

Mum's the Word

"AREN'T you feeling better, Mum?"

"A little better, thank you, dear," I say happily, making a successful grab at the sliding cup on the precariously held tray. "Quite well, in fact."

"But you talk so quiet."

"I'm glad to hear it. Her voice was ever soft. Gentle and low, an excellent thing in woman," I quote approvingly.

"But you're not a woman, you're a Mother."

OH, dear, I think, sinking back exhausted on my pillows, do I shout as much as all that? Still, how else am I to make myself heard?

Of course, I embarked on parenthood with the highest ideals—Never Raise Your Voice to a Child, say all the authorities. But it's so embittering to find that the soft answer ("After you've finished your vegetables, dear," or "Next year, if you're a good boy") so conspicuously fails to turn away wrath. At any rate, I think, I have had my principles—I have never raised my voice outside the house, not even to call "Dinner's ready!" from the front door. So lowering to the tone of the neighbourhood. Anyway, one doesn't really



"It scarcely seems worth while pursuing him there"

want the neighbours to know that mid-day dinner is nearer to two o'clock. Tomorrow morning, if I'm up (and I suppose I will be—after all, mothers can't be malingers), I'll try not to raise my voice more than the odd couple of decibels.

Morbidity, of course, vanishes with the morning. I leap out of bed at the usual time—7.30—and prepare to carry out my usual early morning routine of putting a head round my door and bellowing, "Quarter to eight! Time to get up!" returning to throw on my clothes

and skim another page of my novel, emerge again to scream "Eight o'clock—you'll miss the bus!" do my hair, emerge for good expecting to find everybody, if not up, at least in a state of mental preparedness. But this morning I raise my voice and nothing happens. I am consternated. That one talent which is domestic confusion to hide lodged with me useless?

I visit George first and shake him gently by the shoulder. "Quarter to eight," I breathe. "You'll miss the bus." The effect is gratifying and unexpected. Something about that pregnant whisper, those tear-filled eyes (such an effort to talk) is extraordinarily moving. Perhaps it is a quarter to eight? Perhaps he will miss the bus?

Encouraged, I turn to Jimmy's bed. "Quarter to eight," I whisper. "So what?" he whispers back, and retreats under the covers. I drag him forth and poke him into his clothes.

Susan, continuing her ministering angel role, is already up and dressed and cutting lunches. "Thanks," I hiss, and rush out into the kitchen and clash saucepans in an endeavour to create an atmosphere of urgency.

It used, I reflect, to be so easy. I would sit at the table like a captain at the bridge, shouting orders to my landlubberly crew. "Susan, take Baby out of the cat's saucer." "I want the butter soft, George, not runny." "Jimmy, aren't you out of that bathroom?" "Quick, the toast!" "Quiet, cat!" But now I am most definitely reduced to the lower deck, obeying my own unspoken directives as well as other people's, and not even able to answer back.

And then departure time—a matter now of individual inspection instead of a time-saving putting to the group of questions that expect the answer Yes, like "Have you cleaned your teeth?" "Have you got your pennies?"

The phone rings. Exhausted by my period of active service I can't even whisper—I just croak disconsolately.

Quite amusing, in a nasty way, hearing the Hellos and Are You Theres rising to a little crescendo of irritation and diminishing to a merely mechanical chirrup. But we can't stand here all day making faces. Let's go back to bed.

Early in the afternoon I answer the door to a young man from the P. and T., who asks to see the phone. They've had several complaints, he says, just strange noises the other end. Mopping and mowing I lead him to it. He lifts the receiver and listens. I approach, with some misgiving, his unoccupied ear. "Actually," I breathe, "there's nothing wrong with the phone—it's me." He dials. Perhaps he hasn't heard? I withdraw a pace to restrain my vocal cords for a second attempt. But before I can approach him again he has put down the receiver, sidled past me and shinned up the nearest telephone pole. It scarcely seems worth while pursuing him there with unwelcome attentions. I shrug, and return to bed.

Later, a dreadful thought strikes me. Is there a warning in the Repairman's Vade Mecum about women like me? But, no. One look at my stout matronly dressing-gown reassures me. No one could possibly mistake it for a negligee.

THE next day's a little easier. I can squeak. And the phone, thanks to that nice young man, is better than it's ever been. While I'm waiting for Exchange to notice me I can hear the most stimulating snippets of third-party conversation that before were quite in-frasonic. But things are still a little difficult. "Hullo?" I answer.

"Is that you, Mary?" says a voice. "Get Mummy for me, will you, dear?"

"But I am Mummy," I squeak. "I'm sure you're a very good Mummy," says the voice nicely. "And how's Dolly? Did she go for a walk in her new pram?"

"But it's me. It's Molly." "It's important, dear. Get Mummy, there's a good girl."

I give in, put the receiver down, patter away, stomp back, square my shoulders, and try for an octave lower.

BUT I feel depressed. For the mother of a family, raising the voice is rather like showing the flag, non-punitive but necessary for the maintenance of order and good government. The voice is the sign and symbol of matriarchal authority—without it I find apple cores under the beds and drifts of paper dolls occupying the living room. Things are going to the pack, and I as powerless to arrest their progress as a plain-clothes traffic cop who's forgotten his hat. I brood darkly. Perhaps some system of placards like they have in radio shows? Only I'd just have the ones with QUIET, SILENCE, or STOP in block capitals.

Poor George picks the wrong time to show me his Social Studies notebook. I thumb through it in dumb misery, wincing at the mis-spellings, unedited by the amorphous pencil illustrations of such concepts as "Moari Stick Game," which could equally well be a dilapidated picket fence, or Stumps Drawn at Lords, feeling each blot as engraved on my own escutcheon.

"Well, what do you think of it, Mum?" he asks, gaily confident.

"I think—" I begin strongly (but words and voice fail me and I'm reduced to something less than a whisper) —"I think it's positively atrocious."

"What?" He comes over from the other side of the fireplace.

I apply my envenomed lips to his unsuspecting ear.

"I think," I hiss, "it's absolutely incredible."

(continued on next page)

N.Z. LISTENER, AUGUST 6, 1954.

(Solution to No. 706)

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Clues Across

1. So often made into a chain of flowers or leaves.
5. Tiny pleats, sewn into a famous friar's robe, perhaps?
8. "Full many a flower is born to — unseen" (Gray's "Elegy").
9. Dress before time? Rubbish!
10. Wilde wrote a play about the importance of being this.
12. "Thrice is he — that hath his quarrel just" ("Henry VI," Part 2, Act 3, Scene 2).
13. Employed in a famous educational institution.
15. Happy-go-lucky.
17. Dry one over there?
19. This terrier has nothing to do with the Dogstar.
21. Portion* are in reverse for this band of leather.

"THE LISTENER"

23. Tops are made into grass.
26. Captivate.
27. Meeting-place.
28. "Britain is
A world by itself, and we will
nothing pay
For wearing our own —"
("Cymbeline," Act 3, Scene 1).
29. Silly.

Clues Down

1. This filament could be brief, and begins with a trivial lie.
2. Raises to the second power.
3. Pigment from a certain kind of earth.
4. Things are a bit confused.
5. Rent over a fuss giving rise to a violent storm.
6. In "What Every Woman Knows" (Barrie), Maggie describes it as "a sort of bloom on a woman."
7. He appears with his cousin, Justice Shallow, and Sir Hugh Evans, at the beginning of "The Merry Wives of Windsor."
11. Show resentment and ill-temper.
14. They are to be found above our 28 across.

CROSSWORD

15. "... or the pitcher be broken at the fountain, or the wheel broken at the —" ("Ecclesiastes," Chapter 12).
16. Praises in a confused way.
18. Imprisonment, usually vile.
20. A streak of this indicates cowardice.
22. Solemn ceremonies.
24. Four in a pot? It's a turning point.
25. Portents.

No. 707 (Constructed by R.W.H.)

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