

## “The Mother of ‘Pills’”

• 1894 •

“PILLS! OH, PILLS! YOU PILLSY!”

The girl turned from the door of the drug-store, and looked back under bent brows at her mother, who was wiping graduated glasses with a stained towel, at the end of the prescription counter.

“I wish you wouldn’t call me that,” she said; her tone was impatient but not disrespectful.

Her mother laughed. She was a big, good-natured looking woman, with light-blue eyes and sandy eyebrows and hair. She wore a black dress that had a cheap, white cord-ruche at the neck. There were spots down the front of her dress where acids had been spilled and had taken out the color.

“How particular we are gettin’,” she said, turning the measuring glass round and round on the towel which had been wadded into it. “You didn’t use to mind if I called you ‘Pills,’ just for fun.”

“Well, I mind now.”

The girl took a clean towel from a cupboard and began to polish the show-cases, breathing upon them now and then. She was a good-looking girl. She had strong, handsome features, and heavy brown hair, which she wore in a long braid down her back. A deep red rose was tucked in the girdle of her cotton gown and its head lolled to and fro as she worked. Her hands were not prettily shaped, but sensitive, and the ends of the fingers were square.

“Well, Mariella, then,” said Mrs. Mansfield, still looking amused; “I was goin’ to ask you if you knew the Indians had all

come in on their way home from hop pickin'."

Mariella straightened up and looked at her mother.

"Have they, honest, ma?"

"Yes, they have; they're all camped down on the beach."

"Oh, I wonder where!"

"Why, the Nooksacks are clear down at the coal-bunkers, an' the Lummis close to Timberline's Row; an' the Alaskas are all on the other side of the viaduct."

"Are they goin' to have the canoe race?"

"Yes, I guess so. I guess it'll be about sundown to-night. There, you forgot to dust that milk-shake. An' you ain't touched that shelf o' patent medicines!"

She set down the last graduate and hung the damp towel on a nail. Then she came out into the main part of the store and sat down comfortably behind the counter.

Long before Mariella was born her father had opened a drug-store in the tiny town of Sehome, on Puget Sound. There was a coal mine under the town. A tunnel led down into it, and the men working among the black diamonds, with their families, made up the town. But there was some trouble, and the mine was abandoned and flooded with salt water. The men went away, and for many years Sehome was little more than a name. A mail boat wheezed up from Seattle once a week; and two or three storekeepers—Mr. Mansfield among them—clung to the ragged edge of hope and waited for the boom. Before it came, Mr. Mansfield was bumped over the terrible road to the graveyard and laid down among the stones and ferns. Then Mrs. Mansfield "run" the store. The question "Can you fill prescriptions?" was often put to her fearfully by timid customers, but she was equal to the occasion.

"Well, I guess I can," she would say, squaring about and looking her questioner unwaveringly in the eye. "I guess I'd ought to. I've been in the store with my husband, that's dead,

for twenty years. I'm not a regular, but I'm a practical—an' that's better than a regular any day."

"It's not so much what you know in a drugstore as what you *look* like you know," she sometimes confided to admiring friends.

It is true Mrs. Mansfield was often perplexed over the peculiar curdled appearance of some mixture—being as untaught in the mysterious ways of emulsions as a babe—but such trifles were dismissed with a philosophical sigh, and the prescriptions were handed over the counter with a complaisance that commanded confidence. The doctor hinted, with extreme delicacy, at times, that his emulsions did not turn out as smooth as he had expected; or that it would be agreeable to find some of his aqueous mixtures tinged with cochineal; or that it was possible to make pills in such a way that they would not—so to speak—melt in the patient's mouth before he could swallow them. But Mrs. Mansfield invariably laughed at him in a kind of motherly way, and reminded him that he ought to be glad to have even a "practical" in a place like Sehome. And really this was so true that it was unanswerable.

So Mrs. Mansfield held the fort; and as her medicines, although abominable to swallow, never killed any one, she was looked upon with awe and respect by the villagers and the men in the neighboring logging-camps.

Mariella was brought up in the drug-store. She had the benefit of her mother's experience, and, besides that, she had studied the "dispensatory"—a word, by the way, which Mrs. Mansfield began with a capital letter because of the many pitfalls from which it had rescued her.

"Mariella is such a good girl," her mother frequently declared; "she got a real good education over at the Whatcom schools, an' she's such a help in the drug-store. She does make a beautiful pill."

Indeed, the girl's pill-making accomplishment was so appreciated by Mrs. Mansfield that she had nick-named her "Pills"—a name that had been the cause of much mirth between them.

Mariella was now sixteen, and the long-deferred "boom" was upon them. Mrs. Mansfield and her daughter contemplated it from the store door daily with increasing admiration. The wild clover no longer velveted the middle of the street. New buildings, with red, green or blue fronts and nondescript backs, leaped up on every corner and in between corners. The hammers and saws made music sweeter than any brass band to Sehorne ears. Day and night the forests blazed backward from the town. When there were no customers in the store Mariella stood in the door, twisting the rope of the awning around her wrist, and watched the flames leaping from limb to limb up the tall, straight fir-trees. When Sehorne hill was burning at night, it was a magnificent spectacle; like hundreds of torches dipped into a very hell of fire and lifted to heaven by invisible hands—while in the East the noble, white dome of Mount Baker burst out of the darkness against the lurid sky. The old steamer *Idaho* came down from Seattle three times a week now. When she landed, Mrs. Mansfield and Mariella, and such customers as chanced to be in the store, hurried breathlessly back to the little sitting-room, which overlooked the bay, to count the passengers. The old colony wharf, running a mile out across the tide-lands to deep water, would be "fairly alive with 'em," Mrs. Mansfield declared daily, in an ecstasy of anticipation of the good times their coming foretold. She counted never less than a hundred and fifty; and so many walked three and four abreast that it was not possible to count all.

Really, that summer everything seemed to be going Mrs. Mansfield's way. Mariella was a comfort to her mother and an attraction to the store; business was excellent; her prop-

erty was worth five times more than it had ever been before; and, besides—when her thoughts reached this point Mrs. Mansfield smiled consciously and blushed—there was Mr. Grover! Mr. Grover kept the dry-goods store next door. He had come at the very beginning of the boom. He was slim and dark and forty. Mrs. Mansfield was forty and large and fair. Both were "well off." Mr. Grover was lonely and "dropped into" Mrs. Mansfield's little sitting-room every night. She invited him to supper frequently, and he told her that her fried chicken and "cream" potatoes were better than anything he had eaten since his mother died. Of late his intentions were not to be misunderstood, and Mrs. Mansfield was already putting by a cozy sum for a wedding outfit. Only that morning she had looked at herself in the glass more attentively than usual while combing her hair. Some thought made her blush and smile.

"You ought to be ashamed!" she said, shaking her head at herself in the glass as at a gay, young thing. "To be thinkin' about gettin' married! With a big girl like Pills too. One good thing: He really seems to think as much of Pills as you do yourself, Mrs. Mansfield. That's what makes me so—happy, I guess. I believe it's the first time I ever was real happy before." She sighed unconsciously as she glanced back over her years of married life. "An' I don't know what makes me so awful happy now. But sometimes when I get up of a mornin' I just feel as if I could go out on the hill an' sing—foolish as any of them larks holler'n' for joy."

"Mariella," she said, watching the duster in the girl's hands, "what made you flare up so when I called you 'Pills?' You never done that before, an' I don't see what ails you all of a sudden."

"I didn't mean to flare up," said Mariella. She opened the cigar-case and arranged the boxes carefully. Then she closed it with a snap and looked at her mother. "But I wish you'd stop it, ma. Mr. Grover said—"

"Well, what 'id he say?"

"He said it wasn't a nice name to call a girl by." Mariella's face reddened, but she was stooping behind the counter.

Mrs. Mansfield drummed on the show-case with broad fingers and looked thoughtful.

"Well," she said with significance, after a pause, "if he don't like it, I won't do it. We've had lots o' fun over it, Pills, ain't we—I mean Mariella—but I guess he has a right to say what you'll be called, Pi—my dear."

"Oh, ma," said Mariella. Her face was like a poppy.

"Well, I guess you won't object, will you? I've been wond'rin' how you felt about it."

"Oh, ma," faltered the girl; "do you think, honest, he—he—" "Yes, I do," replied her mother, laughing comfortably and blushing faintly. "I'm sure of it. An' I'm happier 'n I ever was in my life over it. I don't think I could give you a better stepfather, or one that would think more of you."

Mariella stood up slowly behind the counter and looked—stared—across the room at her mother, in a dazed, uncomprehending way. The color ebbed slowly out of her face. She did not speak, but she felt the muscles about her mouth jerking. She pressed her lips more tightly together.

"I hope you don't think I oughtn't to marry again," said her mother, returning her look without understanding it in the least. "Your pa's been dead ten years"—this in an injured tone. "There ain't many women—Oh, good mornin', Mr. Lester? Mariella, 'll you wait on Mr. Lester?" Well—beaming good naturedly on her customer—"how's real estate this mornin'? Any new sales afoot?"

"Are there?" repeated that gentleman, leaning on the show-case and lighting his cigar, innocent of intentional discourtesy. "Well, I should *smile*—and smile broadly too, Mrs. Mansfield. There's a Minneapolis chap here that's buyin' right an' left, just

*slashin'* things! He's bought a lot o' water-front property, too; an' let me tell *you*, right now, that Jim Hill's behind him; an' Jim Hill's the biggest railroad man in the U. S. to-day, an' the Great Northern's behind *him!*"

"Well, I hope so." Mrs. Mansfield drew a long breath of delight. Mr. Lester smiled, shrugged his shoulders, spread out his hands, and sauntered out with the air of a man who has the ear of railroad kings.

"Are you goin' to the canoe races to-night, Mariella?" began her mother, in a conciliatory tone.

"I don't know. Might as well, I guess."

The girl was wiping the shelf bottles now; her face was pale, but her back was to her mother.

"Well, we will have an early supper, so you can get off. Mercy, child! Did you break one o' them glass labels? How often 'v' I told you not to press on 'em so hard? What one is it? The tincture cantharides! Well, tie a string around it, so we'll know what it is. There ain't no label on the aconite bottle, nor the Jamaica ginger either—an' them settin' side by side, too. I hate guessin' at things in a drug-store—specially when one's a poison. Have you scoured up them spatulas?"

"Yes'm."

"Well, I'll go in an' do up the dishes, an' leave you to 'tend store. Don't forget to make Mr. Benson's pills."

But Mr. Benson's pills were not made right away. When her mother was gone, Mariella got down from the step-ladder and leaned one elbow on the show-case and rested her chin in her hand. Her throat swelled in and out fitfully, and the blue veins showed, large and full, on her temples. For a long time she stood thus, twisting the towel in her hand and looking at the fires on the hill without seeing them. Some of their dry burning seemed to get into her own eyes.

Mr. Grover, passing, glanced in.

"Mariella," he said, putting one foot across the threshold, "are you goin' to the canoe races?"

The girl had darted erect instantly, and put on a look of coquettish indifference.

"Yes, I am." Her eyes flashed at him over her shoulder from the corners of their lids as she started back to the prescription-case, "I'm goin' with Charlie Walton!"

When Mariella had gone to the races that night, and customers were few and far between, Mr. Grover walked with a determined air through Mrs. Mansfield's store and, pushing aside the crimson canton-flannel portieres, entered her cheerful sitting-room. On the floor was a Brussels carpet, large-flowered and vivid. A sewing-machine stood in one corner and Mariella's organ in another. The two narrow windows overlooking the sound were gay with blooming geraniums and white curtains tied with red ribbons. There was a trunk deceptively stuffed and cretonned into the semblance of a settee; and there was a wicker-chair that was full of rasping, aggravating noises when you rocked in it. It had red ribbon twisted through its back and arms. Mrs. Mansfield was sitting in it now, reading a novel, and the chair was complaining unceasingly.

Mr. Grover sat down on the trunk.

"Mrs. Mansfield," he said, looking squarely at her, "I've got somethin' to ask of you, an' I'm goin' to do it while Mariella's away."

"That so?" said Mrs. Mansfield.

The color in her cheek deepened almost to a purple. She put one hand up to her face, and with the other nervously wrinkled the corners of the leaves of her novel. She lowered her lids resolutely to hide the sudden joy in her eyes.

"I guess you know what I've been comin' here so much for. I couldn't help thinkin', too, that you liked the idea an' was sort of encouragin' me."

Mrs. Mansfield threw one hand out toward him in a gesture at once deprecating, coquettish and helpful.

"Oh, you!" she exclaimed, laughing and coloring more deeply. There was decided encouragement in her honest blue eyes under their sandy lashes.

"Well, didn't you, now?" Mr. Grover leaned toward her.

She hesitated, fingering the leaves of her book. She turned her head to one side; the leaves swished softly as they swept past her broad thumb; the corners of her mouth curled in a tremulous smile; the fingers of her other hand moved in an unconscious caress across her warm cheek; she remembered afterward that the band across the bay on the long pier, where the races were, was playing "Annie Laurie," and that the odor of wild musk, growing outside her window in a box, was borne in, sweet and heavy, by the sea winds. It was the one perfect moment of Mrs. Mansfield's life—in which there had been no moments that even approached perfection; in which there had been no hint of poetry—only dullest, everyday prose. She had married because she had been taught that women should marry; and Mr. Mansfield had been a good husband. She always said that; and she did not even know that she always sighed after saying it. Her regard for Mr. Grover was the poetry—the wine—of her hard, frontier life. Never before that summer had she stood and listened to the message of the meadow-lark with a feeling of exaltation that brought tears to her eyes; or gone out to gather wild pink clover with the dew on it; or turned her broad foot aside to spare a worm. Not that Mr. Grover ever did any of these things; but that love had lifted the woman's soul and given her the new gift of seeing the beauty of common things. No one had guessed that there was a change in her heart, not even Mariella. It was well that Mrs. Mansfield prolonged that perfect moment. When she did lift her eyes there was a kind of appealing tenderness in them.

"I guess I did," she said.

"Well, then,"—Mr. Grover drew a breath of relief—"you might's well say I can have her. I want it all understood before she gets home. I want to stop her runnin' with that Walton. Once or twice I've been afraid you'd just as leave she'd marry him as me. I don't like to see girls gallivant with two or three fellows."

Mrs. Mansfield sat motionless, looking at him. Her eyes did not falter; the smile did not wholly vanish from her face. Only the blood throbbed slowly away, leaving it paler than Mariella's had been that morning. She understood her mistake almost before his first sentence. While he was speaking her thoughts were busy. She felt the blood coming back when she remembered what she had said to Mariella. If *only* she had not spoken!

"Well," she said, calmly, "have you said anything to Mariella?"

"Yes, I have; lots o' times. An' I know she likes me; but she's some flirtish, and that's what I want to put a stop to. So, with your permission, I'll have a talk with her to-night."

"I'd like to talk to her first myself." Mrs. Mansfield looked almost stern. "But I guess it'll be all right, Mr. Grover. If you'd just as soon wait till to-morrow, I'd like to be alone and make up my mind what to say to her."

Mr. Grover got up and shook hands with her awkwardly.

"I'll make her a good husband," he said, earnestly.

"I don't doubt that," replied Mrs. Mansfield.

Then he went out and the crimson curtain fell behind him.

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When Mariella came home her mother was sitting, rocking, by the window. The lamp was lighted.

"Pills," she said, "I want you to stop goin' with that fello'."

The girl looked at her in silence. Then she took off her turban and struck the long black pins back into it.

"I thought you liked him," she said, slowly.

"I do, but Mr. Grover wants you—an' I like him better."

"Wants *me!*" Mariella drew up her shoulders proudly.

"Yes, you," replied Mrs. Mansfield, laughing. The humor of the situation was beginning to appeal to her. "He says he'd told you. You must of laughed after I told you he wanted me."

"Oh, ma, does he want me, honest?"

"Yes, he does." She was still laughing.

"An' don't you mind, ma?"

"Not a mite," said the widow, cheerfully. "I'd rather he'd marry you than me; only, I thought he was too nice a man to be lost to the family."

"Oh, ma!"

"Well, get to bed now. He's comin' in the mornin' to see you."

She took up the lamp and stood holding it irresolutely.

"Pills," she said, looking embarrassed, "You won't ever tell him that I—that I—"

"Never, ma!" exclaimed the girl, earnestly; "as long as I live."

"All right, then. Look out! You're droppin' tallo' from your candle! Don't hold it so crooked, child! I wouldn't like him to laugh about it. Good-night."

As she passed through the kitchen she called out: "Oh, Pills! Mr. Jordan brought in a mess of trout. We'll have 'em fried for breakfast."

The girl came running after her mother, and threw her arms around her.

"Oh, ma, are you sure you don't care a bit?"

"Not a bit," said Mrs. Mansfield, kissing her heartily. "I just thought he ought to be in the family. I'm glad it's turned out

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this way. Now, you go to bed, an' don't forget to roll up your bangs."

She went into her room and shut the door.



"THE MOTHER OF 'PILLS,' " Ella Higginson's first story to win a national award, was chosen as the Best Original Story by *Short Stories: A Magazine of Select Fiction*. It was published in February 1894 and reprinted in Higginson's collections *The Flower That Grew in the Sand and Other Stories* (1896) and *From The Land of the Snow-Pearls: Tales From Puget Sound* (1897).

In "The Mother of 'Pills,'" Higginson dramatizes the shifting understandings between a mother and her daughter in the tiny town of Sehome on Puget Sound in the late-nineteenth-century United States. The subject of the mother/daughter relationship in struggling Pacific Northwest towns is one that Higginson will often return to in her fiction over the course of her career. The setting of the "The Mother of 'Pills'" is a drugstore that is owned and operated by the main character, the widowed Mrs. Mansfield. Higginson's detailed description of the store and the various medicines prepared there reflect the knowledge that she had acquired while working in drugstores owned by her husband (Russell Carden Higginson, a druggist) in Oregon and then in Washington.