

THE INNER EXPERIENCES OF A CABINET MEMBER'S WIFE

AS SHE WRITES THEM TO HER SISTER AT HOME

DRAWINGS BY T. DE THULSTRUP

[As these "letters" tell of the actual social and domestic life of a prominent Cabinet member's wife the name of the writer is, for obvious reasons, withheld, and no attempt at portraiture has been made in the illustrations]

FIRST LETTER

WASHINGTON, D. C., October 12, 189—

My Dear Sister Lyde:

HERE I am writing to you the very first time I have had a chance during this week of hullabaloo since our arrival here as members of the President's official family.

How glad I am we did not come on for the short session last spring! As it is, Henry knows the "ropes" as well as a man born without social instinct ever could know them. He is mightily afraid that I will make blunders, although the dear fellow tries to hide his fear from me by putting on an air of supreme indifference to opinion. Alice has gone to Miss Denny's school in New York, and Tim has gone to study at Yale. I am delighted with the house Henry took. The people of whom we rent it furnished have traveled all over the world and brought home beautiful things. They left more in the house than I thought they would. I guess you and I would put on our thinking caps, as Aunt Jin used to say, before we would intrust such pictures, statuary and bric-a-brac to strangers. I hope I'll feel at home in this big house before the four years are up. I feel now as I used to when we played "I spy" in the old barn. I listen for rats and ghosts as I move about in the loneliness of so many great rooms.

Isn't it strange, Lyde, since coming here I seem to have lost sight of all my life between now and when you and I went to the seminary in Cincinnati? I remember how, when we went back to the farm in Ohio after the first year, father said, "Wal, my gals, do you think you'll manage to content yourselves here after such a spell of education?" and you said right off, "Yes, indeed, father, home's the best place I've ever seen," but I had to confess how much I would like to live in the great world. What do you suppose I would have done if anybody had told me later, when I taught a district school at Janesville, that in twenty-five years I would be the wife of a Cabinet officer living on this beautiful avenue in Washington in a house so full of fine things that I am afraid to move for

fear I'll break something? To be sure, our own house, ever since Henry has been a prominent man, has been almost elegant for the city where we lived, but people cannot furnish in the best taste until they have been about the world and seen things. Our horses and carriage would look old-fashioned here. I took my first drive this morning in my new close carriage, driven by a man in livery. I felt silly at first, then rather important, and by the time I reached home I had forgotten that I ever rode in less style. That must be the faculty for adaptation the American women are supposed to possess.

We have secured a cook, a housemaid and a driver (coachman), each and all so high and mighty that for twenty-four hours I was tempted to apply for a divorce from Henry owing to domestic infelicity. I tell him he brought me to this and must see me through it, especially if the kitchen gentry should cut me dead after another week.

The first official Cabinet day does not come until along in January, although I have an unofficial day beginning in November. Meanwhile, I am committing to memory some of the senseless social rules of the Capital. I don't believe George Washington and his good wife Martha would have sanctioned saying "Good morning," when the gas is lighted, or shaking hands like a kangaroo.

The money question concerns me more than anything else though. Just how we are to make both ends meet with the children at school and the enormous expenses we are called upon to meet here I hardly see. I tell Henry we shall probably pay dear for the honor which has come to him, as the salary attached to his office will not begin to carry us through. Several of the Cabinet ladies have called already, and seem

disposed to be social and kind to me. All of us make a first call upon the wife of the Secretary of State this year because she is the eldest and not very strong, and the wives of

Congressmen are compelled by social law to go about calling first on the Cabinet and Senate ladies. Imagine the labor they go through and how disagreeable it must be! All of the ladies of this Cabinet but Mrs. Secretary of State are as new to Washington as I am.

There seems to be a great deal of noise going on downstairs. I wonder what it is! Here comes Henrietta, the elegant housemaid—I know her step.

Good-by, dear Lyde, I wish you were here to help me out.

Devotedly, your sister,

AMELIA T. CUMMINGS.

P. S.—That girl came in to say she would let me take my choice between Thomas, the coachman, and her lovely self. "He's insulted me honor, Mrs. Cummins, mum," she wailed in a brogue scarcely in harmony with her name. "He's a low baist; not fur the loiks o' yez to have about yez, mum. He said me tail weighed me down, mum. 'Ye can't sail a kite from Ireland with a heavy French tail like Henrietta,' says he. 'Why don't yez call y'rself Katie or Maggie or something else equally green?' Thin I up an' slaps his face an' comes to tell yez how he lies about me, and how yez must take your choice between us, me as has been French maid to a Countess!"

I hardly knew which to do, laugh or cry, Lyde. Eventually I effected a compromise, but it is only a flag of truce. The Hibernian-French maid is very "sweet," as they say here in Washington, on the elegant Thomas—while he bestows his affections on the cook—hence the conflict.

When you go to church next Sunday say a "Good Lord deliver us," for me and the servant question. EMMY.

SECOND LETTER

WASHINGTON, October 22, 189—

Dear Lyde:

I do not know what I should do if I did not have you to talk to, even if I can only talk on paper. Henry is up to his ears in departmental business.



"IF I HAD LET HIM HE WOULD HAVE MILKED THE COW THERE AND THEN, IN FRONT OF THE HOUSE"

The responsibility of the position weighs upon him greatly. I must save some of the ridiculous letters we get to read to you some day. Some of these are anonymous, directing us as to our conduct while here; some are funny, some foolish and some malicious, but the begging letters are the worst of all. Dozens of relations have sprung up of whom we never heard before. One man who claimed to be a second cousin of Henry's asked if we would bring out his daughter in Washington society for a certain sum, to be paid in advance. I cannot begin to tell you how many petty annoyances we endure, ranging from these letters to newspaper people. I really believe newspaper reporters are the greatest pests on earth. If one refuses to see a "representative" of one of those papers which belong, they tell me, to "the yellow journalism" (whatever that may mean), no matter how entirely one may be engaged when he or she calls, the creature will go away, write up an imaginary interview with you and publish it broadcast.

Of course, they are not all like that; the reputable papers have really interesting ladies and gentlemen to represent them here, but when a reporter or correspondent is without conscience he is like the "little girl who had

a little curl right in the middle of her forehead: when she was good she was very, very good, but when she was bad she was horrid." They ring us up in the middle of the night between twelve and two o'clock, wanting to know some item connected with a Cabinet meeting. Poor Henry has to dress and see them, racking his brain to keep them off the scent when he is not at liberty to talk for publication.

There is one girl here to whom I have lost my heart. She seems to like me, too, which is most surprising because, although she is only twenty-one years old, most of her life has been spent in Washington, and she is more worldly-wise than I should want my daughter to be.

I am always surprised when worldly people take to me, for I have had little experience and am not a brilliant talker. This girl is the only child of

"THE POOR CHILD WALKED THE FLOOR WITH CLENCHED HANDS AS SHE TOLD ME ALL THIS"

Senator Tyler, and is the one truly beautiful woman I have ever seen. Her skin is like thick cream without a particle of color; her eyes are brown and near-sighted. She will not wear glasses, but carries a lognette, so those eyes have a dreamy, poetic look you would appreciate, being the artistic member of the family, even if you are a middle-aged mother of five children living in a small city. In contrast with Marion Tyler's eyes is her hair, a natural golden, which, of course, the "gossip bugs" say is bleached. The hair is naturally yellow, as she is naturally a remarkable creature. As she and her mother have been very polite to me I asked Miss Tyler to receive with me on my first day, along with Mrs. Representative Dillon and Miss Maud Dillon, of Kentucky, both of whom I have known since Maud was in baby clothes. I think you met Mrs. Dillon at our house. This is their first term, too, so they were on their Ps and Qs quite as much as I was. We had great fun beforehand rehearsing Washington etiquette with Miss Tyler, who undertook to coach us. Everything went off well but saying "Good-morning." I stood inside the doorway leading from the hall to my drawing-room (parlor is discarded here), heading the line of receiving ladies. These Cabinet receptions are open to the public, even before they are official in character, and all kinds of people come in great numbers. Mrs. Dillon stood next to me in line, and then came Miss Tyler; then Maud. One of the first callers was the wife



"ON CABINET DAY HE OPENS THE DOOR TO VISITORS, THEN ANNOUNCES THEM SO DISTINCTLY"



THE MAGNIFICENT COSTUMES OF THE CHINESE DIPLOMATS "WOULD MAKE YOUR MOUTH WATER AS MUCH AS A THOUGHT OF THEIR TEA DOES MINE"

Generated on 2022-02-17 16:01 GMT / https://hdl.handle.net/2027/mdp.39015012341635 Public Domain, Google-digitized / http://www.hathitrust.org/access_use#pd-google

of one of the Justices, a lady of much formality and dignity of manner. As she was announced for one moment I was on the awful edge of a cordial, "How-do-you-do?" but collecting myself I muttered, "Good-morning," and accepted her kangaroo shake of the hand high up in the air in the proper manner. Mrs. Dillon forgot entirely, and with true Kentucky heartiness said, "Good-evenin'. So glad to see you!" Miss Tyler, of course, said the right thing, but Maud was so overcome by her first appearance in Washington that she said, "Good-evenin'!—I mean good-afternoon—(gasps) no, no, I don't—good-mornin' is the thing, isn't it? Please excuse me, I am so stupid!" All said with her ringing laugh, which even made Mrs. Justice unbend. The people came in large numbers and stood around aimlessly. After the first of January the rooms will be packed to suffocation, they tell me, with all kinds and conditions of individuals.

I have found a jewel of a man to wait on us—an old dandy who has served the best people in Washington for twenty-five years past. He knows everybody in town by name, has Washington ways at his fingers' ends, and will steer me through breakers ahead, I am quite certain.

On Cabinet day he opens the door to visitors, then announces them so distinctly that I can call nearly every one by name—something which seems to flatter people greatly. The butler's name is Lemuel—Lem for short. He is over fifty, but is sprightly and distinguished in manner and speech. I am humble enough to recognize how much more he knows than I do about a few things, and if I can buy his information without lowering myself too far in his eyes I intend to do so. I let the girl Henrietta go, and have secured a Swede who bids fair to prove satisfactory. Lem is only a general utility house-man, so the two of us are being waited upon by two men and two maids. What would mother say if she could see me in such glory? Father would say, "Wasteful extravagance" (I can just hear him), but mother would draw herself up, and with one of her haughty gestures say, "There is nothing too good for one of my girls."

Your loving sister,
EMMY.

THIRD LETTER

WASHINGTON, D. C., NOVEMBER 5, 189—

Dear Sister:

At the very beginning of this letter I must tell you my latest domestic experience, so that you may believe the spirit of competition is still alive in a place reputed to be given over entirely to government and society. When I first set up housekeeping here I took milk of a dairyman recommended by Mrs. Kneller, of the Navy. He came around and delivered milk from a wagon just as they do at home. The milk was pretty good at first, but soon became suspiciously watery, so I stopped taking of him and gave my patronage to a little German woman in the market. Bear in mind that my patronage is something to view with respect nowadays, and that the whole Nation wants to know what I am going to have for Thanksgiving dinner, judging from the number of times I have been interviewed on the subject. Yesterday, late in the morning, when I was trying to get a moment to myself in which to answer some letters, a hurried knock came on the door of the little room opening off of my bedroom, which Tim calls "mother's retiring chamber." Following the knock came Louise, the latest addition in the way of upstairs girls. She explained, all of a flutter and trying to hold in a big laugh: "The milkman's down in the kitchen, Mrs. Cummings, an' he's got the cow." "Cow?" I echoed. "He's got the cow in my kitchen, do you mean?"

"No'm, not quite, but I shouldn't wonder if he'd bring it in if you don't go down to see him. He says he's heard you said his milk was watered, so he just brung in the cow hitched on to the back of his wagon, so as you can see it, an' says he'll milk it right in front of the house if you'd like to see where the milk comes from. I told him to go, but he just stands like a bull in a ten-acre lot an' says he'll hold his ground till he sees the missus."

And I positively had to go downstairs and argue with him over half an hour before he could be convinced of my determination to do as I pleased. "Sure nuff," as Lem says, there stood a fine, plump cow hitched to the rear of his wagon in front of the house, and if I had let him he would have milked the cow there and then.

Do you remember how father used to say, "If Em's heart could be turned wrong side out it would be found lined with other people's troubles"? I often wonder why people tell me so much about themselves. You have such a keen interest in human nature that I must give you a peep at the inner lives of these world's people. It seems that the beauty of Washington, Marion Tyler, has after all a heart. The gossip goes that she is a heartless coquette, and is soon to marry a foreigner attached to the English Embassy—a foreigner, who, strange to say, has money as well as a prospective title. The Tylers, I have discovered, are poor in comparison with the style they keep up. The victoria, with liveried coachman and footman, in which Marion and her mother drive about leaning back with the indolent, superior air of princesses, is hired by the year. Marion's parents have brought her up with the understanding that she can only repay them for the sacrifices they have made in order to keep up appearances, by marrying well in a worldly way, now that she is of a salable age. I had concluded the world must be right for once about people's feelings, because Marion seemed almost reckless in her flirtations, and the matrimonial views she expressed were worldly and heartless. But the other day a note came to me from her, all tear-blotted and crumpled, saying:

"Dear Mrs. Cummings—If you wish to save a girl from ruin, write inviting me to spend the day with you to-morrow. You are the only human being in all this desert of selfishness. I almost believe you have a heart.
Yours,
MARION."

I wrote her a note and she came the next day before luncheon. When she first arrived the lovely face was in its usual conventional repose (she has made an art of self-control), but after a few moments she began by saying she must explain her frantic note, and as she spoke the tears slowly filled the sad brown eyes, making her expression so pitiful that a lump rose in my own throat. Then she told me that for two years she has loved one of the young Lieutenants stationed at the barracks. He is as poor as she is, and her parents have put her to slow torture ever since they began to suspect her weakness for

Lieutenant Garven. They have told her she is to marry Mr. Brian Bymington, the Secretary of the English Legation, heir to a moneyed title, and I fear they will win the day, because of the girl's previous training.

I thought she was their own child, but it seems she is Mrs. Tyler's niece, whom they adopted in her infancy. You can imagine how such people would make her feel the load of obligation toward themselves. This she feels keenly, and knows besides how utterly unfitted she is to be a poor man's wife. Just imagine a girl of twenty, Lyde, who cannot sew on a button or mend a glove! She has had a special maid to do everything for her all her life, even when Senator Tyler's grocery bills were in arrears. One of the worst features of the case is that her lover has been entangled with a married woman here whose influence has ruined a good many men. He does not try to conceal his former relations with this woman from Marion, but such relations seem to be looked upon as a matter of course in Washington, and Lieutenant Garven tells the child if she marries Bymington he will go back to this Mrs. Deming, and Marion can blame herself. The poor child walked the floor with clenched hands as she told me all this. I really believe it was the first time in all her life that she had talked out herself to any one.

She asked me if I would let her meet Jack Garven here alone once in a while, because her father has forbidden her to receive him at home. I did not know how to refuse, and still I hardly like the idea. I said I would think it out the best I could and let her know in a day or two. I have only met Mr. Garven a few times. He seemed then to be a typical young Army officer, almost as light-headed as he is said to be light-footed at waltzing, but there may be more to him than I think. Henry would think me a romantic fool if I should tell him about this, but I know you will sympathize with the child as I do. You and I always did like "the love parts" of a story, didn't we, Lyde? I tell Henry he and I will have to get acquainted again after this administration. We hardly see anything of each other. He works hard at his departmental duties, and I even harder as the season comes on, what with luncheons, teas, dinners, my own receptions and calls.

I had tea at the Chinese Legation the other day. Dear child, you do not know what tea is—you have never tasted the real thing. I never had before the Chinese Minister, through an interpreter, explained to me that in China they keep pots of the beverage about and drink it whenever they are thirsty, as we do water. I asked him why they did not all die of nervous prostration. He came nearer laughing than I ever knew a Chinaman to do before, and assured me there was no harm in real tea: that the American disease lies only in the wretched leavings which the Americans drink. This tea was like nothing else I ever tasted. It suggested roses and honey and some of Aunt Jin's spiced peaches and violets. As it costs fifteen or twenty dollars a pound over here I fear I cannot add it to my marketing list.

I wish you could see the Orientals of the Legation in full dress. The magnificent embroideries on their blouses, as I call their floating jackets and full silk shirts, would make your mouth water as much as a thought of your tea does mine. I thought the tea at the English Legation house was delicious, until Mr. Fou Lung Chung served me to the real thing. Henry says he expects to hear of my eloping with the aforesaid gentleman in hopes of "drinking my fill" of the celestial nectar.

Outside of Washington people have an idea that the political society constitutes all the social intercourse known to the Capital. I find this a mistaken idea. There is a large circle of people designated as trades-people, who seldom mingle with the political set, except at the Presidential and Cabinet receptions free to all. Then there is a literary set, much like that we read about as existing in Boston. I met one of the brainy set at Mrs. Chief Justice's house, and she said to me: "Does not the weight of a butterfly existence bear down upon your esoteric being, Mrs. Cummings? You ought to join our club for the study of the soul's repose, which would rest you after days and nights of mere physical existence." I thanked her humbly, and I hope gratefully, but with a mental reservation. It seems to me my soul is getting more repose at present than any other part of me. If she had asked me to join a society for the development of the muscles of the right hand, or for the promotion of tact, I think I should have joined.

The Georgetown people look down upon the political set with some contempt. Their pride is that of family. Being a member of the floating population myself I do not expect to meet these people of inherited degree. Poor me! However, I shall not pine. It does me good to talk all of these things out with you.

Good-by, my dear.
Devotedly,
EMMY.

FOURTH LETTER

WASHINGTON, D. C., NOVEMBER 15, 189—

Dear Lyde:

You asked me in your last to tell you something in a familiar way about the life going on in the White House, so I will devote a letter to what might be called Presidential domesticity—if such a thing exists. The worst of the life is the lack of privacy and room. The first lady of the land is about the hardest-worked woman in America in many ways. The present lovely incumbent has more leisure than most of those who have occupied the place, because she knows no more about the domestic arrangements than if she lived in a hotel. Everything is turned over to a housekeeper, who does not even report to Mrs. President. The President's wife has not the luxuries nor conveniences of ordinary rich people living in large cities. Her quarters are circumscribed, and she is besieged by reporters, especially during the first year, while the mere reading of her letters received every day is a heavy task, although she has a secretary to help her out. This Mrs. President does not even receive the reports of the head steward, the chief official servant of the household. It is said that he went to her not long ago to ask her advice about getting rat poison to kill the numerous rat and mice occupants of the White House (be it said in shame to the Nation), and she told him his province was to keep everything disagreeable hidden from her—from rats to ghosts. That settled Mr. Steward.

The President's wife cannot for one moment relax the vigilant eye she is compelled to keep on her every word, look and action, except when she is asleep. She is the central figure for gossips not only of one city, but of the whole United States. If a woman were not circumspect in this position social conditions would soon become more topsy-turvy than they are at present at the Capital, it seems to me. She must throw her youth behind her or lock it up in her heart while she inhabits the White House. Of course, they do entertain one or two guests at a time at dinner or luncheon very often, but the great dinners are State affairs, at which the precedence of individuals seems to be the foremost consideration, and the occasions are formal almost to the extent of being stiff and uncomfortable to an easy-going person like me.

We attended the first Cabinet dinner of the year early this week. The President always gives the first dinner of the season to his official family, as the Cabinet people are called. I was full of interest and importance upon this occasion, it being my first meal in the State dining-room of the White House.

The President took in Mrs. Secretary of State, and Mrs. President was escorted by Mr. Secretary of State. There is no law of precedence in the Cabinet, but degrees of rank have gradually grown into observance according to the time the special portfolio has been in existence. The portfolio of State was established first, therefore the Secretary of State is looked upon as the ranking Cabinet official. A funny thing happened the other day. I was waiting for an elevator in a store, and just then the Cabinet lady next below me came along to get the elevator, too. We stood chatting a while and when the elevator came up I stood back to let her go in first, because she was older than I. She would not move; I stood looking at her and the elevator waited. She stepped behind me saying, "You rank me, Mrs. Cummings. Please go first." Don't you think that was ridiculous in a Republic?

To go back to the dinner—it was very splendid, from the things eaten to the things worn by the ladies. There was a stateliness about everything which reminded me more of George Washington than anything else in Washington ever has. When we know each other better, and are more at home in the business, a Cabinet dinner will seem just like any other elegant dinner, I imagine. Henry is not much of a lady's man, and it was amusing to watch him laboring to entertain the lady he took out.

The President's wife has two privileges I envy her—that of having flowers from the White House conservatories always at her command, and having the Marine Band at her disposal. One way she has of complimenting individuals is by sending to them immediately after dinner the made floral decoration which always adorns the centre of her private dining-table at the evening meal. Not long ago Mrs. President honored your humble servant with a mass of camellias just off of her dining-table. How mother would have swelled with pride could she have seen her daughter receive a friendly remembrance from the first lady of the land. I confess I swelled a little bit myself for a minute or two.

The White House conservatories contain some very rare and beautiful plants, especially in the way of orchids, those weird, almost grotesque flowers, which I had only heard of before coming here. When the head gardener conducted me through the hothouses he showed me one orchid of which he is particularly proud, because it bears a striking resemblance to a human countenance. He called the largest blossom of this variety "Grandma," and all of the others "The Kids."

Mrs. President suffers from some of the same trammels of etiquette and conventionality endured by the crowned heads of Europe. For that matter, all prominent State officials and their families lose their personal freedom somewhat as soon as they take office. Imagine Mrs. President walking down town for a morning's shopping, or dropping in on a friend to visit, to "set a spell," as Aunt Jin used to say! I miss my friends more than anything else in Washington. There is not a single place in the city where I can go informally.

When the President entertains a few friends at dinner they are served in the private dining-room, where the members of the family always eat. Henry and I have been entertained there once, along with a Western railroad magnate and his wife. The dinner was much like any other five-course dinner formally served by a colored man. Everything was beautifully cooked, and I enjoyed myself very much, but I do not believe I shall ever get over my dislike of a servant standing behind my chair listening to everything that is said. I suppose that feeling comes from our early training, but even of late years, since we have been able to keep three servants at home, I have never permitted the girl to stay in the room when she was not needed, as long as the bell would call her in a moment. But I can see plainly that preference in the manner of living is all a matter of education.

But to return to the White House. The one other familiar mode of entertainment open to its occupants is the afternoon tea, which comes very near being informal. Yesterday afternoon Mrs. President entertained about thirty or forty ladies in that way, mostly visitors in town toward whom she wished to extend a special courtesy, such as wives and daughters of local politicians who had contributed largely to the campaign fund or been of use some way or other. Sometimes an unsuccessful office-seeker can be pacified by such a special favor bestowed upon his wife. I know one woman who went home in high glee showing a note of invitation dated from the Executive Mansion and signed by the President's wife, as her proudest possession. For months after she went home every caller had to hear all about that private reception and read the invitation. She was not a sore-head after that, even if her husband was.

I was going to tell you in this letter of a shocking glimpse into Washington society which a young Army man gave me a few days ago. But engagements crowd me and I must stop. In my next I will tell you this and some other surprising things. In the meantime, the best love, Lyde, from your
EMMY.

Editor's Note—In the next (January) Journal "Mrs. Cummings" writes her sister of the frank glimpse into Washington society which she refers, and of one of the most brilliant military social assemblages she ever saw. She gives a glimpse of the life led by a fashionable mother and her daughter at the Capital, and of the matrimonial prospects of young girls; what department life in Washington means for young men, and describes "the greatest day of her life." The love story of Miss Tyler and Lieutenant Garven also assumes a new aspect in the next "letters."