Sedgwick, Catharine M. “Look Before You Leap.” *The Columbian Lady’s and Gentleman’s Magazine*. [edited by John Inman and Robert A. West] (January 1846): 13-17

LOOK BEFORE YOU LEAP.

By Miss Catharine M. Sedgwick

[p. 13]

I was on a visit, not long since, to a friend of mine who, still in the unimpaired maturity of life, is surrounded by grown and growing children. Her summer residence is in the neighborhood of a thickly populated village, and being a ‘most gracious ladye,’ she is sometimes rather over visited by her social neighbors. We had one of those occurrences, which in June give such an out-door freshness and fragrance and always an in-door sweet security – a rainy day. Days of rural dissipation, of rides, drives, walks, and pic-nics had preceded it, and an immense batch of sewing bad accumulated in my friend’s work-basket. She called us all about her and gave to each one an appropriate task. I took a pile of stockings, whose ‘windowed raggedness’ was to me a storied record of our scrambles through the rocky beds of brooks and up the tangled mountain sides. On Clara devolved the task of ‘hook and eyeing,’ as she called it, and little Lilly was to replace the missing strings.

“You are good for nothing at the needle, Anne,” said her mother.

“Least in mamma’s kingdom of heaven,” interposed Anne Reyburn, with an arch smile.

The mother returned a smile, as she said, “You don’t deserve for that the pleasure I had allotted to you; but it does not signify; people seldom get their deserts in this world; so, Miss Anne, you may read to us while we work. There is Boswell’s Johnson on the table – a delightful book for social reading. Open it where you may you cannot fail to fall on something agreeable.”

We were soon arranged for our morning’s business, and a lovelier household group than the mother and her girls I have seldom seen. That compendious and trite description of matrons, ‘fair, fat, and forty,’ might be applied to my friend, but in her case the fortunate physical circumstances were symbols of moral wealth and beauty. That ‘fair and fat’ indicated health produced by a wise simplicity of living, by the most beneficent disposition and the sweetest serenity of temper; and the ‘forty’ was forty years of sunshine with only just so much of clouds as is necessary to keep frail human virtue alive and vigorous. Mrs. Reyburn sat, generously filling her commodious sewing-chair, with her huge work-basket on the table before her; Anne gracefully lounged on the sofa with her book; and the younger girls, their faces ‘bright with thoughtless smiles,’ sat on their low chairs with their pretty work-boxes and sewing implements beside them. The door opened into the garden, fresh and flowery in its young June beauty; the rain pattered musically on the doorstep, and the sweet briar, honeysuckle and mignonette sent in to us their exquisite odors. When the sky brightened for a moment the robins swelled their throats; but the clouds dropping down the distant mountain’s side insured the continuance of the

morning’s rain, and we began our business with that placid contentment which comes of having no thought, project, temptation or desire beyond the present moment.

Anne Reyburn was just nineteen. Hardly anyone saw her for the first time without exclaiming ‘how like her mother!’ and to a slight observation there was little difference but that of age – in the daughter, the fervid and startling charm of the morning – in the mother, the more subdued beauty of the advancing day; but on a study, Anne revealed feelings of greater depth than her mother’s and a more impulsive gush, liable too to find their way in more uncertain and more devious channels – a character better fitted to modify circumstances than to be modified by them.

My friend influenced the formation of her children’s characters rather by the atmosphere of affection and kindness with which she surrounded herself, than by any direct bearing of authority upon them. This is an admirable and sufficient agent with gentle and pliable materials. Anne has one of those strong characters that must do for itself the hardest work of education: the training of feeling, the subduing of passion, the maiming of reason, must for itself fight the battle of life.

I am tempted to draw Anne's character, which is curious enough in these days of task-work- education and regular training, (dwarfing she calls it,) but her portrait in all its unframed luxuriance would fill more than the space we have now assigned to other matter, so we leave her to be guessed at by a few glimpses of her heart through her words.

She began to read to us, but she read rather dreamily. Her poetic eyes often wandered to the mist floating over the mountains, and finally coming upon Dr. Johnson's saying, that he believed

[p. 14]

marriages would be full as happy as they are if matches were made by the lord chancellor, she threw down the volume, saying “What a detestable old goose he is! What did he know about happy marriages!”

“Doctor Johnson, an old goose!” said one of the little younger girls; “Well, Anne, I wonder what discovery you will make next!:

“I dare say, Clara, you would like a husband of the chancellor's choosing, and would take him with a 'thank you, sir!' and ‘if you like him, sir, I am sure I shall.’ Now heaven save me even from our dear chancellor, M____s, choosing a husband for me!”

“And yet, Anne," said her mother, “I am not sure that you would not in the end be happier with a husband of any wise man's selection than with one of your own choosing.”

“I don't care about the 'end,' mamma; I wish to be happy in the beginning.”

A light laugh, which Anne felt to be against her, ran round the circle. She waited till it was past, and then said, very earnestly, “You may all laugh, but is there one of you, from Miss____ down to Lilly, that would not think it a disgrace to marry any man but him of your own heart's election?”

“Certainly not, Anne,” replied her mother, “but you, my dear child, I presume would have that election decided by love alone.”

“Assuredly, for that alone influences the heart. Reason and judgment, which weigh heavily in the lord chancellor's balance, are not of a feather's weight in the heart's scale.”

“But utterly worthless as reason and judgment are in themselves, Anne,” said Mrs. Reyburn, with a grave smile, “may they not be allowed to sanction or influence, or even to decide an insufficient love?”

“No, no—oh no, mamma! An insufficient love is no love at all; is good for nothing. The man that I marry I must love with a love that doubts nothing, fears nothing, hopes all things and believes all things. The whole world's favor would not advance him one jot in my affection, nor its disfavor throw one shadow over him.”

“The 'whole world!' That is talking in very general terms; but suppose a case. If you had a lover whom you liked extremely but did not love, according to your extravagant notions of love"____

“Extravagant, mamma!”

“Do not interrupt me, Anne. Suppose that your father and I approved him; would choose him from all the world for you; that your brothers were his warm friends; that the children loved him”____

“You need not suppose anything more, mamma. It would not all have the slightest influence on me—it could not. Love comes and goes whither it will. If reasons were as thick as blackberries they could not create love; and marriage is disgraceful without love—that

> 'Most sacred fire, that burneth mightily
> In living breasts.’”

“I grant you, Anne but remember that same poetic oracle whom you have quoted, also says—

'Wonder it is to see in diverse minds,
How diversely love doth his pageants play
And shows his power in variable kinds.'

“Now I believe that an affection far short of—or rather far different from what you would call love, may make the basis of the happiest marriage. Do not you?" said my friend, appealing to me, and trusting that as her cotemporary I had arrived at her more sober point of view.

I confess my sympathies were with the daughter; but I compromised between the opposing parties so far as to say, that I deemed love without reason perilous, reason without love inadmissible; and the only sure basis, love sanctioned by reason.

Mrs. Reyburn admitted that in theory I was right, but she contended that there were many modifications and aspects of love; that characters were so various, and that life was so different in reality from what youth pictured it; that she had seen so many different loves that 'hoped all things and believed all things ' wrecked in the first year of marriage; that, for her part, she would rather her girls would trust to a more rational and calmer sentiment than that which made the inspiration of poetry and the basis of romance.

“I will tell you a true story girls,” she said; “a 'love-story,' I call it. Perhaps it will rectify some of your opinions. My heroine was a friend of Miss ____ 's as well as of mine. She knew as well as I, the parties and circumstances, and will vouch for their truth, though indeed there is nothing in them so incredible as to require a voucher.

“A Mr. Ewing, the friend of our parents, died immediately after some reverses in his business, and left his wife with a large young family and an impaired fortune. Mrs. Ewing took a small house, and let her two best rooms to a single gentleman who boarded with her and paid her liberally—Mr. John Sheafe. He was a singular man this Mr. John Sheafe, but his singularities were graceful and pleasing. He was about thirty when he first took possession of his rooms. Dear Mrs. Ewing! she used to say he gave her no more trouble than a kitten, and yet he had his particularities. Though his rooms were furnished with every convenience and elegance, he did not scruple to let in all the little Ewings—a perfect menagerie of wild young things they were—and they might wrap themselves in the bed-clothes, pull

[p.15]

down the curtains, pile up the chairs, rattle down the shovel and tongs, any thing but touch his pictures and books, and the little sinners, like their unhappy progenitors, were very apt to seize on the forbidden things, and then they were driven forth from their paradise and the doors shut upon them. Sheafe would try his best to look like a thunder storm, but the sun always shone through the clouds, and the little wretches were weather-wise enough to know that no storm could gather there, and though Sheafe had told them they never should enter his room again, and

Mrs. Ewing with her sternest face, (poor Mrs. Ewing! it was as difficult for her as for her lodger to counterfeit wrath,) assured them Mr. Sheafe was very angry 'indeed,' before twenty fours passed away they had one by one stolen in, and were as lawless and uproarious and as welcome as ever. Sheafe had one peculiarity that puzzled Mrs. Ewing to the day of her death. Though of a spirit so social, that in every relation in life he felt and made felt what has been happily called fellow-being-ism, he had an aversion to being included in social arrangements. He prized above every thing else his individual independence, and when Mrs. Ewing would say 'Mr. Sheafe, our friends so and so, are going to have a pic-nic on Slaten Island,' or 'are going to Long Island,' or wherever the party of pleasure might be, 'and I have promised you will join us'— or 'we are going to have such a pleasant little party this evening, all your friends—do come home,' he invariably replied 'no—don't count on me—it is not probable I can be there'—or 'be here,' and finally perhaps at the very moment they began to recover from their disappointment of his not being with them, he appeared among them, the very soul of all their pleasures."

"Mamma," interrupted Clara Reyburn, "you said you were going to tell a love story?"

"So I am, my dear, and I am just introducing you to one of the parties."

"That Mr. Sheafe, mamma? Why you said he was thirty years old!"

"Yes, Clara, and he was thirty-five, before I come to the love part of my story."

"Oh horrid, mamma!"

Mrs. Reyburn proceeded:

"Mr. Sheafe was not rich, but he had an easy fortune and few wants, and he continued to let it fall, like the quiet and plentiful dews of heaven, on the right and on the left. There was no burden in his favors. For five years he managed to make Mrs. Ewing live in a house rent free, of which he said he had taken a lease for a bad debt, that he had long ago given up as hopeless. He kept a servant and secretly paid him double wages for doing Mrs. Ewing's work. He had always some poor friend in the shape of a French dancing or music-master that he wanted to give a little money to, and Mrs. Ewing would particularly oblige him if she would allow the children to take lessons of them, as he did not like to ask them to take money without an equivalent. This was something like reversing the old adage of 'killing two birds with one stone.'

"You will easily perceive that such a man, in the course of four or five years, would so involve himself with the concerns of a family, as to become indispensable to their happiness. In this five years Catharine or Kate Ewing, as we used to call her, had passed from the awkward age of her fourteenth to her nineteenth year."

"Oh, now the love story is coming," cried Clara Reyburn.

"And reason versus love," said Anne.

Her mother smiled, and went on:—

“Kate was a light-hearted, happy-tempered young creature. She had been from the beginning a prime favorite of Sheafe's, but for the last two or three years he had appeared rather more reserved toward her. While she was a child he was unlimited in his beneficence to her. Her room was filled with his gifts, books and pictures. All her books—the prettiest of rose-wood book-cases—all were his gifts. All her expensive masters had been employed by him. Now, he ceased to be her open benefactor, some good earthly providence seemed still watching over her, and showering favors upon her. If a new book worth buying appeared, she was the first to possess it, and never had she occasion for a bouquet but a bouquet of the choicest flowers appeared at the door. Kate was not very far-sighted in such matters. She did not see why if Mr. Sheafe continued to give, he could not give openly as he had always done. Her simple hearted mother was easily eluded.

“’I know very well, Mr. Sheafe,’ she said, soon after these anonymous gifts began, ‘where Kate's presents come from. I may thank the giver if she cannot.’

“Mr. Sheafe looked grave and displeased. A rare look for him, for of all the men I ever knew he was the most cheerful, the most joyous, as he had a right to be, for he was the best. He said, ‘I perceive you mean your thanks for me, Mrs. Ewing. You are wasting them; whoever the giver of these trifles to Kate may be, he should be allowed the secrecy he chooses.’

“ ‘Well, I assure you,' replied Mrs. Ewing, completely baffled, ‘I have not the smallest notion who it is. I never once thought of anyone but you. To be sure I ought to have remembered that you never in years past made any secret of your gifts.’ A smile that in spite of him, played over Mr. Sheafe's lips, and a blush that deepened

[p. 16]

his rather deep colored cheek, would have told the truth to a more suspicious person than dear Mrs. Ewing. But she, as you know, Miss ____, always took the sense that met the ear.”

“But, mamma," interrupted Anne Rayburn, “I trust Mr. Sheafe was not a rosy bachelor. I can imagine a girl of Miss. Ewing’s age, falling desperately in love with a man, even if he were forty, if he were tall, with a pale, marble complexion, and fine large dark eyes and plenty of black hair.”

“Oh Anne, my dear,” replied her mother, laughing, “nothing can be more unlike your possible lover than my real one. Mr. Sheafe was not above the middle stature; a little inclined to the rotund and the ruddy; and as to his hair, once, alas! Of the softest, lightest brown, it had retreated so far from his forehead that he wore----”

“Oh, not a scratch, mamma; don't say he wore a scratch!”

“Not quite a scratch, Anne, but a small nicely fitted patch to hide the ravages of time. Plenty of black hair indeed! You will hardly find that on a man's head of thirty-five from Maine to Georgia.”

“But a patch, mamma! Baldness is better than that. My father's head now is beautiful; rather bald, to be sure, but the little hair that he has, is soft, bright, and curly.”

“Oh, father's head is lovely!” cried Clara Reyburn!

“Oh yes, I guess it is!” exclaimed in chorus half a dozen young voices.

Mrs. Reyburn and I exchanged smiles, she proceeded:

“Even the patch, Anne, did not conceal or deform the fine classic shape of his head, which with its moral and intellectual developments would have charmed a phrenologist. I am sure no large dark eye ever so expressed, as his beaming gray one did, the kindling and discharging of feeling. His lips between humor, kindness, tenderness and sympathy, were always in a sort of graceful movement, and in short, though he had none of your requisites of beauty, he was the most agreeable-looking man I ever saw.”

“Agreeable looking! Well, was Miss Kate Ewing *agreeable* looking too?”

Till now I had listened to what was to me an old story with as much interest as the young people, but now I interposed; and with enthusiasm, at the recollection of my charming cotemporary, I described her in terms that made all my young hearers exclaim:

“Oh, she must have been beautiful, and so interesting.”

And Clara Reybum said:—

“I hope that '*old* bachelor' didn't dare to fall in love with her?”

“Not, perhaps, what you would quite call falling in love, resumed her mother, but the love he felt for her as a child, grew insensibly into a strange sentiment, and one bright day he was suddenly betrayed into a disclosure for which Kate was totally unprepared. She burst into tears, and frankly told him she had never thought of him as a lover, and never could; but that she loved him so dearly she would rather have died than told him so. A total change came over him—in place of his perpetual good humor and sunny cheerfulness, an immovable gravity and occasional melancholy. Poor Mrs. Ewing could not divine what it meant. She first thought his affairs must be embarrassed, and then she fancied it was an incipient fever, and begged him to take advice. She told him all the house would be wretched, if an evil overtook him, and called his

observation to Kate, who, she said, had not smiled for a week. He made no reply to her, but the next morning she was astonished by the information that he was going abroad, and that he and his servant were packing up his furniture to be removed to a place of storage.

"It was a wretched day at the Ewings. Poor Mrs. Ewing walked up and down her room, wringing her hands and wiping her eyes, and wondering and wondering (till Kate wished herself deaf that she might not hear) what could have happened to Mr. Sheafe. Kate went to her worsted work, but her eyes were so blinded with tears, that she could not see it; she took up a book, but she did not know whether she read backwark or forward. She sat down to her piano and played so false, that even Mr. Sheafe heard and noted it.

"Mrs. Ewing saw the carpenters bringing in empty boxes.

" 'Dear me,' she said;' it seems just as if a coffin was coming into the house."

" 'Oh,' thought Kate, in the impatience of her first misery; 'I wish it were me, and that I were to be carried away dead in it!'

" 'Ma'am!'' said the chambermaid, rushing in, 'you never saw such an awful change as there is in Mr. Sheafe's room: its day changed into night —its as solitary as the tomb.'

" 'Is he gone, Jane,' said Kate, starting up.

" 'Oh no, Miss—Lord how pale you look—but dismal like a tomb, I mean. The wardrobe is emptied—the books are all in boxes—the pictures, every one of them, even that pretty likeness of Mr. Sheafe that a body can never look at without feeling that he is just going to speak something pleasant—that is in a box, and it looked up at me somehow sorrowful, it did ma'am; and his dressing gown, that always hung there—always with the red cords and tassels hanging down by

[p. 17]

the bed-post, so lively and like Mr. Sheafe, that is packed up too.'

" 'Jane, do go away,' said Kate, petulantly; 'you make my head ache.'

" 'Why, Miss Kate!' said Jane, and as she shut the door after her, she murmured to herself, 'her heart ache more like, and its good enough; for her, for I know she is at the bottom of it.'

"A few moments after, in flounced Sophy, the, cook, and after turning her eye from Mrs. Ewing to her daughter, " 'Its true, ma'am,' she said; 'I see its true; I could not believe Jane. Well, how things does turn topsy-turvy in this world. I shall have to go too. I can't stand it. He never kept the dinner waiting, and never came too soon, and fretted for it. Who'll regulate the clock, now? I shall never take no more satisfaction in roasting a goose. He always said I did it to a

turn.’ The tears actually rolled over her round, black cheeks. She continued: ‘With most every body, the scum will rise sometimes, but he's as clear as spring water. He knows what is what, Mr. Sheafe does. He says I’m the only one short of old England that can cook a Christian beefsteak, and he always has something funny to say. Oh he's sugar and spice too!’

“A poor humble widow, who served the house from her thread and needle basket, opened the door gently at this moment, and asked:

“ ‘Is it true, ma'am? is Mr. Sheafe going?’

“ ‘Yes.’

“ ‘The Lord have mercy then on the poor.’

“Every new voice brought forth a fresh shower of tears from Mrs. Ewing. While matters were at this point, the door was opened a crack, and Mr. Sheafe said in a broken voice, 'I am going out for an hour; when the carpenter calls, Mrs. Ewing, be kind enough to tell him the boxes are ready to nail up.’

“Half an hour after, when the carpenter did call, Kate sprang up and said, ‘I will speak to him, mamma.’ An hour or two more passed away, when Mr. Sheafe came in. He had a pass-key to the street door, and as he opened it and shut it, very gently, no one was apprized of his entrance.

“Of all the men I ever knew, he had the greatest repugnance to scenes. He dreaded dear Mrs. Ewing's ingenuous demonstrations, so he stole stealthily up the back stairs, and first entered his lodging room. The door communicating with his parlor was wide open, and through it he saw his books were replaced in his book-case; he advanced a little farther, the pictures were re-hung in their places—a little farther still, and he saw Kate Ewing standing on a chair before his picture which she had that moment replaced, and he heard her say:

“ ‘Dear, dear Mr. Sheafe—never, never shall you leave this house if I can help it.’”

My friend paused. Smiles were on her lips and tears in her eyes. It could no longer be concealed that she was the heroine of her own story. I looked round upon her children. Surprise and discovery were flashing from Anne Reyburn's bright eyes.

The younger girls cried, “Go on, go on, mamma,” and “what did Mr. Sheafe say?” and, “what could Miss Kate say?”

“I do not remember, my dear children. It was one of those rich moments of life when much more is felt than said; but this I know very well, that from that time to this, I have never repented the repentance of that morning ____ "

My friend was interrupted by the entrance of her husband. He had been into the village and brought home a basket of fruit and flowers which he threw among the children. His face had that expression of beaming, paternal happiness, which came from the consciousness that his footstep once over his threshold, was the welcomest sound ever heard there.

I think there was a slight struggle in Anne Reyburn's bosom, as there will be when old ideas are giving place to new ones, but it was soon over. A joyous light flashed from her soul as her eye fell on her father, and kissing her mother, she said, in a subdued voice, “Nobody but yourself, mamma, would have made me believe that yours was not a love-match in the beginning as it is in the end. Well, well, I have had many a dream of love; if I ever have such a reality as yours, I shall be quite content.”

The light just dawned on Clara. “Why, Anne!” she exclaimed; “Goodness, mamma! Mr. *Sheafe*, indeed! Dear, dear Mr. Sheafe! If you had shabbed him, mamma, I never would have forgiven you!”

A pretty family scene followed; a chorus of exclamations, a few tears, many questions, some jokes on the discarded patch, and a ringing of laughing voices ---- but here the curtain falls.