

Is There a Real Dorothy Dix?

For nearly thirty years Mrs. Elizabeth Gilmer has been answering newspaper readers' questions about their most intimate problems. She comforts, scolds, and advises out of a depth of understanding acquired in a life beset with anxiety and care

by Beatrice Washburn

DID you ever wonder: How to hold your husband's love? How to keep your boy from drinking? What to name the baby? How to reduce? How to make your will? What to do with your flapper daughter when she stays out till 2 A.M. in a neighbor's automobile? How to hold your position? Whether or not you should marry your first cousin? How to get along with your mother-in-law?

And if so, did you ever think of writing to the daily paper about it? If you haven't, you are unique, because almost everybody does, according to the veteran heart columnist of the country, Dorothy Dix, whose mail runs into something like a thousand letters a week and who is literally bombarded with queries like these. In private life Dorothy Dix is Mrs. Elizabeth Gilmer of New Orleans. She has been answering folks' questions for nearly thirty years. Her answers to them run in seventy-eight newspapers throughout the United States and her mail comes in such quantities that the postman has to carry an extra pouch to accommodate her. There is scarcely a question in the world that she hasn't answered or, at least, that she hasn't been asked. Every state in the Union contributes its quota, to say nothing of Australia, Japan, India, England and South Africa. Representatives from every stratum of society appeal to her for advice on their most intimate problems—shop girls, debutantes, burglars, shop-lifters,

A GENTLE, well-bred, elderly woman with white hair and laughing eyes and hands so small you wonder they can manipulate the typewriter, is the highest-paid woman newspaper writer in the world. She started newspaper work at five dollars a week when she was in desperate need. Wealth and success, following on years of poverty, disillusionment and despair, have but enriched the sympathetic interest that she takes in other people's troubles.

housewives, society matrons, business women, grandmothers and young wives.

There isn't a small town in the country, if it boasts but a signal tower and a rail fence, where Dorothy Dix couldn't stop over between trains and be on intimate terms with every one, from the school teacher and the

farmer's wife to the station agent and the boy who drives the flivver. The chances are that she has helped most of them.

"The one thing we are all interested in above everything else is our family affairs," is how she explains it, and incidentally it may be said that Dorothy Dix is not as imposing or awe inspiring as the picture that appears at the head of her column in the papers for which she writes. She is small and dainty, with white hair and laughing eyes and hands so small that you wonder they can manipulate the typewriter. She is reputed to be the highest-paid woman newspaper writer in the world. Her salary runs way up into the five figures, but she doesn't mind saying that she was paid three dollars for her first article and that she started newspaper work on the old *Picayune* in New Orleans on a salary of five dollars a week.

She lives on the edge of Audubon Park with her ninety-year-old father in a big cream-colored house which has just been completed. It stands window deep in trees—sycamores, live oaks and magnolias. It has been built up quite literally of tears and confessions from young girls she has interviewed in county jails, jealous

wives who have killed their husbands, mothers weeping for their sons, lonely women marooned on farms who had no outlet but the daily paper—all the people she has advised and scolded and comforted and listened to in her long career.

"It is no particular credit to me that I am interested in other people's problems," she continues. "It is due not only to long training in newspaper work, but to the fact that I have had a variegated and troubled life myself, so that the problems they put up to me are often those I have experienced. There is no doubt that we all depend for happiness, in the last analysis, upon one thing—the people we love. When something goes wrong with our intimate relations, when we are worried about our husbands, daughters, wives, the whole fabric of our lives is twisted. The oil magnate is just as worried when his flapper daughter breaks the speed laws as is the grocery man when his stays out late to the movies. Mr. Midas loves his wife no less than the street-car conductor does his. The bank president's wife is as interested in holding her husband's love as the postman's wife is in holding hers. The governor is as ambitious for his children as the milkman. I get as many letters from the highly educated as from those who never saw the inside of a high school. And fully half of them begin something like this: 'I know you can't help me in this, but it is a relief to talk to some one.' It is the old impulse of confession, you see, the impulse we all have at times to break out and tell some one about something that has been festering in our lives for a long time. I don't pretend to write literature, but I have the knack of being able to talk to people in their own language. And don't think it came by accident. It has been developed by long years of hard work and bitter experience."

One Letter Averts a Tragedy

In one morning's mail came this letter from a girl, a country school-teacher, who had let herself be persuaded by a man: "I love him so. He promises me that if I will come and live with him for six months, at the end of that time he will marry me."

The letter was written from the extreme northern edge of a Northern state. Dorothy Dix did not wait for her secretary or her typewriter or even for her breakfast. She sat down and sent a special delivery letter telling that girl to leave the town at once and get as far away from that man as possible.

"Why should he marry you at the end of six months if he will not do so now?" she wrote. "Do you think a man who is base enough to propose such a thing to a woman is going to marry her after he has got what he wanted and is tired of her?"

Well, this letter at least had a happy sequel. The girl left town, got a job somewhere else,

recovered from her infatuation and is leading an interesting and self-respecting life. Hundreds of letters are answered through the daily papers, but thousands of them are not. These are the ones that are sent with real names and requests for a personal reply. They are letters that her secretary never sees, that she never shows to any one and that she takes the trouble to answer personally, every one. She works from nine o'clock till noon every day of her life and again for two hours in the evening. No one need ever accuse her of making up her letters. There are baskets full of them in her room, letters with every kind of stamp and in every kind of handwriting. She receives on the average about a hundred letters a day and her morning mail contains much more drama than you could see in the movies if you went every day for a week, many more heartbreaks than the jails, more suffering than the hospitals, more news, if she could print it, than the daily newspaper.

What gives a person insight, intuition, sympathy, and a sense of humor sufficient to get a bird's-eye view of another's life, to scan what lies on top and read below the surface? Hard training and strenuous reporting aren't all. Dorothy Dix, like the excellent reporter she is, has "covered" about every human activity from women's clubs to murder trials, from vital statistics to political conventions. But more than that she has been a country girl and a small-town woman. She can sympathize with the problems of the average housewife whose life is bounded on the one side by husband and children and on the other by the high cost of living.

A woman wrote to her one Christmas morning and said: "I wish I had the money to send you a real present in proportion to what you have done for me. But I am sending you this little incident hoping that you will accept it as a gift beyond all price for it represents the happiness of eight people. I am a married woman with three children. My husband is good and hard working, but unromantic and undemonstrative. During his absence I became acquainted with a traveling man who was married and had two children and whose wife did not understand him. We were crazy about each other and decided we could not live apart. We lived some fifty miles out of New York City, so one morning we each took an early train and met in the Grand Central Station, where we planned to take a train for the West and begin life over again. While he went to get our tickets he bought a morning paper and left it for me to read in the waiting-room. I glanced over it idly and my eye fell on your little article 'You Can't Build a Life on False Foundations.' Every word of it seemed to burn right into my soul. When my friend came back I handed him the paper and he read the

article without a word. Then he laid it down, looked at me and said: 'Well, I guess we both better go back to our jobs.' And we did."

Another letter, and these letters are all typical and not exceptions, was from a little country girl who had come down to Philadelphia to look for a job. It is in her own words:

"I got work as a clerk in a dry-goods store but it was awfully dull and I only got a small salary. The work was so hard that I began going out in the evenings as much as possible so I could have some fun. Often I went with men I met over the counter who I didn't know any thing about. But they took me to handsome restaurants and to cabarets and it seemed wonderful to me because I came from a little town where there isn't a single restaurant and folks had never seen a cabaret except in the movies. One of these men I liked especially well. He was so good-looking and a dandy dancer. He hated to see me work so hard and said if I would only stop he would get me a little apartment and a car of my own. Of course I was dumb to fall for anything like that but ask any girl that works ten hours a day for fifteen dollars a week and she will tell you it's fierce. You get so tired it seems like you'd do anything to get a rest. Besides I was young and not bad looking and I didn't want to go back home and wash dishes and cook all the rest of my life. So one day I told him I'd come and I met him in a cafeteria for lunch with my suit-case all packed to go away with him. While we were eating I picked up a newspaper that some one had left in a chair

Dorothy Dix's Letter Box

DEAR DOROTHY DIX—Should an unmarried woman adopt a child? Will she be happier in voluntarily assuming the entire responsibility of rearing a child upon whom no one else has any claim than in playing the fairy god-mother to the children of friends, cousins and sisters?



Answer:

There is no reason why an unmarried woman should not adopt a child and very many reasons why she should if she finds her life empty and she has the maternal hunger that many women have.

I do not think that there is any finer and nobler thing that a woman can possibly do than to take a little homeless and friendless child and give it a real home and a mother's love and tenderness. It is the saving of a life from something far worse than physical death, and the good one does in rearing up a man or woman, with high and noble ideals and good principles, does not end with that individual. It stretches on and on to their children and their children's children into eternity.

I think that you will get far more happiness out of adopting a child of your own for keeps than you will out of the borrowed babies of your friends and relatives. It is the same difference there is between owning your own automobile and getting a lift now and then from a kindly disposed friend.

Various motives enter into your desire for a child. For one thing, you want a child to love and a child to love you. You can have only a warm affection for the half dozen or so children to whom you play fairy godmother and whom you have with you for only a little while at a time and for whom you have no responsibility. But if you adopt a baby that is wholly yours, that you will have with you all the time, whose cunning little ways will be a ceaseless source of interest to you and whose mind and body you will watch develop day by day, you will soon come to love it with a real passion of mother love.

We notice this even in our cursory contacts with children. It is the ones with whom we have daily association that we think better and prettier and smarter than any other children in the world and whose cute sayings we are always repeating.

You want to be loved. You want to feel the clinging of little arms about your neck. You want to feel that a child turns to you to weep out its sorrows on your breast. These you can only get from the child you adopt, which will give to you the affection that you crave. You will be its mother, not just its auntie, as you are to your friends' children.

Finally, you will have the pleasure of developing the child you adopt in your own way and according to your own ideals, as you have no right to do with your friends' children. And there is nothing else more interesting than to cultivate the sweet garden of a child's mind.

DOROTHY DIX.

DEAR MISS DIX—My wife is a domestic genius. She is as industrious as a bee, but her patience is no longer than her finger and she has a fierce temper. I have done all I could to cure her of this, using kindness, silence, patience, gifts, threats and scoldings, but all to no avail.

What shall I do?

A. W. G.

Answer:

You know what you do in business, Mr. A. W. G. You strike a balance on the year's work. You offset your liabilities by your assets and find out that you have your gains as well as your losses.

That is the policy that wise people have to pursue in matrimony. No man gets a perfect wife. No woman marries an ideal husband. They find that their life partners have their faults and their virtues, and they weigh them one against the other. If you do that, you will find that they break pretty even.

Undoubtedly, an irritable, high-tempered woman is hard to endure. She is a thorn in the flesh, a pebble in the shoe, and if you let your mind dwell on how she aggravates you and how disagreeable she is to live with, you will soon get to the place where you cannot stand another day, and your marriage will be a total loss.

But you can save the situation by balancing your account and thinking how lucky you are in having a domestic genius for a wife. Think how well fed you are, how clean your house is, how thriftily your wife manages.

Think of the men you know who go home at night to good-natured slovens who have lain on a couch and read novels all day and left the dishes unwashed in the sinks, the beds unmade, and whose idea of preparing a dinner for a hungry man is to slap some delicatessen mess on the table and open a tin can.

Think of the men you know married to women who spend every cent they make and who can never get ahead any because their wives are always running them in debt to dressmakers and milliners. Believe me, A. W. G., being a domestic genius offsets a lot of temper in a wife.

DOROTHY DIX.

Thanks to her daily column in seventy-eight newspapers, there isn't a small town in the country, if it boasts but a signal tower and a rail fence, where Dorothy Dix couldn't stop over between trains and be on intimate terms with everyone, from the school teacher and the farmer's wife to the station agent and the boy who drives the flivver. The chances are that she has helped most of them.

and began to read it in the way you do when you're upset about something and pick up something without thinking about it. At the top of the page there was an article by you called 'Don't Pay Too High a Price for Your Fun, Girls.' Well, I can't tell you what that article did for me. It seemed to make everything plain. While my friend went to order a taxi—he was always classy about things like that—I grabbed my suit-case and ran out the side door and he never saw me again. I ran all the way to the station and got on the first train going back to my home town. Now I am married to a fine boy who owns the garage and we have two babies. I just wanted to tell you about it."

Taken all in all, the letters have varied very little in the past twenty years. Easy divorce, economic independence and the vagaries of the modern generation are but surface currents compared to the old, prosaic, commonplace difficulties of human relationship. A question that women have asked since Penelope sat waiting for Ulysses and that they are asking yet is: "How can I make my husband love me as he used to?" It would certainly break your heart to see just how many times that recurs.

Another, asked so often that you wonder it does not echo to the very gates of Heaven, comes in every day and from every part of the country: "Do you think he will come back and marry me?"

"Men write me more frequently than they used to," says Dorothy Dix, "perhaps because they are becoming more articulate or perhaps

helplessness of the Southern women of that day. She couldn't even make a fire, to say nothing of making a living.

"I didn't know enough to teach school," she confesses, "and in those days teaching was the only job a perfect lady could indulge in."

This early experience started the conviction which she now holds and expresses on the lecture platform—that every girl, no matter how well born or well endowed, should be taught how to earn her living. Let her learn stenography, photography, dressmaking, tending babies, anything that will enable her to gain a salary—and let her learn it well in case she should ever need it.

During the time, thirty years ago, when the young wife was torn with anxiety and care, her family sent her to the little town of Bay St. Louis, on the Gulf of Mexico, to restore her shattered nerves.

"Fortune placed me in the house next to Mrs. Nicholson, the owner of the New Orleans *Picayune*. We became friends and I confided in her that I had literary aspirations and thought perhaps I could write. 'Show me something you have done,' she said kindly and I pulled out a little story about an old negro we had up in our Kentucky plantation. Whether out of kindness or because she saw promise in it I never knew, she offered me three dollars for the manuscript. It was the first money I had ever earned. It was a dazzling sum to me. And after it had appeared in the old *Picayune*, the finest paper in the South and one of the best in the entire country, she offered me a steady job doing women's news for a salary of five dollars a week."

A Pioneer "Sob Sister"

Dorothy Dix started out doing vital statistics—the births, marriages and deaths on which every newspaper cub cuts his teeth. She did the obits so well that she was promoted to the recipes! The cookery column gave her the idea that clothes and food did not represent the whole range of female activity. Out of the experience of her own married life the little wife knew that other women had problems that tortured them, husbands that mystified them, children that worried them, in-laws that nearly drove them crazy. If they could find an outlet for the daily wear and tear of domestic life it might do them as much good as learning how to make coconut cakes. And so it proved. She opened a column for letters and little daily talks and the correspondence began to pour in. Letters came in by the tens, the hundreds, and finally by the thousands, until the *Picayune* was fairly swamped with letters. In self-defense she had to find a pen name and compromised on Dorothy Dix, partly because it was alliterative and easy to remember and partly because Dick was the name of an

old man they had on the Kentucky plantation who had taught her her letters and who, like his famous prototype in Dickens, was always going to write an entire book on the Judgment Day.

Along with the letters Mrs. Gilmer did straight reporting. Her love of newspaper work was so great that she carried editorials home with her and learned them by heart, hung around the copy desk until she knew how to write heads, asked for extra assignments when she had finished her own and, any editor will appreciate this, came to the office on her day off to see if she couldn't find some little thing to do.

"Women are natural born newspaper men," is what she claims, "they are the greatest gossips in the world and eternally interested in human affairs. What is a newspaper but a very great shop always interested and always sympathetic toward the other fellow's business."

All this time she was keeping house and taking care of her husband on the side. When women write her that they can't manage a job and a house, too, she replies that it can be done. She has done it.

It was not long before her daily letters to contributors, with their sympathetic understanding, their flashes of wit, their bits of pathos and their undoubted literary quality attracted the attention not only of readers, but of editors the country over. One of the first to appreciate her work was William Randolph Hearst. He wrote and offered her a position on the New York *Journal*. She lingered in New Orleans for six months after this summons because Major Burbank, her city editor who had trained her, was ill and she could not bear to leave him short handed. When he died she left New Orleans and made the decisive trip North into a strange and alien country.

"No one will believe how green I was when I struck New York," says she. "I had never seen the skyscrapers or the elevated, and the roar of traffic absolutely terrified me. My city editor was Foster Coates and he immediately rushed me to every 'human interest story' he could find. I believe Mr. Hearst was the first big editor to see the possibilities of 'sob stuff.' He wanted every item on the police blotter covered like a melodrama, which of course it was. He was the first to inject human sympathy, description, character analysis, and interviews into a murder trial. I staggered around the unfamiliar streets to the Tombs and Bellevue, through Broadway dives and lodging-houses, Bronx tenements and Westchester country houses, losing my way to New Jersey whenever I was sent there, a little eighty-five-pound country girl, pitifully green and unsophisticated among all those seasoned and expert reporters. But they were all kind to me and of course it was magnificent training.

I attributed my ease in concentration and swift work now to the twenty years I spent on the *Evening Journal*, when you worked at top speed, under brilliant editors, when no assignment was considered too hard and there was no coming back to the desk with the wistful plea—'I couldn't get it.' You either got it or you got out. I never could have accomplished what I do now without it."

She kept up the Dorothy Dix letters and found the problems of New York and New Jersey not so very different from those of Louisiana and Mississippi. Wives were wives and women were women the world over. She became expert in murder trials, Florence Burns, Nan Patterson, Mrs. Patrick, Mrs. Carmen, Josephine Terranova, Becker and a dozen others. She knew the way to Ossining almost as well as the route to the Park Row *Childs'* where you could get ham and eggs after the paper was put to bed and the last edition over. She saw reporters come and go. Some rose to editors, some to feature writers, some to publicity men. Some broke out of the game entirely and became business men. She saw what drink could do to brilliant men and what brilliant men could do without drink. She knew a city editor in a near-by office who murdered his wife and was sent to Sing Sing for life. He is there yet. She numbered among her newspaper acquaintances Frank O'Malley, Martin Green, Irvin Cobb, Will Irwin, Chester Lord, Lindsay Dennison, Charley Michelson, Nellie Revell, Richard Harding Davis, Arthur Brisbane, Frank Swinnerton, all the galaxy of stars of ten and twenty years ago.

In 1917 Dorothy Dix transferred from Mr. Hearst to the Wheeler Syndicate so that she could carry on her column of letters unhampered by the demands of daily reporting. A few years later she switched again to the Philadelphia *Public Ledger* Syndicate, for which she writes today. Then, all at once, when she took stock of things and realized that it was no longer necessary to report at an office, she found that she was rich enough to do all the things she had always wanted to do. Rich enough to live any place she liked. The twenty-dollar salary had grown into four and then into five figures. She had published two books of magazine articles—the famous Mirandy dialogues, and a book of travels—besides her letters.

She looked about her for a place to live and decided on New Orleans because it was where she had started out and the place to which she had always wanted to return. So with her old father and the negro maid she had brought with her from Kentucky she moved back to Louisiana and planned to give up work entirely. And like most people who try to do that, she found she couldn't. The letters followed her; they clamored for answers. She had grown from an amateur scribbler into the

highest-salaried newspaper woman in the country, from a cub reporter into a director on the paper where she started. Yet here they were still, the same old letters—"How can I make my husband love me again?" "How shall I keep my boy from drinking?" "Do you think eighteen is too young to marry?"

She sat down and answered them, of course, as she is still answering them and will continue to do as long as she lives. From the broad gauge of her own observation she realizes that each crisis, while it is different, is also alike—that underneath them all lies a great kinship and a great bond. Mrs. Brown, the milliner of Willmar, Minnesota, or Snohomish, Washington, who writes that she is in love with her husband's brother is in much the same predicament as were two people who lived long, long ago called Paolo and Francesca. The flapper who runs out the back door to meet her sixteen-year-old swain because her parents will not let him come in the front, receives nothing but criticism from her neighbors, but doubtless the neighbors were saying the same thing when young Juliet climbed out on her balcony to spoon with Romeo. And each of us, be it Father Montague or Helen of Troy or you or I has the conceit to think our own affairs the only ones really important or significant in a world that has already seen more than twenty centuries of men and women kiss and grow up and fall in love and die. It is this inestimable difference, the little angle that makes your wife seem more desirable to you than ever did Galatea to Pygmalion, this human element, that Dorothy Dix catches on the end of her pen and conveys to nineteen million people. She does it with a zest, a spice, a sense of humor that lifts it from the realm of Polyanna and Bertha M. Clay into something that closely resembles art.

She Avoids the Limelight

In New Orleans she leads a quiet, inconspicuous life. Most people don't even know that Mrs. Gilmer, the gentle, dignified woman whom you meet at teas and who speaks occasionally before women's clubs, is one and the same with Dorothy Dix, whose column is read alike on St. Charles Avenue and in the Parish prison. She has very little taste for the limelight and quite obviously avoids it. Her taste in books, in furniture, in clothes is conservative and unerring. She still regrets, a little wistfully, that she can't write literature.

And yet, doesn't she? What else would you call a faculty that makes the commonplace seem significant and the every-day routine of life interesting and beautiful, just as it once seemed to each of us when we exulted in our first sunset, our first kiss, or our first baby?

People make fun of the heart column. The intellectuals say that it is sentimental and often absurd. And it is. So are we all.

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Everybody's

FRANK QUINN
EDITOR

CONTENTS

Robert W. Chambers writes a new novel of pioneer American days	9
A Sentimental Villain. A short story <i>Illustrated by James C. McKell</i>	Wallace Smith 10
Don't Be Afraid of Making Mistakes	Samuel Crowther 16
Is There a Real Dorothy Dix?	Beatrice Washburn 19
Strangers of the Night. A short story <i>Illustrated by Gerald Leak</i>	Guy Fletcher 26
America's Most Quoted Man	J. K. Winkler 34
Murphy of Red Oak	Earl Chapin May 37
The Deadly Dud. A short story <i>Illustrated by Ray C. Strang</i>	William Slavens McNutt 43
The Candle Bid. A novelette <i>Illustrated by O. J. Gatter</i>	L. Patrick Greene 50
She's Mother to 50,000 Sailors	Alfred F. Loomis 68
A Host on Wheels	Samuel Taylor Moore 71
The Ethics of Terry. A short story <i>Illustrated by S. George Phillips</i>	James L. Aton 76
A Rebellious Schoolgirl Grows Up	Henry Rood 86
Once He Borrowed Two Show Cases	Ruby Irwin Livingston 89
The Old or the New	93
A Terribly Strange Bed. An old short story <i>Illustrated by W. Fletcher White</i>	Wilkie Collins 95
The Inn of the Two Witches. A modern short story <i>Illustrated by Stockton Mulford</i>	Joseph Conrad 104
We Must March. A novel <i>Illustrated by J. Scott Williams</i>	Honoré Willsie Morrow 117
An Artist in Stained Glass	Stewart Beach 137
This Cop Writes Hymns	James A. Belflower 138
A Newsboy Who Washed His Neck	Harry V. Martin 139
Rescued by a Blue Chow	Blanche Theodore 140
Everybody's Chestnut Tree	141

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