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Katherine Hoffman
Iowa State College

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Ellen H. Richards  
—Home Economist, Wife, Homemaker

by Katherine Hoffman

A GIRL, intense-eyed and quick-witted, stood behind the miscellaneous assortment of merchandise on the counter of her father's general store. She sold tobacco along with the dry goods and groceries, but she fairly hated the stuff. One day a knot of the small town loafers took their purchased tobacco and their pipes and sauntered over to the stove to smoke and gossip while they tipped back their chairs and stuck their feet up.

The girl with the snapping eyes objected, "Don't they have any good stuff?" then said one, "do you sell us tobacco if you don't expect us to smoke it?"

"We sell you molasses too but we don't expect you to stay here and cook it up," she retorted.

That girl was Ellen H. Richards, in whose honor we celebrate a convocation on December 3.

But ... We might not have this annual convocation if there had not been a South American revolution and a certain college president who thought of a way to get around his board of trustees without their knowing about it.

For Ellen H. Richards, far from being the name of a woman related to home economics, cold and impersonal and far away as the moon to most of us, is the name of a woman who somehow had a faculty for having extraordinary things happen to her and happen to her first. It is the name of a woman who achieved all those things the modern college woman desires—husband, a home, a career—and a large measure of fame besides.

And all might not have happened if that South American revolution had not come along just when it did ...

Ellen H. Richards, only it was Ellen Swallow then, was just fresh from two years of math-solving and telescope gazing at Vassar, at a time when Vassar was still young enough to be on trial for its existence. She wanted a job, but nothing short of California would do. So she indulged her love of adventure to the extreme and picked South America. She was ready to go; she was anxiously waiting to go. Then that fateful war broke out and President Santiago decided that none of the six American school teachers he had hired had better venture into the unsettled conditions of the Argentine Republic. That left Ellen Swallow still in America and still very definitely without a use for her education.

It was a bitter disappointment to her, but if it had never happened she might never have turned to chemistry as a starting career in her effort to make a place for herself in a stridently male world. She might never have become interested in American women and their problems, nor seen the great possibilities of applying science to homemaking.

She still wanted a career, but those were the days when women were females and as such just didn't have careers. Nevertheless she wrote a good firm of Quaker chemists, who answered in a very stilted, yet halfway sympathetic, fashion that they knew of no firm to which they could direct her attention, but they had heard "that female assistance was employed in an apothecary store." They further regretted that they could render her no aid even though they desired to see "proper means of livelihood thrown open to females."

Ellen Swallow now tried to enter a men's scientific school. In the meantime, even as the modern college girl without a job, she worked around home, making wax flowers for wedding gifts, doing fancy work for the fair, reading, and cooking for Thanksgiving. But she was nearly going wild at all the hindrances before her.

Finally she heard from a Mr. Runkle, president of the Massachusetts Institute of Technology. A clever old man he was—the day the board of trustees would be to buck public opinion and that of the board of trustees should he allow young women to enter the institution. In a letter signed "Faithfully yours," he merely said that Ellen Swallow was to have all the advantages of the institution without the handicap of any kind. He didn't tell her the whys and the wherefores of it, and she accepted. But later she found out. "I thought it was out of the goodness of his heart, because I was a poor girl with my way to make, that he remitted the fee, but I learned later that it was because he could say I was not a student, should any of the trustees or students make a fuss about my presence. Had I realized upon what basis I was taken, I would not have gone."

But she did go, and once there her career got a good start. She set out to make herself indispensable. She thought "perhaps the fact that I do not scorn womanly duties but claim it as a privilege to clean up and sort of supervise the room and sew things, etc., is winning me stronger allies than anything else. Even Professor [Redacted] accords me his sanction when I sort his papers or tie up a sore finger or dust the table, etc. Last night Professor B found me useful to mend his suspenders which had come to grief, much to the amusement of young Mr. C."

From here Ellen Swallow went on and up, but it was while she was working in this laboratory that she married Mr. Richards. She had given up the idea of marriage some years before. "Oh, Annie," she wrote, "the silent misery I am discovering every now and then among my friends whom I thought (were) as happy as most, makes us shudder. Yesterday some things I heard about one of my dearest friends made me almost vow I never would bind myself with the chains of matrimony. I don't believe girls usually get behind the scenes as much as I have or they could not get up such enthusiasm for married life.

And when she fell in love she was testing water in a laboratory, analysis after analysis, accurately and carefully for a public water survey. It was a Mr. Richards, head of the mining department, the exact opposite of herself in temperament. She was quick; he was low and deliberate and judicial. She was a little shy about her romance, even when she wrote home to her mother she called him "Your Professor." And she had to take facetious remarks from Mr. Smith, a friend of hers in the laboratory. "Cupid has appeared among the retorts and receivers," he hinted.

They were quietly married and went directly to the house they had chosen at Jamaica Plain. Robert was excited, important professor though he was. Ellen Richards was excited. They went through the marriage ceremony and afterwards it developed that he had made some slight slips in packing. He had no necktie but a white one. Ellen Richards laughed at him, and then she discovered that she had left all her keys in her closest door at 523 Columbus Avenue and she couldn't get in at no clothes except those she had on.

They went off on a wedding trip. But such a wedding trip! Not just she and Robert went, but Professor Richards, and his new wife and his whole class in mining engineering headed for Nova Scotia to do some practical work. She wore an outing costume—heavy boots and a short skirt (quite a rarity and a scandal in those days) and when, standing on the steps of the Institute she met some fashionable Vassar friends of hers they refused to believe that she was a bride.

She went back to her work at the Institute, later teaching and working December, 1936
to get other women admitted to the school where she had been the first. She did numbers of things in the educational field before she became definitely interested in the home economics that now is almost the only thing with which we associate her name. But through it all she was human, she was alive, she was hospitable, and in no place was this more apparent than in her home.

To begin with, it was a little different from the ordinary home of the time. It was an era when fresh air was dangerous, curtains were heavy dark plush, and there was no running hot water. In her Jamaica Plains house, Ellen H. Richards had a furnace, a skylight, a special ventilator designed by her and her husband, and a hot water heater. She had no curtains at the windows, except in the bath, but grew green plants instead—more and more of them at the windows. The plants were kept watered by a special hose arrangement.

Mrs. Richards, as one of her guests described her, was a "small woman with a thin face, white hair, very black eyebrows, and eyes that sparkle with life." She allowed no engagements or complications to interfere with her hospitality. Her house was always open. A regular affair was the dinner she gave for those from distant parts of the world. Mr. Richards put on an exhibition of glass blowing and made a water hammer which was raffled off with much amusement later in the evening.

That is the way her friends knew her—filled with limitless energy and with a certain quality of aliveness about her, the same quality that she had when she talked back to the men in her father's general store.

It is for this woman, not the cold impersonal "force in home economies" that we celebrate Ellen H. Richards Day, years after the revolution that kept her from going to South America, and the clever college president let her enter his institution without paying tuition just to keep her name off the books.

**Around the Globe**

**With Old Saint Nick**

*by Ruth Kunerth*

Czechoslavakian fortune telling! Pour melted wax into cold water and let your imagination run its course when you see the shapes it takes. While you have a pail of water near by, float some tiny lighted candles in nut shells, and bestow an honor or award a prize to the one whose candle floats upright longest and burns to the end. Children will love it!

Although those who prepare the Christmas eve dinner may not find it as convenient, the custom of sitting down to eat when the first star appears in the sky seems like a nice Christmas tradition. The Ukrainians begin their twelve course meal with the first star rather than watching the clock. Try this year just as a break from the mechanical routine of other days.

No customs duties or taxes are required for the Hungarian idea of gilding nuts for tree decorations. These nuts would also make clever little place-card holders for the name-cards could be wedged into the slightly parted halves. Table decorations could be formed out of chains of gilded or silvered nuts, giving an atmosphere of simplicity.

Have you ever thought of Christmas without visualizing an evergreen tree lighted days before the 25th, without snow or at least cold weather, without red and green colors predominating or without mistletoe?

"Christmas trees aren't lighted in our homes in Denmark until Christmas eve, when they're a surprise for the children," says Mr. Nielsen. Only stores and business concerns display decorated trees before the 24th.

If you lived in the West Indies or South America, Christmas would be connected in your mind with hot—very hot weather, swimming and tennis. Ines Rosenbusch says that there is no mistletoe used in South America, and red and green colors aren't seen predominantly as they are here.

We habitual last-minute shoppers better not move to the West Indies! Gifts have to be sent out of the islands about two weeks earlier, if they're to be received on time. Miss Greaves says that cards from other countries are still being received in the West Indies in February, because too many people allow only a day or two for transportation. We could advantageously adopt the shopping dates of these islands.

Are you interested in food? The Hawaiians individualistically prepare roast pig by digging a hole in the ground, building a fire in the bottom of it, placing stones on top and heating them for about three hours. The whole pig is put on the hot stones, which are covered with tea leaves, and roasted. The roast pig, prepared for Christmas and special occasions in this manner, is served on a table covered with large tea leaves.

Red cabbage and pork or goose are included in the Danish Christmas dinner, while ham and horse-radish form a part of the typical Yugoslavian Christmas breakfast.

Our traditions and customs are lots of fun, interesting and important, but they can be made even nicer by giving them a new touch.