

## AUNT AGATHA'S LETTERS.

Will Allen Dromgoole in the Youth's Companion.



CANNOT remember when it was that we first began to dread Aunt Agatha's letters. I think we did dread them a long time before any one of the family mentioned it.

The first open reference to the matter, as nearly as I remember; was made the night father came home from Lexington and laid the mail upon the table, about which the family had gathered, mother with her knitting, George with his drawing and Ella and I with our books.

We looked on eagerly while mother ran through the letters. Suddenly George's face fell.

"Oh!" he said and turned back to his drawing, with an expression of disappointment on his face. We understood thoroughly what it meant. Mother tried to appear wounded, father laughed slightly, and Ella took a letter from among the white; unopened envelopes lying on the table.

Let's open it first, mother," she said, "and be over with it. Aunt Agatha never writes unless she has something unpleasant to tell us. Let's take the bitter first, and perhaps the other four letters will help us over auntie's."

So it was we came to express our dread of Aunt Agatha's letters. From reading them first we began to put them off until the last; and sometimes, if they came at night, we would leave them over until morning. Then we fell into the habit of laying them aside and leaving them unread for days together.

One day there came a letter in Aunt Agatha's hand bearing in one corner the word "Important." Mother opened it with trembling fingers. Aunt Agatha was in deep distress because her last three communications had not been answered. What was the matter? Was any one dead or sick?—Was Eunice well?—Eunice was mother.—Eunice was likely to die at any moment; her heart was always weak. And if nothing was the matter why had her letters been treated with such silence?

Mother smiled and looked at George.

"Why, I replied to Aunt Agatha's last letter myself," she said. "I remember it distinctly. It was the letter that foretold such a hard winter and Agatha's certain death from the cold."

George was shading a cherub's face on the white Bristol board and said nothing.

"Mother," said Ellen, "I think Aunt Agatha ought to use mourning envelopes; her letters have such a funeral wail through them."

Mother looked shocked. "Your aunt doesn't think, dear," she said. "Not every one understands how to write a letter. But about the last letters Agatha speaks of; does any one know anything about them? George looked up from the cherub's face. "Yes, mother," he said. "I know all about them as well as if I had read them, which I certainly have not done. They are a series of calamities, told and foretold. Aches, agues, chills and disappointments, natural evils and evils very unnatural. A sudden insight into the world's hollowness, a realization of the instability of humanity, and a long, lonesome desire to flee from the follies and disappointments of the flesh into an existence where trouble cometh not and the weary are at rest. There! You have Aunt Agatha's three last letters in full. If you doubt it, look in the last lower drawer of father's old secretary and examine the documents themselves."

"George!" The entire household expressed its disapproval—a disapproval which exploded in a burst of laughter, however, when poor auntie's letters were brought out and proved to be just about what George had said they were.

So it went on; the letters were received constantly and constantly laid away. Mother undertook once to answer them without reading and found it just as well. After that we rarely read one through.

Yet she was not a gloomy woman, nor one who lived in the shadow of serious reflections. She was simply one of those who imagined that a letter, to be worth reading, must be a kind of stately document that must not be wanting in wisdom and warning and poetry. Aunt Agatha's letters always had a poetic covering at the close, where she held up the follies and false fancies of youth and her own longings for an existence "beyond the purple seas of time, in the amarantine fields of eternity."

We laughed sometimes and sometimes we fretted. One afternoon I remember riding over to Lexington with George for the mail. Father was sick and mother was worried. Business had not prospered that year. Two of the best blooded horses had died, pink-eye had appeared among the cattle, and rust in the wheat. A note for a large amount was about to fall due and there was no way to meet it.

Worse than all, father's rheumatism had returned and he could not walk, but lay all day fretting himself

into a fever and declaring his house would be sold over his head while he lay there doing nothing to prevent it. George ought to be at school and the girls need clothes—not finery, but good, plain winter clothes.

All this was true, every word of it. But how were the needed things to be brought about? George and I talked it over while we rode into Lexington.

"Aunt Agatha ought to help us," I said. "She has no one but herself to care for, for Ella is even better off than Auntie herself."

Ella was Aunt Agatha's only child, and was possessed of a fortune in her own right.

"Aunt Agatha ought to help us. She could, if she would."

George touched his horse with his riding-whip. "I would not be compelled to wade through the avalanche of epistolary hopelessness that would follow her assistance for all the money she possesses," he declared. "Evil is wrought by want of thought as well as want of heart, and Aunt Agatha's gloomy letters make us cross and unhappy and discouraged. So whether she intends it or not, the evil is wrought just the same."

Fifteen minutes later George came out from the postoffice with a short, thick white envelope bearing the Princeton postmark.

"Let's destroy it, velle," said George, as we were galloping homeward.

"No," I replied, "it is not ours. Whatever it may contain, mother alone has the right to dispose of it. But there is so much to worry her just now that we will slip it behind the clock with the others till things look brighter."

There were just five of these same short, thick white envelopes "behind the clock" already! At the rate they were accumulating we must soon have a reading or a clearing out of some sort, or else the old clock would rebel and betray the secret.

When we reached home father was feeling better and the letter we brought him from an old friend over in Tennessee—it was such a breezy, cheery letter that it was difficult to believe that it treated only of stocks and bonds and business matters—gave him so much pleasure that I thought I might venture to show Aunt Agatha's.

"Father," I began, "there was another letter, but—"

"From Aggie!" he said, with a frown. "Take the con—"

"William!" It was mother's voice, gently reproachful, yet full of unexpressed relief.

Father became gloomy again. "I tell you, Eunice," he said, "if people cannot write pleasantly they ought not to write letters at all. They have no right to afflict other people with their doleful anticipations. I wish Agatha would never put your name upon another envelope. I heartily wish it, and sometimes I am tempted to write and tell her so."

"But she means well."

"No doubt, but we are indebted to her for all our present financial trouble. I would have sold the stock last spring, when Rogers wanted it, but for Agatha's harangue about leaving my wife and children without a decent saddle horse. Then when the widow Gleaves offered me \$10,000 for the farm over in Henry county I ought to have taken it, and I would have taken it but for Agatha's letter prophesying that I would leave my family without shelter if I persisted in selling off my land. Land is always a safe investment; I remember her very words. She has been the ruin of me by making me doubtful and uneasy, and afraid to act for myself."

That night I sat alone with mother in the old sitting room, talking over our tangled affairs. "Mother" I said, after a long silence, "don't you think we had better write to Aunt Agatha? She is devotedly fond of you, and will willingly help us."

Mother shook her head. "My dear," she said, "we will not make our troubles heavier by putting them in writing. We can bear our own burdens; we have no right to afflict other people with them."

She agreed, however, that I might write to Ella, Aunt Agatha's daughter, and ask her to visit us. She came, bright, sunny-hearted Ella Norris, and with her coming the house seemed to shake off its burden of doubt and gloom. Father forgot his rheumatism and began to limp about the place again through the day. Each evening we gathered in the sitting-room and had games, music and no end of pleasant conversation.

One night Ella and I sat alone before the sitting room fire having our last chat, for my cousin was to leave me the next afternoon. We must have sat there far into the night, for at last mother called to us to go to bed. I chanced to glance up at the clock, and found that it had run down.

"Dear me!" I exclaimed. "The clock has stopped. It always annoys mother to come down in the morning and find the clock run down."

into a fever and declaring his house would be sold over his head while he lay there doing nothing to prevent it. George ought to be at school and the girls need clothes—not finery, but good, plain winter clothes.

I made a clean breast of it. The old clock ticked off another hour before I said, "That is all. You have the story of our troubles, and know why Aunt Aggie's letters have remained unopened. I hope the recital has not wounded you."

She slipped her arms about my waist. "Poor mother!" she said. "I remember how I used to skip the 'purple seas and the frailties of humanity' when I was at boarding school. But if these letters are discouraging her heart is true and strong and tender, and you ought to have written her all about uncle's troubles long ago."

The next day Ella left us. Mother pressed her close and cried softly when she said good-bye, but father held her at arm's length and looked at her steadily. "I want to remember how sunlight looks when I go back into the shadow," he said.

Two days later a letter came. It was one of the old thick envelopes, but the writing was not in Aunt Agatha's hand. I felt uneasy while mother broke the seal for I feared the knowledge of how her letters had been received—if Ella told her—would very seriously offend her.

The letter contained a check sufficient to lift us out of our difficulties, and it began by saying that she had asked Ella to address the letter in order to make sure that it would be opened. She censured father for not telling her of his embarrassments, and then said she hoped she had written at least one letter that would be a messenger of happiness to her dear sister. Then there was something about the vanity of riches and the uncertainty of wealth, and the letter closed with an admonition to lay up for ourselves treasures "where neither moth nor rust doth corrupt."

Father laughed while he dashed a tear from his cheek. "Dear old Aggie!" he said. "She can't help preaching any more than she can help being generous and loving."

"No," said mother, "that is true Agatha. Yet I think it a great pity not to understand the art of letter-writing. The true art, my children, is never to write anything unpleasant if it can be avoided, for letters, you know, stay with us, and their stings and their stabs stay too, and have much to do with our feelings toward the writer."

### Getting Colder in Asia.

A recent writer in the North China Herald, of Shanghai, says that the climate of Asia is becoming colder than it formerly was, and its tropical animals and plants are retreating southward at a slow rate. This is true of China, and it is also the case in western Asia. The elephant, in a wild state, was hunted in the eight century, B. C., by Tiglath Pileser, the king of Assyria, near Carchemish, which lay near the Euphrates in Syria. Four or five centuries before this, Thothmes III., king of Egypt, hunted the same animal near Aleppo. In high antiquity, the elephant and rhinoceros were known to the Chinese; they had names for them, and their tusks and horns were valued. In the time of Confucius elephants were in use for the army on the Yangtze river. A hundred and fifty years after this, Mencius speaks of the tiger, the leopard, the rhinoceros and the elephant as having been, in many parts of the empire, driven away from the neighborhood of the Chinese inhabitants by the founders of the Chou dynasty. Tigers and leopards are not yet by any means extinct in China. The elephant and the rhinoceros are again spoken of in the first century of our era. If of these particulars regarding elephants be added the retreat from the rivers of South China of the ferocious alligators that formerly infested them, the change in the fauna of China certainly seems to show that the climate is much less favorable for tropical animals than it formerly was. In fact, it appears to have become drier and colder.

### The March of Cholera.

The British Medical Journal says, "When some months ago the Turkish authorities asserted the extinction or non-existence of cholera in Syria, while Russian consular agents maintained that it was still hovering about on the borders of the Persian and Ottoman Empires, we expressed our conviction that the subsidence of the epidemic was merely what might be expected at that season, and that it would reappear with the return of spring. And so it is; cholera is reported not as having broken out on the imperial domain of Djedid and in the village of Bellek, near Bagdad, where six persons have died out of thirteen attacked. Bagdad was the headquarters of the epidemic last year, whence it was carried by the river boat as far up the Tigris. We believe that the Foreign Office received information of its occurrence as far north as Diarbekr and Erzerum, though in the latter case it was more probably conveyed by road from Tabreez. If we may venture to prophesy, we would say that it will not proceed further up the Tigris Valley, but, traveling by the Euphrates, will be next heard of at Aleppo, and, perhaps, Beyrout, and it will enter Egypt, via Yeddah and Suez, and then leave Alexander for the Levantine and Mediterranean ports. From Tabreez it will take the route via Erzerum and Trebizond, to Constantinople, Odessa, and by Baku, Tiflis, Derbent, and Astrakhan, over Russia."

### The Strawberry.

The rose, the apple and the strawberry seem especially intended by nature for the use and pleasure of mankind. Not only does the beauty and fragrance of the one and the grateful flavor of the other point to this, but the very wide distribution of each over the face of the earth, as well as their great susceptibility to improvement and adaptation under the fostering hand of man, seem to indicate unusual designs in this direction. The strawberry is, perhaps, the most universally acceptable of the many delicious fruits intended for the human palate. Some variety of it is found growing wild in nearly every part of Europe, many of the finest sorts are indigenous to North and South America, and even India has a native variety, though of slight food value. Since the cultivation of the strawberry began, moreover, it has adapted itself readily to nearly all climates and soils, no other fruit, probably, being now as widely disseminated.

Notwithstanding this, such is the power of popular fallacies that the ancient belief still holds strongly in the minds of that only rare skill and the most unwearied labor suffice to insure a crop of this heaven-bested fruit. It is false. The strawberry is as easy of cultivation as sweet corn—indeed, needs much the same care, except in the particular of water. It ought to be universally grown by garden proprietors. What is more delightful or appetizing than the sight upon one's breakfast table of a generous dish piled to a topping mountain with the blushing and fragrant cones, fresh picked from the garden and inhaling the cool breath of a June morning? A rare charm, too, and one in which the supply from the private garden holds an immense superiority over that of the market, lies in the mingling of the various kinds, thereby bringing out by contrast the subtle variations for which the strawberry is famous.

### He Wanted a Pass.

The multitudes who think they ought not to pay railroad fare are never at a loss for grounds upon which to base their applications for passes. The passenger agents are used to the most extraordinary petitions, some piteous, some audacious, and now and then one that is downright humorous. Under this last head comes an application that was made to Passenger Agent Ed Smith of the Baltimore & Ohio the other day.

Mr. Smith was busy in his office on 5th avenue, when a tall and very lean young man came in and asked to see the passenger agent. Mr. Smith noticed that the young man's hair was very long and that the bottoms of his trousers were frayed, but in spite of these ominous signs he said cheerily: "Well, sir, what can I do for you?"

"I want to get to Baltimore," said the long-haired young man in a peevish voice.

"You've come to the right place, sir; we sell tickets for Baltimore to any one," said Mr. Smith, waving his hand toward the ticket counter.

"No, you don't understand me," went on the young man. "I have some beautiful poems here, and when I've read you one or two I am sure you will see your way to transporting me to Baltimore," and with this the young man fished out a bundle of manuscript from his coat tail pocket. It was a warm day and Mr. Smith did not feel inclined to precipitate a conflict; so he sank back into his chair and the long-haired poet began to read aloud his effusions. He read two poems of considerable length, and he might have read more, but the second poem had a refrain in which "along the shore" was rhymed with "all the more" and "Baltimore," and Mr. Smith's good nature couldn't stand that. He called to the clerks and they deposited the lank and lean poet with the long hair on the sidewalk. For some days yet Baltimore is safe.—Pittsburg Dispatch.

### Japanese Frugality.

Some remarkable statements are made by Professor Rein, a scientist who has been investigating the material resources of Japan. They reveal a national frugality and economy of a marvelous type. The area of Japan is less than of California. Its cultivated land is less than one-tenth of its total acreage, yet its products support about 38,000,000. In Japan 2,560 persons subsist from each square mile of tilled land. A people existing in such circumstances must, from necessity of preservation, be provident, painstaking, hard working, ingenious and frugal. The Japs appear to deserve all these adjectives. Agriculture with them is literally marked gardening, because the soil is required to produce more than any other place in the world.—Once a Week.

### As a Soldier.

The religion of Dahomey Land is to the effect that any soldier killed while fighting white men goes straight to heaven to become a handsome young man of 25, who is provided with fifteen beautiful wives and all the game he can eat for a thousand years. Under this belief hundreds of them do their best to get killed, and its rather funny to think how they are bamboozled when they wake up "over there."—Detroit Free Press.

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