

GLYN ELINOR

YOUR AFFECTIONATE
GODMOTHER

Elinor Glyn

Your Affectionate Godmother

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Содержание

I	5
II	10
Конец ознакомительного фрагмента.	13

Elinor Glyn

Your Affectionate Godmother

I

Your Affectionate *Godmother*

November, 1912.

N OW that you are soon about to return from Paris, Caroline – polished, let us hope, in education – it may be interesting for us to have some little talks together upon the meaning of things and the aspects which life is likely to present to you.

If you had been with me from early childhood you would by now have grown so completely to understand my point of view that words would not be necessary between us. But circumstances have arranged that only in your eighteenth year have you been given into my charge, so, as I want you to be happy, my dear godchild, we must lose no time in looking at a number of points which can assist that end.

I understand, by what I know of your character, that you have a clear idea of what you want, and that is to take some place in the world of no mean importance. Therefore, the first thing to assure yourself of is that you are not the square peg screaming to get into the round hole. There is nothing so warping as that egotistical ignorance which feels itself fitted for whatever position it desires without question or further effort.

To me the most startling difference between the Americans and the English is this – that the English never boast of their attainments or prowess, *in words*, because for hundreds of years they really have been supreme among the nations, and so now they are simply filled with the belief that this is still the case, and therefore that it is unnecessary for them to try to learn anything new; on the other hand, the Americans boast *in words* continually that they are already ahead of the rest of the world, while using their clever brains all the time to pick up from every other nation equipments which will eventually make them so.

I leave it to your own powers of deduction to decide which, at the present stage of the world's rapid evolution, seems the more likely to win in the end! But we are not now going to talk of the national characteristics of your two parents – I merely use this as an illustration of what I want to teach you so that you may have the advantage of knowing how to cultivate the good side of both. The thing to aim at is to make yourself fit for whatever position you aspire to, and to keep your receptive faculties always on the alert to continue to acquire good things even when you have obtained that position. Then you will never need to demonstrate your supremacy *in words*, every human being who comes in contact with you will see it. And you will have the dignity of the one country and the ability of the other in your possession.

The advice which was generally given to girls was a mixture of altruistic idealism coupled with the intention to throw dust in their eyes upon most of the facts of life.

We have fortunately changed all that now. But, before we come to any material points, we shall have to get down to the bedrock of the main principle of life which is our religion. And I do hope, Caroline, that I shall not bore you by speaking of this – for my religion, and the one I want you to believe in as yours, is a very simple one, and will not take me long to explain. You see, we cannot possibly go on until this point is settled, because it is the key to all others.

I believe I had better enclose you a dialogue I once wrote when strongly under the influence of the style of Lucian, that later Greek master of inimitable cynical humor. Your appreciation of style and your sense of humor, I trust, have been cultivated sufficiently to be able to grasp the fact that a

reverent and divine belief is wrapped up in what at first reads as flippant language. I wrote a number of these dialogues upon all sorts of subjects when I was in the same mood, and, if you like them, and understand them, I can send them to you from time to time, to illustrate my meaning, for the finishing of your education, and the perfecting of your armory of weapons which must be of a sort which is not obsolete for the fight of life.

All godmothers writing to their godchildren – and indeed all women writing to the young – are very apt to be dreadfully serious and to give them only the heaviest fare, which must inevitably weary them. Now, Caroline, there is not going to be any of that kind of thing between you and me, because my aim is not to show you how many stereotyped moral sentiments I can instill into you on orthodox lines – but it is to try to prepare you for that place in the social sphere which you have a right by accident of birth and fortune to expect. And, above all, my aim is to try to help you to gain happiness spelt with a big H – as happiness is obtainable in this hour of the world’s enlightenment. It is not always possible for older people to secure it, because, when they were in the gloomy retrogressionist atmosphere which held sway in their younger days, they laid up for themselves limitations which may take them all their lives on this planet to get through.

You, Caroline, have not had time to incur any serious debts to fate, so you have a real chance to achieve the desired end, and so progress in body, soul, and spirit. Now read the dialogue.

Dialogue between Elinor and John

Dedicated to the shades of Lucian and Don Quixote

Elinor: Very well, my good friend, let us begin by discussing religion then, and from there we can branch off to other matters which come up, and, as you are here merely to make a few remarks, I gather, and leave the hard work to me, I consider I have the right to select my subjects – and I choose religion to begin upon.

John: I’ll do my best to listen, but women are illogical beings, and you will pardon a yawn now and then.

Elinor: All I ask is good manners – conceal your yawn behind a respectful hand.

John: Begin – as yet I am all attention!

Elinor: My religion is very simple. It started by being a rebellion against the narrow orthodoxy which I had been taught in my youth. I refused to credit the idea that we were all born miserable sinners. I felt that we were glorious creatures who should stand upright and rise into space. I resented the attitude of all saints and martyrs as depicted in statuary and painting – a *mea culpa* attitude – a pleading for the charity of some omnipotent being to overlook a personal fault – as it were to say, “If I grovel enough your vanity will be appeased and you won’t punish me.” I looked round at the glorious world of nature and at the wonder of my own body, full of health and vitality, and I wanted to cry aloud to God, “Dear God, I am so glad you have made me, and I mean to do the very best I can for your creation in return.”

John: That is not altogether a bad idea.

Elinor: I felt that human beings, because of their gift of articulate speech, were different to animals, and had been given a higher spark of the divine essence in their possession of the loan of a more responsible soul. I seemed to realize that we had no smallest right to soil it or degrade it, since God need not have lent it to us at all if He had not wished. We were, so to speak, on our honor with the thing. I suddenly understood that it was unspeakable disgrace to commit paltry actions just because people would not know about them – that even if one had to admit the necessity of bluff in the affairs of men sometimes it was perfectly childish to use it in dealing with God – and not only childish, but useless.

John: You would be honest with God! Tut, tut! – a pretty state of things! A theory like that could upset the world.

Elinor: *Tant pis!*– I am not talking of expediency. I am stating my beliefs.

John: Go ahead.

Elinor: I felt that because we had received this divine triple loan from God of understanding, apprehension, and emotion, with its branches of deduction, critical faculty, and appreciation – all things beyond the material – we at least owed Him something in return. You will admit, I suppose, that decent people do not accept the loan of a friend’s house and then utterly neglect and defile it?

John: It would be in shocking taste.

Elinor: Then doing the thousand-and-one actions which defile the soul are in shocking taste also. Don Quixote was infinitely nearer a true knowledge of the obligation entailed by the possession of this loan than any of us modern people!

John: Oh, heavens! are you going to drag in fictional characters to illustrate your tirade? I feel the yawn coming.

Elinor: Then I will state what to me are the facts of religion. I believe that I personally, and each one of us, have received from God, for the term of our sojourn on earth, a spark of Himself, and, since He has had the intelligence to construct this planet and a number of others, He cannot be so wholly wanting in logic as deliberately to throw this spark of Himself into temptation, and then deliberately to punish it for falling. If I believed God capable of that I should utterly despise Him.

John: It sounds mean.

Elinor: Of course. Now think a moment. Each unit being a part of the eternal scheme, the soul of each unit being a spark of the Divine Consciousness, it follows surely that the basis of all religion is that we must not soil our souls – not from the fear of hell or hope of heaven, but because they, being lent by God, must return to Him untarnished. The law of cause and effect takes care of the punishments or rewards. We bring each upon ourselves by our own actions; setting in motion an inevitable machinery producing consequence, as surely as when we thrust our hand into the fire it is burnt.

John: That sounds all right; go on!

Elinor: You see, then, our setting in motion this law can have nothing to do with the anger or approval or complacency of God. “Be good, and you will go to heaven: behave evilly, and you will go to hell” – one was taught. Reward and punishment – personal gain or personal pain – which gets it back to pure selfishness.

John: Then you would take away these strong motives to influence human conduct? You *are* getting on to a high plane!

Elinor: I began by saying we were talking of religion; you seem to consider we are discussing a business concern.

John: So it is – put it how you will.

Elinor: I deny that from my point, but I admit it if you are going to traffic with rewards and punishments.

John: Then you mean to tell me that each unit is always to behave in the purest manner and do his level best simply to return to God at death an untarnished soul?

Elinor: Certainly.

John: But you would do away with all priestcraft, all politics, all society! ’Pon my word, this is worse than Socialism. You know I never bargained for that!

Elinor: Nothing of the kind! The basic principle is that God is omnipotent. Granted this, and the poorest intelligence might then credit Him with having the best of all the attributes with which He has endowed mankind, whom he created – chief of these being common sense.

John: Go on.

Elinor: It is hardly likely, then, that He is perpetrating a colossal joke upon His creation by making the whole system experimental. It is conceivable that a brain which could evolve the intricate organism of a minute ant might be far-seeing enough to devise an immutable law which, when our evolution is sufficiently advanced, we shall be able to perceive, and to fall in with its action.

John: We are all as yet struggling in the dark, then?

Elinor: More or less. You see time is no object to God – these cycles which to us mean so much may be no more than a day to Him. I think you will admit we have let in a good deal of light in the last hundred years or so.

John: Well, yes. But just think, then, of the waste of time all the religions and conventions and superstitions have entailed in the past. It makes one giddy to realize it! Where would we be if we had always understood your basic principle?

Elinor: Nowhere. The evolution of the world has been perfectly necessary, my good John – you don't ask children to play golf before they can walk.

John: No – but now I gather from your remarks that you would sweep away the incumbrances and restrictions of orthodox religions.

Elinor: Not at all! In a large family everyone cannot be grown up at the same time; the little ones have still to be thought of.

John: I think we are getting a bit out of our depths – had we not better get back to your muttons – in this case your idea of religion?

Elinor: But I have stated it plainly; it is simply to endeavor to keep the soul untarnished so as to return it to God – as a good butler keeps his employer's silver under his charge highly polished, even though it is not all used every day.

John: Then what is the first step to this end?

Elinor: To think out the reason why of things, to try to see the truth in everything.

John: Good Lord! A fine task! Are you aware, my good woman, that this has been the modest ambition of several million of philosophers and theologians and metaphysicians before your day, and that none of them have altogether succeeded? If I did not mind being rude, I might say, "I like your cheek!"

Elinor: Oh, say what you please! Your words cannot alter my basic principle, which you will find very sound, if you care to apply to it the test of common sense.

John: You mean, to bring it to ordinary facts, that when I can get the better of a friend by a bit of sharp practice and make a pot of money without the risk of anyone's finding me out, I am to refrain from doing so because of this soul business? I do call that hard! considering I go to church every Sunday, and subscribe to all the charities liberally – and to the football clubs.

Elinor: Yes, I mean that.

John: And when you are jealous of a woman you are not to set about a vile, false insinuation against her, even though it could never be traced to your door?

Elinor: Certainly not.

John: But, my poor child, that would produce a universal state of brotherly love. You had not suggested that before as one of your component parts of religion!

Elinor: John, when God made man I do believe He left out one colossal quality in him – the faculty of seeing the obvious. Women can see it sometimes, but men! – almost never! So I shall have to tell it to you in plain words. *God is love!*

HERE ENDS THE DIALOGUE

Now, when you have digested all this, Caroline, I want you to think what that sort of religion really means – and how it must elevate its believers into great broad aims and ends. How it must destroy all paltry meannesses, because, once a person realized that, even if no one on earth could ever know of his small action, his own soul would be aware of it, and become tarnished in consequence – then surely he would hesitate to commit that which would injure his own self-respect.

There is another point to be considered: how best to arrive at what is actually right or wrong. And this can only be done by psychological deduction, through effect back to cause. If the results of an action produce pain and sorrow and evil, then the action – which is cause – must be bad. And, as there is nothing new under the sun – and all actions you would be likely to commit have already been committed by others in the past – you can get a general idea as to their probable result. But, above all other sides, the one to be examined is the effect upon the community. If the result of the action can only affect yourself, then you have the right to consider whether or no you will be prepared to pay the price of it before you commit it. But if there is plain indication that it can degrade or injure others who are near to you, or the community at large to which you belong, then the sin of it “jumps to the eyes,” as the French say.

The test of every action is whether or no it would injure your own *self-respect*; firstly, entirely for you; and, secondly, in regard to the community – because your self-respect would be injured if you felt you had hurt the community.

You are a responsible being, you know, Caroline, a being with naturally fine qualities, and one who has had the fortune to have received the highest education. Therefore you must “make good,” and show that, when art and science, directed by common sense, have done their best for a young girl, she can prove in herself that it is worth while to use these two things for the perfecting of the coming woman who is to be the mother of that race of mental giants which we hope the middle of this, our century, will produce.

I think I am a crusader for the cause of common sense – which is only another word for what God meant when He endowed Solomon with wisdom. And, as these letters to you go on, you will observe that every single point we shall discuss will be ruled by this aspect.

For the highest ideals are only common sense poetically treated. And now, Caroline, good-night – we have finished this talk upon religion – and need not refer to it again, since I believe your intelligence is such that you have grasped my basic principle. You will hear from me soon upon another subject.

Your affectionate godmother,

E. G.

II

December, 1912.

I HOPE you were not very bored by my last and rather serious letter, Caroline. I was obliged to begin in that solid way, so that we could be sure of our points of view being the same for future talks, but in this missive I am going to write about something quite different, and almost as important – your manners!

The tendency of the present day is to do away with all gentle things, and among them courtesy has gone by the board, so that to see anyone still with beautiful and gracious manners is a thing to be remarked upon and rejoiced over. And I want you to be among this small company of the survival of other days!

The modern young woman is so innately selfish that, as a rule, her manners are only good when some definite momentary gain to herself makes their display worth while. She is too short-sighted to look ahead and see their value, and she is no longer a proud person remembering what is due to herself, and, therefore, that good manners ought to be the stamp of her breeding. She is often as primitive as a young savage, with a smattering of a fair mental education on top.

Numbers of kind-hearted mothers about forty years ago began to think that their own training had been horribly stiff and cruel, and gave a much greater license to their offspring. Deportment masters and mistresses grew to be less and less in vogue, and ridicule was cast upon the rules that had been in practice for every girl entering society. People began to laugh at numbers of things, a sense of humor was reviving, and it attacked the methods and fashions of “young ladyhood.” The children of those days, who are now mothers of the present young girls, went a step further, with the best intentions, and augmented, by the craze for exercise and out-of-door games, the effect of the lax rules of deportment, so that now one hardly ever sees a really gracious and graceful young girl, and some of them are the most unattractive specimens of youthful females in consequence.

Now, Caroline, I want you to be a cunning creature and combine the methods of the old and the new. If your tastes incline to violent outdoor games, assiduously cultivate beautiful and gracious manners as well, so that the young men you play with, while admiring your skill, will not feel they can treat you as “another fellow,” hardly with courtesy, and with no consideration.

Try not to swing your arms and be ungraceful in walking. Try not to sit in every awkward position that may be comfortable. Do not cross your legs and display yards of ankle, and, above all, do not lean both elbows upon the table and eat as though at a picnic where gipsy’s ways were good enough. One sees all these defects so constantly now that one has almost ceased to remark upon them. The very tight skirts have done one thing for women – they have enormously improved their walk, making those long, manly strides impossible. I suppose no nation in the world has such naturally perfectly-shaped bones and proportions – and no nation spoils these advantages so much by their atrocious movements as we do. Well, what a pity! And why cannot common sense step in and rectify this failing? Why do anything with exaggeration? Why play games to death, turning a pleasure into a grind? All is out of balance; and by these unattractive methods girls have often had to become the seekers, not the sought-after!

You must remember, Caroline, that you will be in a country where women are in an enormous majority – and the effect of this is that the men, unconsciously and naturally, have a great idea of their own value. It is not their fault, or because they are particularly vain men; it is simply because there are so few of them and so many of us! Therefore, if you want really to enjoy life and count as a coveted quantity, you must rise above the general company of young, unmeaning beings of your sex, so as to make the nice young man you may fancy think of you, not as one of a batch for him to choose from, but as the only desirable creature in all the world for him to strive to obtain. The really

interesting thing is to be a personality, not one of the herd. And I would like to see you, Caroline, with your beauty and your position, starting a new fashion in young girls when you come out. For, my dear child, realize one thing, – all the stuff and nonsense which you may have been told about women fitting themselves for a self-sufficing existence, and their “rights” and their assertion of equality, are pitiful makeshifts, of use only if the poor things do not obtain the sole real joy and happiness – to be the loved and honored mate of some nice man. If, by your self-assertion and exaggerated mentality, you have been able to crush out all sex instinct, then you become as the working bee – of a third sex, an anomaly in nature, and a ridiculous excrescence in God’s scheme of human progression. So for heaven’s sake, my sweet Caroline, keep this in view. Train what individuality in yourself you will, but keep your clear perspective so as to be able to see the ultimate goal of happiness.

I think I have been rather generalizing, so now I want to come down to a concrete description of what I think would be a perfect young girl, and you must tell me if you agree with this picture of a female “admirable Crichton”! I think, firstly, she ought to be sensible enough to understand the colossal importance and value of beauty, and to have learned to take care of her personal appearance, so that in every way she is a pleasure to the eye. She ought to have discovered early what style of garments suits her; she should have practiced until she can do her hair becomingly; and by exercises, and by care in remembering what is ugly and to be avoided, she should have perfected the grace of her body’s movements. All these things having been looked upon, not as vanities, but as the natural polishing of the body God had entrusted her with, as the shrine for her soul.

Her voice should be soft, and her cultivation at least sufficient – should she not be naturally clever – to make her know the topics of the day which are interesting to converse upon; and she should be broad enough not to be prejudiced about any of them.

Unselfishness in her should go as far as not to want always to have her own way, regardless of whom it hurts or discomforts. (One could not expect more than that in these days!)

She ought to have so high a respect for herself that she could never make herself cheap, but she should also have common sense enough to realize that, because it is, numerically, such an unequal fight between the sexes, she must have her weapons of attraction peculiarly well polished. Then, out of the limited circle of possible husbands she will have to choose from, she may hope to attract *the best*– because like clings to like.

As she is my ideal young girl, she will not be stupid enough to set out with the idea of making her own life self-sufficing. Whatever circumstances may force her to do afterward, at least to start with she will know that to be happily married is the natural goal, and that to obtain this good thing she must take care of her equipments and fit them for the post she aspires to.

She must have tact and a highly cultivated sense of humor, so that she may not be a bore with her notions and her egotism. She must not stand against the times, but be so ruled by fine taste that she cannot be drawn into any exaggeration.

Her ambition is to become the inspiration and adored mate of whatever nice man she may marry, because, as she is very highly refined and balanced, she will not be attracted by the weakling or the fool, whom she would inevitably rule while she despised him.

If she finds that somehow she has drifted into union with one of these beings, then it will be time enough for her to assert her supremacy – and the more self-controlled and equilibrated she is, the more successfully will she be able to stand alone if necessity requires her to do so. But, Caroline, remember that the natural goal and the happy and glorious goal of a woman is to strive to be the refining influence, the inspiration and the worshiped joy of a man. When she has to be self-sufficing, then, no matter how great she may become, the happiness is only second-best. So as you have youth and a clear sky, child, I want you to set forth with a desire for this best and greatest happiness.

There are splendid and suitable young men coming on every year, so this should not be an impossible attainment. Do you remember what Tennyson wrote about King Arthur making his knights swear this vow after the others?

To love one maiden only, cleave to her,
And worship her by years of noble needs,
Until they won her; for indeed I knew
Of no more subtle master under heaven
Than is the maiden passion for a maid,
Not only to keep down the base in man,
But teach high thought and amiable words
And courtliness, and the desire of fame,
And love of truth, and all that makes a man.

Now, even with your limited experience, Caroline, I am sure you will agree with me that there are very few modern maidens who are able to make a young man desire to shine in any of these ways. They do not inspire him with much reverence for themselves, or even much love!

Often the most they can make him feel is that they play a good game of golf, or that they “aren’t bad sorts,” or something of that kind. For you must not forget that whatever the other person thinks and feels about you is what you yourself have given him the presentment of. It entirely lies with you, therefore, what impression on his heart and brain you wish to create. I do assure you, Caroline, that it is infinitely more agreeable when he thinks you all that is perfect, and is passionately in love, than when he is mildly attracted by your golf and your *camaraderie*, while his unemployed senses, left at liberty to roam, stray to the more cunning young women of the chorus, who have realized that some feminine allurements are not bad things to cultivate. By all means play your golf and your tennis if they give you pleasure, but try and make your partner feel that these things are a means to securing the end he desires: namely, your company and companionship; not that you are the means to his enjoyment of the game. Do not throw away all mystery and appear a loud, jolly schoolboy, because, if you do, naturally the other “boys” will treat you as one of themselves, or as a sister – not as “another fellow’s sister,” to be considered, and whose favors are to be schemed for.

There used to be an idea that girls must be warned about wolves in sheep’s clothing, who wandered in society ready to lead them astray, corrupt their morals, and break their hearts! But, if these fabulous creatures ever existed, they only survive now in a few daring, youngish married men who make it their business to flirt with girls. I need not warn you against these, Caroline, because

I know that you are a proud little lady, and one, therefore, whose instincts would tell you that the attentions of a married man were merely an insult, disguised in whatever form they happened to be. It is only the lowest and cheapest sort of girl who willingly encourages such people, blazoning to the world that her vanity is colossal and her self-respect *nil*. So we need not touch more upon this subject. If a man is not free to marry a girl, his assiduous attentions are an impertinence, to say the least of it.

Owing to the scarcity of men, as I said before, they are inclined to give themselves airs, and numbers of young women do the seeking and the hunting, while the poor youths are scared of being captured, and, when they are secured at all, it is unwillingly. Must not that be a hateful blow to the girl’s pride when she thinks of it!

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