

*Memoirs of a
Mother-in-Law*

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Memoir I

Myself

FROM TIME IMMEMORIAL it has been the fashion for mothers-in-law to be held up to ridicule and contempt. I am not quite sure about the use of the word immemorial, because I am not a professional author, and when I was a girl young women were not so highly educated as they are now, and plain writing, plain sewing and plain cooking were what I was brought up to – and, I may as well add at once, plain speaking, which I inherited from my dear mother.

My dear mother always spoke her mind. Many a time have I heard her say to my dear father when he remonstrated with her about something she had said in company, “I can’t help it, Zachariah; I always did speak my mind, and I always will, no matter whether it offends people or not.”

As a girl I spoke my mind, as a young woman I spoke my mind, and, though I am a middle-aged woman now, I speak it still, and I intend to speak it in these memoirs. I know that I have occasionally given offence by so doing. A woman with four married daughters and three married sons, a single daughter, who lives at home, a dear, clever little mischievous boy of eleven for her youngest, and a husband who can’t say

“boh” to a goose, unless the goose is his wife, and who has for the whole thirty-five years of our married life left me not only to say all the unpleasant things, but to do them also, while he keeps out of the way, can’t help giving offence occasionally if she is honest and plain-spoken.

Of course, if my husband – not that, as a man, I wish to say a word against him – had done his duty as a husband and a father, I should not in certain quarters bear the reputation of being “a Tartar”. That is the elegant expression I once heard applied to me by a young man from an ironmonger’s shop in my own house to my own servant.

Tartar or no Tartar, I didn’t allow his master to impose upon my husband, who really has no more idea of the value of things than a child, and ought never to be trusted in a shop alone. He believes everything the shopmen tell him, and hates what he calls haggling over the price of anything. I once let him go with me to buy a bonnet because he said he had seen one in a window that he thought would suit me, and I declare he made quite a scene. Directly I had tried on about half a dozen he began to fidget with his stick and shuffle his feet, and he wanted me to have a hideous thing that made me look a perfect fright. Of course I saw what was the matter. He thought I was giving the young woman in the shop a little trouble. “Oh, of course,” I said to him, “you don’t mind what sort of a fright I look, you only think of other people.”

I said it out loud, and he went as red as a turkey cock, which is a painful habit he has when I speak to him before people.

“I don’t want you to look a fright, my dear,” he stammered, “but you don’t want to try on every bonnet in the shop and then walk out without buying one.”

I have never been able to understand why men have such a horror of walking out of a shop without buying anything. Of course the assistants would like it if you bought the entire contents of the shop, but you don’t go into a shop to please the assistants – you go to please yourself, and if you are not pleased with anything you see, or if it is too dear, why should you buy it?

Two of my daughters take after their father in this respect. I have known my eldest, Sabina, after we have spent a morning at Shoolbred’s, or Whiteley’s, or Marshall & Snelgrove’s,* and not found exactly what we wanted, rush back just as we were going out of the shop and buy some absurd and utterly useless bit of trumpery for sixpence, and when I have remonstrated with her for wasting her money, reply: “Oh, Mamma, we have given such a lot of trouble, I was obliged to buy something.”

It was the absurd idea of buying something, I am sure, which led my husband to buy the cruet stand at the ironmonger’s in the Tottenham Court Road, which caused the young man to tell my own housemaid that I was a Tartar. And the hussy had the impudence – she didn’t know that I was looking over the banisters – to say that I was that, and no mistake, and poor master would never hear the last of the cruet stand. Poor master, indeed. I poor-mastered her, and she left that day month, and but for her mother calling and appealing to me as

a mother myself she'd have had no character from me. There's a good deal too much "poor master" about the giggling, flighty servant girl of today.

I daresay I did say some very unpleasant things to the ironmonger, but I only spoke my mind, and I would have done it under the circumstances if he had been twenty ironmongers.

I happened to say one day at dinner that we had never had a decent cruet stand; of course we had cruet stands, flimsy, silly, tottery-overly modern things, but I always remembered dear mother's best cruet stand (which was my admiration when I was a little girl, and an ornament to any dining table), and my two boys trying to reach the pepper at lunch knocked the one we had over and saturated the clean tablecloth (and one of my best ones) with vinegar and Worcester sauce, not to mention mustard. I spoke my mind, and said that it was not the sort of cruet stand I expected when I married a man of means.

The very next day my poor, foolish husband – as good-hearted a man as ever breathed – must march off to an ironmonger's in Tottenham Court Road, and go in and ask to see some first-class cruet stands. Why he went to an ironmonger's I don't know, especially to a cheap, advertising ironmonger, with fire irons and dustpans and things hanging up outside to attract attention; but he did, and the proprietor soon saw the sort of man he had got hold of, and persuaded him to buy a big, vulgar, wretched thing, and charged him six guineas for it. Directly it came home I saw what it was at a glance; and

when John – that’s my husband – told me what he’d paid for it I was horrified, and I said, “If you think I’m going to allow you to be swindled like that you’re mistaken. I’ll send it back at once and demand the money.”

Then he began to argue, and said that he’d bought it and paid for it, and I was prejudiced. We argued the matter over for an hour, but he was obstinate, and said I couldn’t expect him to go into the shop and tell the man that his wife said he was a fool. I don’t think this sentence is quite clear. Those his and hims always did bother me, but then I’m not a professional writer. It is much easier to say what you mean than to write what you mean. I made my husband understand me, for I said: “Then if you don’t go back with the cruet stand *I* will” – and I wrapped it up in the flimsy pink tissue paper that they had sent it home in, and took it by the handle, and I went off with it then and there, and I walked into the shop and put it down on the counter, and I said to the proprietor, who was staring at me as if he’d never seen an indignant wife before, “You’ll be good enough to give me back six guineas, which my husband, Mr Tressider, paid you for this trumpery thing yesterday.” There were several customers in the shop, and the proprietor was evidently taken aback for he gasped before he could speak. “I don’t understand what you mean, madam.” “Oh, I will make my meaning plain,” I said. “My husband doesn’t know what cruet stands are, and he paid you six guineas for *this*. I *do* know what cruet stands are, so I’ll trouble you for the money back again.”

“If you are dissatisfied with the cruet, madam, I’ll change it – but we never return money.” “Then,” said I, “you’ll have to begin the practice now.”

He gurgled in his throat and glared at me, but I wasn’t frightened. I knew I had the best of it. He couldn’t turn me out of the shop, and the other customers had left off buying and were listening, and the assistant couldn’t attract their attention. I found out afterwards one lady was giving a large wedding order for a young couple going to be married, and she was quite close and could hear every word. I think the proprietor thought she might be alarmed and think she had come to what my eldest son John called “the wrong shop”, and not give the order. At any rate, he saw that he had a determined woman to deal with, and he altered his tone and said in a loud voice, “Madam, it is not my desire that any article which does not give satisfaction should be forced on a customer. I will give you the money back rather than have any unpleasantness.” And he did, and I went back in triumph, and I put down the money on the table under my husband’s nose, and I said, “There, if people can take the coat off *your* back they can’t off *mine*,” and then I put the money back into my pocket and gave him a look and left him, and it was a very long time after that before he went shopping on his own account for the house again – and I made the old cruet stand do.

I have narrated this little incident because it gives some slight idea of the responsibilities which have fallen to my lot as the practical head of the family. A better husband than mine in

many ways no woman could desire, and I can honestly say that I wish in some things all my daughters had been as fortunate, but when everything disagreeable that has to be said or done is left to the wife to say or do, you cannot wonder that she gets a reputation for being what that impertinent ironmonger's man – he only came to bring a coal scuttle home which had been repaired, and it would never have gone to his master's shop if I had known it – called a Tartar. Goodness knows I have had enough to make me a Tartar. You don't bring up nine children and see seven of them married without having something to try your temper and make you occasionally distrustful of human nature, not to speak of servants and a husband who, though a clever man in business, is utterly helpless when it comes to a bother at home, and yet so devoted to his domestic hearth that it was with the greatest difficulty that I could persuade him to go into society now and then for the sake of the girls. Nice marriages they would have made if it hadn't been for me, and even as it is, I am really very anxious about two of their husbands. My girls – God bless them – have always been the best of daughters to me, and they are now wives that any man might be proud of; but I have never been able to induce my husband to take the position he should do as a father-in-law. If a foot has had to be put down, it has always been mine, and I say that it is a father's place to look after his sons-in-law.

They say that your son is your son till he gets himself a wife, but your daughter is your daughter all the days of your life, and I always made up my mind that my daughters should

not be absolutely removed from my influence, or deprived of my advice when they married and had homes of their own. As to my sons – well, I cannot say that their choice would have been mine. I know where John Tressider would have been had I been like my second son William’s wife. She is a very lovely girl, and her manners are charming. It is really very hard to find fault with her, but her views are not mine. Indeed, I doubt if she has any views at all. When people say to me, “What a lovely girl your second son’s wife is,” I can’t help shaking my head. Her beauty, her sweetness – for she really has a sweet temper – have completely blinded William to her utter lack of household management. I was horrified when I learnt from William what his household bills came to, and the money he allowed her for dress. I tried to reason with him, and told him I should talk seriously to Marion – that is his wife – and all the thanks I got was, “Oh, Mother, for goodness’ sake don’t find fault with Marion, she’s so sensitive; she’ll take it to heart. She’s been crying over her butcher’s book ever since you found out that mistake of ninepence in the addition. I’m sure you didn’t mean any harm, my dear mother, but that and your asking what she paid a pound for lamb at our little dinner party has preyed upon her mind. She’s always saying to me that she is afraid you don’t think she’s a fit wife for me.”

Of course I said it was very hard that I couldn’t make a simple remark without being accused of trying to ruin my son’s domestic happiness, and I felt hurt. I certainly did speak my

mind on the occasion referred to, and I shouldn't have been doing my duty as a mother if I had not done so.

It was the most natural thing in the world. William gave a little dinner party – quite a family affair, his friends and dear Marion's, for she is really a dear girl – and quite innocently in the middle of dinner, having been discussing the terrible price of everything in London nowadays with a lady who was talking about the Stores,* I said to my daughter-in-law, "What do you pay in this neighbourhood, my dear, for lamb?"

Could a mother-in-law ask a more harmless question, and yet will you believe it, the silly girl turned crimson to the roots of her hair, and stammered and said, "she didn't know."

"Not know, my dear," I said. "Don't you check your butcher's book? Do you allow him to charge you what he chooses?"

I am sure I spoke most kindly but Mr Tressider, my husband, began to wink violently at me, and William, my son, glared at me. He has a terrible habit of glaring which I tried in vain to wean him off when he was a child. I can't think where he got it, because his father doesn't do it and there never was a glare in my family.

"What *is* the matter?" I said, and then I noticed that the silly girl's eyes were full of tears.

That annoyed me, and I spoke my mind, not unkindly but firmly. I said: "My child, I'm sorry if I have in any way hurt your feelings, but it was only my mother's love which spoke. If William doesn't mind what you pay for your lamb, of course it is no business of mine."

There was silence for a moment, and then Mr Tressider began to tell one of his absurd stories about when we first set up housekeeping. Of course, he did it to turn the conversation. He has told the story a hundred times, and everybody always laughs, and I suppose that's why he is so fond of telling it, but I never could see the humour of it.

The story, which he generally exaggerates, is this. When we were first married I found a cigar bill of my husband's lying about, and wishing to know the price of everything, I asked him how many cigars he got for all that money, and he told me. I forget how many now, but I know they came out at about sixpence each.

I thought it a great deal of money for a wretched little thing that a man puffs away in half an hour, and so one day, happening to be in a grocer's shop, and seeing some boxes of cigars labelled "a bargain", I thought I would see if I couldn't save John a little money in cigars, so I asked the price, and the grocer told me they were ten-and-sixpence a box of a hundred. I bought a box and took them home, and I said to my husband: "John, dear, you had better let me buy your cigars in future. Look, I can get them for ten-and-six a hundred, and you have been paying fifty shillings." My husband took a cigar out and looked at it, and then he burst out laughing, and said that he was very much obliged to me, but he wanted to live a little longer for my sake, and I believe he gave those cigars to the gardener, who came in once a week at that time, until I discovered that for his entire year's wages we only got four

geraniums and his dirty boots tramping in and out of the hall, and then I stopped it and looked after the garden myself, and made the servants help me.

I have never understood to this day why John wouldn't smoke those cigars because I paid less than the usual price for them. A cigar is a cigar, and I'm sure those smoked beautifully, for I met the gardener out with one one Sunday, and it smelt quite as strong as any my husband smokes. But everybody laughed at the story as if it was something out of *Punch*,* and I made no further remark. But after dinner William came to me, and he said: "Mother, I know you meant it kindly, but Marion is very sensitive, and no young wife likes to be made to appear ignorant before her own guests. Please don't do it again."

"Oh, very well, William," I said. "If your wife objects to my making a remark at my own son's table..."

He saw that I was hurt, and so he took my face between his hands and kissed me. "There, there, mother," he said, "don't get angry, you old dear; let us say no more about it. You know Marion thinks you the most wonderful woman that ever lived, and so do I."

William was always a good son, and his heart is as soft and gentle now as it was when he was a boy. I can't be angry with him, and I never could, but all the same, I do not think that a young woman who doesn't know what she pays the butcher for lamb is the wife for a young man who has his way to make in the world.

Mothers-in-law always have been misunderstood, and I suppose they always will be. No one has ever put *their* side of the question properly. That is what I intend to do here, and that is why, now that all my children but two are married, and I have more time on my hands, I have determined to take up the cause of the most maligned race on the face of the earth. I am quite sure when I have related my experiences I shall have put quite a different complexion on the matter. I daresay I shall offend some of my sons-in-law, and some of my daughters-in-law will feel aggrieved, but I can't help that – I always did speak my mind, and I certainly am not going to mince matters now.

It is time that someone said a good word for mothers-in-law. In most books that I have read they are grossly misrepresented, and on the stage they are always held up to ridicule and, I might say, contempt. I have never been able to understand why there is such an absurd prejudice against them. Of course, I can understand a man when he marries a young, confiding girl, who knows nothing of life, not caring for her mother – an experienced woman of the world – to know or to see too much. But it is a mother's duty to point out to her daughter the proper way to manage a husband, and to give her the benefit of that knowledge which the poor thing (the mother-in-law) has often acquired by painful personal experience.

I have always intended to write my own personal experience, and with that end in view I have made notes of many things as they occurred, and I have kept a diary. I have always kept it under lock and key, for Mr Tressider has a most irritating

habit of picking up any little scrap of writing that may be left about on my table, and reading it – and there are many things one writes in one’s diary which one doesn’t care for everyone to see. Talk about curiosity being a female failing! I never yet met the woman who was half as inquisitive as some men I’ve known. But John Tressider has never seen my diary, and I have kept him in absolute ignorance of my intention to make public my experiences as a mother-in-law. If I had only hinted it to him it would have been all over the place in no time, and I have no doubt that he, in his foolish, soft-hearted way, would have made no end of objection to it, and would have pretended that my sons-in-law and daughters-in-law might not like it.

As I am going to tell nothing but the truth, I cannot see how they can possibly object. At any rate, I shall not ask their permission first. What I am doing I am doing in the interest of a very large and a very badly used class, and though the sons- and daughters-in-law may occasionally wince – there are very few people who can stand plain speaking – I am perfectly certain that before I’ve finished I shall have earned the gratitude of every mother-in-law in the United Kingdom. So much for myself by way of introduction. It was necessary that I should say something, though I was never one to talk much about myself. But I do not wish to be misunderstood, although for the matter of that I ought to be used to it by this time. My husband never understood me, and my children have not always shown that appreciation of my motherly care and foresight for their welfare which I could have desired. But I have

never been deterred from doing my duty, and I shall continue to do it unflinchingly as long as my name is Jane Tressider.

I shall now proceed to my first experience as a mother-in-law, or, rather, as a prospective mother-in-law – the painful moment when I learnt for the first time that my eldest daughter, Sabina, had conceived an affection for someone outside her own domestic circle, and that a young man was anxious to remove her from the bosom of her family and take her from her devoted mother! It is naturally a blow to an affectionate mother when the first of her children shows symptoms of a desire to quit the shelter of the maternal wing. I am not ashamed to say that my first feelings when I heard that a young man had fallen in love with my daughter were those of indignation. There was a reason for my indignation, and that reason was the gentleman himself. I consider his behaviour... But that young man will have to be my second memoir.