me you would willingly give up the world and snap your fingers in the face of conventional society, and even face death with a laugh." It is easy for a passionate, romantic nature to work itself into a mood where those words are felt when written, and sometimes the mood carries a man and a woman through the fulfilment of such assertions. But invariably afterward comes regret, remorse, and disillusion.

No man enjoys having the world take him at his word, when he says he is ready to give it up for the woman he loves.

He wants the woman and the world, too.

In the long run, he finds the world's respect more necessary to his continued happiness than the woman's society.

Just recall the history of all such cases you have known, and you will find my assertions true.

Thank your stars that I am not a reckless woman ready to take you at your word, and thank your stars, too, that I am not a free woman who would be foolish enough and selfish enough to harness a young husband to a mature wife. I know you resent this reference to the difference in our years, which may not be so marked to the observer to-day, but how would it be ten, fifteen years from now? There are few disasters greater for husband or wife than the marriage of a boy of twenty to a woman a dozen years his senior. For when he reaches thirty-five, despair and misery must almost inevitably face them both.

You must forgive me when I tell you that one sentence in your letter caused a broad smile.

That sentence was, "Would to God I had met you when you were free to be wooed and loved, as never man loved woman before."

Now I have been married ten years, and you are twenty-three years old! You must blame my imagination (not my heart, which has no intention of being cruel) for the picture presented to my mind's eye by your wish.

I saw myself in the full flower of young ladyhood, carrying at my side an awkward lad of a dozen years, attired in knickerbockers, and probably chewing a taffy stick, yet "wooing and loving as never man loved before."

I suppose, however, the idea in your mind was that you wished Fate had made me of your own age, and left me free for you.

But few boys of twenty-three are capable of knowing what they want in a life companion. Ten years from now your ideal will have changed.

You are in love with love, life, and all womankind, my dear boy, not with me, your friend.

Put away all such ideas, and settle down to hard study and serious ambitions, and seal this letter of yours, which I am returning with my reply, and lay it carefully away in some safe place. Mark it to be destroyed unopened in case of your death. But if you live, I want you to open, re-read and burn it on the evening before your marriage to some lovely girl, who is probably rolling a hoop to-day; and if I am living, I want you to write and thank me for what I have said to you here. I hardly expect you will feel like doing it now, but I can wait.

Do not write me again until that time, and when we meet, be my good sensible friend—one I can introduce to my husband, for only such friends do I care to know.

To Miss Winifred Clayborne

[Table of Contents](#)

At Vassar College

My dear niece:—It was a pleasure to receive so long a letter from you after almost two years of silence. It hardly seems possible that you are eighteen years old. To have graduated from high school with such honours that you are able to enter Vassar at so early an age is much to your credit.

I indulged in a good-natured laugh over your request for my advice regarding a college course. You say, "I remember that I once heard you state that you did not believe in higher education for women, and, therefore, I am anxious to have your opinion of this undertaking of mine."

Now of course, my dear child, what you wish me to say is, that I am charmed with your resolution to graduate from Vassar. You have entered the college fully determined to take a complete course, and you surely would not like a discouraging or disapproving letter from your auntie.

"Please give me your opinion of my course of action" always means, "Please approve of what I am doing."

Well I *do* approve. I always approve when a human being is carrying out a determination, even if I am confident it is the wrong determination.

The really useful knowledge of life must come through strong convictions. Strong convictions are usually obtained only on the pathway of personal experience.

To argue a man out of a certain course of action rarely argues away his own beliefs and desires in the matter. We may save him some bitter experience in the contemplated project, but he is almost certain to find that same bitter experience later, because he has been coerced, not enlightened.

Had he gained his knowledge in the first instance, he would have escaped the later disaster.

A college education does not seem to me the most desirable thing for a woman, unless she intends to enter into educational pursuits as a means of livelihood. I understand it is your intention to become a teacher, and, therefore, you are wise to prepare yourself by a thorough education. *Be the very best*, in whatever line of employment you enter.

Scorn any half-way achievements. Make yourself a brilliantly educated woman, but look to it that in the effort you do not forget two other important matters—health and sympathy. My objection to higher education for women, which you once heard me express, is founded on the fact that I have met many college women who were anaemic and utterly devoid of emotion. One beautiful young girl I recall who at fourteen years of age seemed to embody all the physical and temperamental charms possible for womankind. Softly rounded features, vivid colouring, voluptuous curves of form, yet delicacy and refinement in every portion of her anatomy, she breathed love and radiated sympathy. I thought of her as the ideal woman in embryo; and the brightness of her intellect was the finishing touch to a perfect girlhood. I saw her again at twenty-four. She had graduated from an American college and had taken two years in a foreign institution of learning. She had carried away all the honours—but, alas, the higher education had carried away all her charms of person and of temperament. Attenuated, pallid, sharp-featured, she appeared much older

than her years, and the lovely, confiding and tender qualities of mind, which made her so attractive to older people, had given place to cold austerity and hypercriticism.

Men were only objects of amusement, indifference, or ridicule to her. Sentiment she regarded as an indication of crudity, emotion as an insignia of vulgarity. The heart was a purely physical organ, she knew from her studies in anatomy. It was no more the seat of emotion than the liver or lungs. The brain was the only portion of the human being which appealed to her, and "educated" people were the only ones who interested her, because they were capable of argument and discussion of intellectual problems—her one source of entertainment.

Half an hour in the society of this over-trained young person left one exhausted and disillusioned with brainy women. I beg you to pay no such price for an education as this young girl paid. I remember you as a robust, rosy girl, with charming manners. Your mother was concerned, on my last visit, because I called you a pretty girl in your hearing. She said the one effort of her life was to rear a sensible Christian daughter with no vanity. She could not understand my point of view when I said I should regret it if a daughter of mine was without vanity, and that I should strive to awaken it in her. Cultivate enough vanity to care about your personal appearance and your deportment. No amount of education can recompense a woman for the loss of complexion, figure, or charm. And do not let your emotional and affectional nature grow atrophied.

Control your emotions, but do not crucify them.

Do not mistake frigidity for serenity, nor austerity for self-control. Be affable, amiable, and sweet, no matter how much you know. And listen more than you talk.

The woman who knows how to show interest is tenfold more attractive than the woman who is for ever anxious to instruct. Learn how to call out the best in other people, and lead them to talk of whatever most interests them. In this way you will gain a wide knowledge of human nature, which is the best education possible. Try and keep a little originality of thought, which is the most difficult of all undertakings while in college; and, if possible, be as lovable a woman when you go forth into the world "finished" as when you entered the doors of your Alma Mater: for to be unlovable is a far greater disaster than to be uneducated.

To Edna Gordon

[Table of Contents](#)

During Her Honeymoon

I am very much flattered that you should write your first letter as Mrs. Gordon to me. Its receipt was a surprise, as I have known you so slightly—only when we were both guests under a friend's roof for one week.

I had no idea that you were noticing me particularly at that time, there was such a merry crowd of younger people about you. How careful we matrons should be, when in the presence of débutantes, for it seems they are taking notes for future reference!

I am glad that my behaviour and conversation were such that you feel you can ask me for instructions at this important period of your life. Here is the text you have given me:

"I want you to tell me, dear Mrs. West, how to be as happy, and loved, and loving, after fifteen years of married life, as you are. I so dread the waning of my honeymoon."

And now you want me to preach you a little sermon on this text. Well, my dear girl, I am at a disadvantage in not knowing you better, and not knowing your husband at all.

Husbands are like invalids, each needs a special prescription, according to his ailment.

But as all invalids can be benefited by certain sensible suggestions, like taking simple food, and breathing and exercising properly, and sleeping with open windows or out-

of-doors, so all husbands can be aided toward perpetual affection by the observance of some general laws, on the part of the wife.

I am, of course, to take it for granted that you have married a man with principles and ideals, a man who loves you and desires to make a good husband. I know you were not so unfortunate as to possess a large amount of property for any man to seek, and so I can rely upon the natural supposition that you were married for love.

It might be worth your while, right now, while your husband's memory is fresh upon the subject, to ask him what particular characteristics first won his attention, and what caused him to select you for a life companion.

Up to the present moment, perhaps, he has never told you any more substantial reason for loving you than the usual lovers' explanation—"Just because." But if you ask him to think it over, I am sure he can give you a more explicit answer.

After you have found what qualities, habits, actions, or accomplishments attracted him, write them down in a little book and refer to them two or three times a year. On these occasions ask yourself if you are keeping these attractions fresh and bright as they were in the days of courtship. Women easily drop the things which won a man's heart, and are unconscious that the change they bemoan began in themselves. But do not imagine you can rest at ease after marriage with only the qualities, and charms, and virtues, which won you a lover. To keep a husband in love is a more serious consideration than to win a lover.

You must add year by year to your attractions.

As the deep bloom of first youth passes, you must cultivate mental and spiritual traits which will give your face a lustre

from within.

And as the mirth and fun of life drifts farther from you, and you find the merry jest, which of old turned care into laughter, less ready on your lip, you must cultivate a wholesome optimistic view of life, to sustain your husband through the trials and disasters besetting most mortal paths.

Make one solemn resolve now, and never forget it. Say to yourself, "On no other spot, in no other house on earth, shall my husband find a more cheerful face, a more loving welcome, or a more restful atmosphere, than he finds at home."

No matter what vicissitudes arise, and what complications occur, keep that resolve. It will at least help to sustain you with a sense of self-respect, if unhappiness from any outside source should shadow your life. An attractive home has become a sort of platitude in speech, but it remains a thing of vital importance, all the same, in actual life and in marriage.

Think often and speak frequently to your husband of his good qualities and of the things you most admire in him.

Sincere and judicious praise is to noble nature like spring rain and sun to the earth. Ignore or make light of his small failings, and when you must criticize a serious fault, do not dwell upon it. A husband and wife should endeavour to be such good friends that kindly criticism is accepted as an evidence of mutual love which desires the highest attainments for its object.

But no man likes to think his wife has set about the task of making him over, and if you have any such intention I beg you to conceal it, and go about it slowly and with caution.

A woman who knows how to praise more readily than she knows how to criticize, and who has the tact and skill to adapt herself to a man's moods and to find amusement and entertainment in his whims, can lead him away from their indulgence without his knowledge.

Such women are the real reformers of men, though they scorn the word, and disclaim the effort.

It is well to keep a man conscious that you are a refined and delicate-minded woman, yet do not insist upon being worshipped on a pedestal. It tires a man's neck to be forever gazing upward, and statues are less agreeable companions than human beings.

If you wish to be thought spotless marble, instead of warm flesh and blood, you should have gone into a museum, and refused marriage. Remember God knew what He was about, when He fashioned woman to be man's companion, mate, and mother of his children.

Respect yourself in all those capacities, and regard the fulfilment of each duty as sacred and beautiful.

Do not thrust upon the man's mind continually the idea that you are a vastly higher order of being than he is.

He will reach your standard much sooner if you come half-way and meet him on the plane of common sense and human understanding. Meantime let him never doubt your abhorrence of vulgarity, and your distaste for the familiarity which breeds contempt.

It is a great art, when a wife knows how to attract a husband year after year, with the allurements of the boudoir, and never to disillusion him with the familiarities of the dressing-room.

Such women there are, who have lived with their lovers in poverty's close quarters, and through sickness and trouble, and yet have never brushed the bloom from the fruit of romance. But she who needs to be told in what this art consists, would never understand, and she who understands, need not be told.

Keep your husband certain of the fact that his attention and society is more agreeable to you than that of any other man. But never beg for his attentions, and do not permit him to think you are incapable of enjoying yourself without his playing the devoted cavalier.

The moment a man feels such an attitude is compulsory, it becomes irksome. Learn how to entertain yourself. Cling to your accomplishments and add others. A man admires a progressive woman who keeps step with the age. Study, and think, and read, and cultivate the art of listening. This will make you interesting to men and women alike, and your husband will hear you praised as an agreeable and charming woman, and that always pleases a man, as it indicates his good taste and good luck.

Avoid giving your husband the impression that you expect a detailed account of every moment spent away from you. Convince him that you believe in his honour and loyalty, and that you have no desire to control or influence his actions in any matters which do not conflict with his self-respect or your pride.

Cultivate the society of the women he admires. There is both wisdom and tact in such a course.

Wisdom in making an ideal a reality, and tact in avoiding any semblance of that most unbecoming fault—jealousy.

Let him see that you have absolute faith in your own powers to hold him, and that you respect him too much to mistake a