

The Elected Mother

Maria Thompson Daviess

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THE
ELECTED MOTHER
A STORY OF WOMAN'S
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"Yes, and one of the very nicest parts about getting home is to find the astonishing faithfulness of Pa," said Mrs. Pettibone as her eyes roamed over the garden, the yard, down the long arbor and across the meadow bars to return to the wistaria on the side porch, which was riotous with the bumble of bees and blooms.

"Why, you didn't expect to find anything else, did you?" demanded Mrs. Ezra Spain, who sat on the porch steps with a pan of snap beans in her lap which she was industriously and expectantly snapping.

"Oh, no, I don't suppose I really did, but for fifty miles or more in the cars coming home I kept a-doubting of him and a-mistrusting as to the June peas and the front walk and the yellow-legged domineer in the setting-house. I always like to get her off the nest by April twentieth, for she's so heavy-feathered it makes her nervous to set in hot weather. But for a man, Pa has attended to the important things surprising — surprising. I'm right down thankful that I find I can trust him with such like — it'll make me feel freer to go and come after this."

"Where in the world do you expect to be going and coming from any more, soon?" asked Mrs. Ez with astonishment in her wide eyes. "We can't spare you again. You've visited the boys this spring — Mr. Pettibone is better'n the common run of men, but I don't believe he'll let —"

"Well, I don't know as I'll ask him when I get a travel-notion again," responded Mrs. Pettibone placidly as she began to take the husks off a bowl of extra large nasturtium seeds, to make ready for a sundown planting.

"What?" demanded Mrs. Ezra in an awe-struck voice as she looked at Mrs. Pettibone's tranquil face.

"Yes," answered Mrs. Pettibone in a matter-of-fact tone, "Yes, I'm thinking of beginning all over with Pa. I've been married to him forty-three years next November, and I'm afraid it will go kinder hard with him, but he will have to be led easy and blind-like to the fact that woman's day has dawned. She's been downtrodden, geared up uneven, stalled up in a house over a cook stove, poked fun at by love-making and things of that kind until she is such a poor weak creature she is in danger of just going on permitting it and being happy in spite of it. Child, don't you know about woman's suffrage when you hear it mentioned in such feeling terms as those?"

"Yes," answered Mrs. Ez contentedly, "but I never took any interest in such doings and I didn't know you —"

"I never did before," answered Mrs. Pettibone as she shoed an inquisitive bee away with a gentle but determined hand. "I've been so busy that I hadn't got 'round to it. You see, the raising of five boys into being good God-fearing men and proper husbands for five likely girls that some other women have been putting in licks on to get ready for them, has taken up a lot of my time. I could just make out to get them warm-covered, proper-fed and catechism-instructed, give a little attention to making a good-husband example out of Pa for them, meet the

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calls that Old Zion church laid on me as a member, do my duty by the sick and get up love enough for the doing of it all to make me sing the number of songs I think the good Lord stints out by the day to all us women to be sung before it's time to put out the cat and the lamp. It's different now — I've got time to feel my wrongs."

"But what has happened? You've got no wrongs, Mis' Pettibone. The boys and Mr. Pettibone fairly — "

"Oh, they haven't done anything to me! Pais a none—such husband and every boy I've got is a God's blessing and married to a good woman, as managing most of them as I would ask for my sons' welfare; but I have waked up to the fact that I'm injured, or could be if anybody wanted to injure me, which they don't. I'm glad you came over this morning, for I want to tell you of the astonishing things I have experienced out to Wahoo City on this visit to Tom and Elviry. I can't tell Pa, for I'm keeping him blind until I can get time to commence on his reformation and my emancipation." As she spoke Mrs. Pettibone's eyes twinkled and her rosy cheeks drew up into a series of crinkled dimples which tickled Mrs. Spain's risibles to the extent of making her emit a deep—voiced chuckle. The bees buzzed resentfully at her merriment and one dusty old fellow bumbled in real temper about her head.

"Lawsy me," she laughed, "you scared me! I thought you were serious. I was just beginning to get sorry for Mr. Pettibone and — "

"I am serious, child; that is, I've come from a place where such things are so serious that there is no time to do or think about anything else. They've got a club in Wahoo City that's just for women to go to and discuss wrongs and wants and it's a revelation to hear 'em do it. I went with Elviry the very second day after I got there and I came away as mad and cross as a wet hen, and I had got over about half that missing of Pa that always spoils my visits to the boys and their families.

"'Elviry,' I said, 'I don't see how you can listen so calm and peaceful when you bear that in all but ten of these United States a woman's children don't belong to her at all, but to some good—for—nothing man who can do just as he pleases with them and her too. How can you stand it, and you a mother with — '

"'Why, Mother Pet,' she said kinder astonished—like at me, 'my children are Tom's children. I want him to do just as he sees fit with all of us. If he does it I will know it is for the best and — '

"'Fiddlesticks,' I said real cross, for the way Elviry does spoil Tom is sinful. She's so in love with him that it would be pitiful if he wasn't worse than she is in love sickness. 'I don't trust Tom not to be just as much of a brute as any of those other men they tell about. They're all men, I say.'

"With that Elviry laughed and we got on the street—car. I was still so upset that I glared at a nice young man, who stood to give me a seat as polite as you please. Elviry introduced him to me and I must say his pleasantness soothed me down some and when I got off the car I said I would be glad to have him call round to see me, as he was such a particular friend of Tom's. He said he would come right away and bring his wife. He looked kinder proud and sheepish when he mentioned her and I wondered if she was that young a bride. But Elviry told me about it as we walked home. She was the woman that was running for mayor on the reform ticket, and all that meeting I had heard, had been brought about by a kind of caucus held to do something toward her election. I didn't pay much attention because I couldn't make out the straight of it, but it seems over there is one of the places where women do vote and they were doing it for fare—youwell. A man, who had stolen a whole lot of money from the City, was out against her for reelection and the things he was resorting to to beat her were most shameful.

"But Elviry said that the women in the town were all up and doing and that a lot of the men were for her and determined to see her have a fair show. She said she was a splendid woman and a fine speaker and was something or other titled from two or three colleges. She promised to take me to hear her speak the very next night, which would be the last speech she would make before the election. I was just as excited as could be though a funny little feeling hit me when I thought of that young fellow so proud and shy — but, anyway, by that time we were at

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home and ready for dinner.

"At the table I read Tom one good long lecture on the rights of woman, and I didn't allow him to answer back, either. He said he hadn't had such a fine time since the Sunday evenings I used to spend with all my boys in the front parlor teaching them who made them and for what purpose. He laughed and laughed and hugged first Elviry and then me, and then made us come up with him and look at the two children to see if I thought they had grown as much as they oughter. Tom's a lot like Pa, and a good bit of my homesickness for my husband came back before bedtime, but I went to sleep thinking about how I would enjoy hearing that fine young woman make a speech. Still that clean-shaved young man would keep coming into my dreams and I felt a kind of pity mixing up with him.

"But my! I tell you that next night was glorious! We sat in good front seats and could see and hear without any strain. When I saw her come down the aisle between the committees on both sides of the platform and take her stand behind the long heavy table like is in the court-house, my heart just kinder stopped beating with excitement. She was a tall, upstanding, young woman with great sky-colored eyes and the most beautiful head set on her strong shoulders you ever saw anywhere. On her black hair was one of her college square-top-and-tassel caps, and a long black silk gown was over her white dress. She looked like one of those pictures of judges and lawyers on the bench in the court-house over in England. I just loved her on sight and would have liked to stretch out my hands to her.

"She stood still for a second and let her eyes rove around hunting for something and then there was a little flash of a smile over to a place behind us where something told me without looking who was there. That smile killed the last bit of that pity feeling I'd been hatching up in my mind for him.

"What did she say? Well, I just can't remember one word of it, but I know it was grand and noble. It was about the duty of being citizens in a town and it wasn't any raving about anybody's wrongs. Everybody sat still and listened to the very end and then they just tore up the house with their hollering and cheering. The women waved their handkerchiefs and the men clapped and clapped. She waited and smiled down at everybody, and, honey, the blush on that woman's face, who had just stood up and took what is called a man's part, was as sweet as coulder been the one Eve mustered when Adam introduced her to the animal friends in the garden. As I said, it was all just glorious.

"Oh, yes, I got acquainted with her. Tom and Elviry and I waited for her and her husband and they came home with us in Tom's abomination of an automobile, what scares me to death the very sight of, to have supper. They live just down the street from my folks and they neighbor almost like we do out here in Glenrose, Harpeth Valley.

"And between her and me it was one of those cases of love at first sight that the dear Lord sometimes sends to settle like a lovely pink cloud of warm feelings between two women, which never floats away from them, but rests a benediction and a protection. She was like a beautiful ruby woman out of the Proverbs, last chapter, tenth verse, and you could see that the heart of her husband was 'safely trusting.'

"While Elviry was cooking some outrageous but good-smelling food in her silver parlor skillet, chafing-dish she called it, Tom undertook to tell the sweet child about what he called my 'high vault to the woman side of the fence.' Of course they all laughed and he made it worse and more outrageous with making up about what I was planning to do to Pa when I got back home and the like, but when I waited until there was a pause in the high jinks and asked him straight out how he'd like to have little Elviry's future husband get mad at her and take her children away if he wanted to, whether or not, and she with the law against her, I felt strong soft arms creep around my neck from behind and her lovely voice half whispered, half laughed, into my ear as she said:

"Never mind, Mrs. Pettibone, I'm coming in to-morrow to have a talk with you and then at dinner you can straighten Tom's conviction out with no trouble at all.'

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"Then we all ate and laughed and parted good friends, though going up—stairs Tom cut his weather eye at me as if he was still afraid of a peach—tree switch hid in my skirts. I just ignored him completely, but took Elviry into my room with me for a minute. There I put the question that was troubling me to her fairly.

"'Yes, Mother Pet,' she answered in a kind of blush herself, 'but it's six weeks off and all this excitement will be over then. She had pledged herself to accept the nomination and started the campaign before she knew of her condition. She has felt it her duty to keep on with it because one of the arguments that is continually being brought up on the woman question is that the very fact of — of such a contingency unfits women for the responsibilities of administration, and holding office and — '

"'Fiddlesticks!' I answered, all that caucus—meeting feeling rushing over me at once, 'it don't unfit them for cooking, washing and ironing, tending the toddlers, mending and sewing, working the garden, milking the cow, churning the butter, and any number of extras thrown in, so why should it unfit them for being mayors and presidents and such? Most candidates from governors to sheriff take a week off any time in a campaign to get on a spree, and why shouldn't a woman quietly and in the fear of God have her baby and go on with the good work?' I was real het up, and showed it.

"'Oh, Mother Pet, if you'll just say that to her in exactly that tone of voice and manner to—morrow I believe you will save the day,' said Elviry, divided between laughing and crying. 'She hasn't any mother and neither have I, and she gets scared sometimes and I try to comfort her, but I'm not like you — '

"'I'll attend to this comforting business from now on, daughter,' I said to Elviry as I lent her my best pocket—handkerchief to wipe her eyes.

"'Has she all her baby fixings ready ?'

"'No,' said Elviry, smiling through her tears. 'She's been so busy; I've done a lot for her, but — '

"'Now,' said I positively, 'that sort of thing won't do. She must attend to all that right away and not neglect it, mayor or no mayor, and I'll start her first thing in the morning.'

"And I did, and never in my life have I seen a sweeter sight than that lovely grand woman seated by my side hemming a flannel band, the telephone ringing at her elbow constant with some politics question or other to settle right off the minute. She'd give her commands and decide what to do in short quick words, then go on printing her stitches in a little night—gown about as big as a minute slow and careful. And for a week those infant first—aid caucuses went on every morning and it looked like to me I was being born all over into a new and most disturbing world. We'd first talk safety—pins and crocheted socks and then about the dreadful sweatshops and what they do to women. Then we'd veer from short petticoats to the property laws what let a woman work her life out helping her husband buy a farm and then at his death be sold out of it on account of having only a dower interest. We'd plan a little silk coat and end up with a prayer for the noble women teachers that a he—school board makes work longer hours than any little whipper—snapper college boy that's teaching for a stepping—stone, and for much less pay. And all the time she was as gentle and noble, but as firm as a rock and well—nigh inspired in her talk about what had to come for women. And with each decision she would say that she knew it would be best for all women because she wanted it for her daughter. The way she planned the conditions she wanted that child to face when she had grown to her woman's estate sounded like a psalm of life written in Revelation style.

"So it was, she sitting at my feet learning the way of women who had been, and I at hers learning the way of the women who were to be, until the Monday of the election came. And that morning was just the same as the others, only we had about finished up most of the needful jobs and were packing them in a little blue and white hamper. Elviry had gone to be one of the counters at one of the polls and the children were both across the street at the kindergarten. The house was quiet and still and I must say that it, was as clean and neat as a pin, and Elviry with

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only one girl in the kitchen, but with management and kindness to help that girl to do the work of three and have time off. She had put the dinner in the fireless cooker — I'll tell you about that later — and gone down to the drug store to vote before time to bring the children home for their lunch. The sweet child and me had things to ourselves and was enjoying the quiet communion.

"Mother Pet,' she said as she looked up with stars in her eyes from a box of little silk shirts I had had her sew tapes on, 'tell me true, am I going to be any less her mother because I have given so much of my time and my strength to this work — that — the world still says is a man's? Would it have been better for me to have sat quietly and dreamed a clean, wide-streeted, beautified city for her with no dark corners where women are wronged, no "open doors" for the young men from which she is to choose her husband? Should I have waited the generations ?'

"No, child,' I answered, looking her full in the face. 'It is not every woman who could do what you have done and it won't be that most of them can ever run their woman-jobs and take up these cares of state, as they are rightly called, but neither could most men or can they ever. We'll just go on having homes which are man guarded and woman tended and the great few among both sexes can meet and settle what is best for all concerned. Run a piece of blue ribbon in this sleeve before you fold it.'

"And, Mother Pet,' this time the rose color spread all over her cheeks in a flame even up into her dark hair, 'my husband — you don't think, do you, the doing what I have done, in any way brings upon him the charge of incompetency? He thinks as I do — he knows that the time has come for women to be legislated for and not against and that the men have failed them. The real sacrifice was made by him. That is what has hurt me — have I taken anything from him that wrongs him? Do I bring anything back from my public life into his home that injures the sacredness of it? Am I a lesser wife for a good man because I seek to better the condition of the wife of the bad? Am I —'

"Honey,' I said to kinder interrupt her, for the tears were swimming deep over the violets in her eyes and I didn't want her to get upset. 'That husband of yours is no more disqualified by your being a good mayor of this town than I am by Tom's being president of that bank, country boy that he is and always surprising me and Pa by his gumption. Your man looks as happy to me all the time as a man who's got his ticket to Salvation bought with a stopover at every pleasant place along the way. Don't worry about him; he's got a "ruby" wife and he knows it. Now you must go home and rest, for I want you to be ready to enjoy the rally after the vote is all counted.'

"And just then the telephone rang and she was the cool mayor-self again with the mother-wife tears still wet on her cheeks.

"And after lunch at Elviry's I went into my room to lie down and get forty winks against another all-night frolic, for it does seem to me that city people get less real sleep than is scarcely believable, with their junketings and doings which Tom is always just thick into.

"I must have slept some into hours when I heard the telephone ring, which I'm not much used to answering, but will when pushed to, and I took it up kinder ginger.

"Mrs. Pettibone, can you come down here quick — she — she needs you,' and that was all; but I knew that boy's voice and what the trouble was, so I put on my bonnet and got the camphire bottle and left in short order.

"Yes, Mrs. Ezra, it's the God's blessed truth I'm telling you. While all the women, and what proved to be the majority of the men in Wahoo City, were down town a-voting for that sweet child to be the mayor of the town, she and him and me was up at her house a- having her baby.

"Well,' I said first thing cheerful-like, 'daughter wants to get here in time to cast her vote before the polls close.'

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"And in the due course of time it all came right in the most natural and peaceable way possible. Along about the time the counts from the different wards began to come in and we could hear the cheering from the flash-light reports down the street at the drugstore corner, I had got the little blossom all tucked out in flannel and linen and lace; and a finer child I never saw. But I sat with it across my lap for quite a spell just a-thinking how on earth I was going to break the news of the calamity to her. She had been so brave and patient and lovely that I couldn't bear to think of her disappointment, and I made out to myself that I oughter put another little shawl inside the blanket, just to give myself more time.

"Then I made a resolve — I sent the nurse to tell him to come to me. He came in looking more sheepish than I almost ever saw on such an occasion. But there was a pride there, too, and a power of awe.

"'Yes,' I said firmly, 'it's true and you have got to tell her. Now, be careful and lay the child in her arms before you break it to her.'

"'Come with me,' he said pitiful-like, and I followed him.

"And if I thought she looked grand and noble as she stood before the audience a-championing her weak sisters for all the world to hear, in my heart I knelt down before her as she took the little thing into her lovely strong arms and laid it against her deep breast.

"'Dear,' said the man gently and quietly, with both sorrow and courage in his voice, 'she's your — son.'

"'Oh,' she said as a glory that was like the sun-dawn spread over her face and neck and white breast, 'oh — a man — I'm glad! Glad!' And about that time I saw that I could come away.

"Oh, yes, I stayed to see her take her oath of office — that's what made me two weeks behind-hand coming home. I hated to disappoint Pa about my promise to be here on April the third, but I decided that it was best for him to begin to find out how much I meant to use my own mind. Oh, no, I'm not going to be savigorus about it, still I'm going to lead him up to my idea gentle but firm. But now, who'd have thought he would have followed my mind so faithful about the peas and the domineck?

"No, Mrs. Spain, I don't think so! Somehow I have a feeling that when all this ruckus gets men's strongness and faithfulness mixed with women's courage and chastity in the future folks, His Kingdom is a-going to come in about two generations from then. And may I be there to see!"