

Catharine Maria Sedgwick. "Old Maids," *The Offering*, 17-46, Philadelphia, Thomas T. Ash, 1834.

"Old Maids"

"To be the mistress of some honest man's house, and the means of making neighbours happy, the poor easy, and relieving strangers, is the most creditable lot a young woman can look to, and I heartily wish it to all here." — PIRATE.

"Mrs. Seton, Emily Dayton is engaged to William Moreland!"

"To William Moreland. Well, why should she not be engaged to William Moreland?"

"Why should she, rather?"

"I know not Emily Dayton's ' why, ' but ladies' reasons for marrying are as ' thick as blackberries.' A common motive with girls under twenty is the eclat of an engagement — the pleasure of being the heroine of bridal festivities — of receiving presents — of being called by that name so enchanting to the imagination of a miss in her teens — ' the bride.'"

"But Emily Dayton, you know, is past twenty."

"There is one circumstance that takes place of all reason — perhaps she is in love."

"In love with William Moreland! No, no, Mrs. Seton — there are no 'merry wanderers of the night' in these times to do Cupid's errands, and make us dote on that which we should hate."

"Perhaps then, as she is at a rational age, three or four and twenty, she may be satisfied to get a kind sensible protector."

"Kind and sensible, truly! He is the most testy, frumpish, stupid man you can imagine." "Does she not marry for an establishment?"

"Oh no! She is perfectly independent, mistress of everything at her father's. No, I believe her only motive is that which actuates half the girls — the fear of being an old maid. This may be her last chance. Despair, they say, makes men mad — and I believe it does women too.

"It is a fearful fate."

"An old maid's? Yes, most horrible."

"Pardon me, Anne, I did not mean that ; but such a fate as you anticipate for Emily Moreland — to be yoked in the most intimate relation of life, and for life, to a person

to whom you have clung to save you from shipwreck, but whom you would not select to pass an evening with. To such a misery there can be no 'end, measure, limit, bound.'"

"But, my dear Mrs. Seton, what are we to do? — all women cannot be so fortunate as you are."

"Perhaps not. But so kind is the system of compensation in this life — such the thirst for happiness, and so great the power of adaptation in the human mind, that the conjugal state is far more tolerable than we should expect when we see the mismated parties cross its threshold. Still there can be no doubt that its possible happiness is often missed, and such is my respect for my sex, and so high my estimate of the capabilities of married life, that I cannot endure to see a woman, from the fear of being an old maid, driven into it, thereby forfeiting its highest blessings."

"You must nevertheless confess, Mrs. Seton, that there are terrors in the name."

"Yes, I know there are; and women are daily scared by them into unequal and wretched connexions. They have believed they could not retain their identity after five and twenty. That unless their individual existence was merged in that of the superior animal, every gift and grace with which God has endowed them would exhale and leave a 'spectral appearance' — a sort of slough of woman — an Aunt Grizzel, or Miss Lucretia McTab. I have lived, my dear Anne, to see many of the mists of old superstitions melting away in the light of a better day. Ghost is no longer a word to conjure with — witches have settled down into harmless and unharmed old women; and I do not despair of living to see the time when it shall be said of no woman breathing, as I have heard it said of such and such a lady, who escaped from the wreck at the eleventh hour, that she 'married to die a Mrs.'"

"I hate, too, to hear such things said, but tell me honestly, Mrs. Seton, now when no male ears are within hearing, whether you do not, in your secret soul, think there is something particularly unlovely, repelling, and frightful, in the name of an old maid."

"In the name, certainly; but it is because it does not designate a condition but a species. It calls up the idea of a faded, bony, wrinkled, skinny, jaundiced personage, whose mind has dwindled to a point — who has outlived her natural affections — survived every love but love of self, and self-guarded by that Cerberus suspicion — in whom the follies of youth are fresh when all its charms are gone — who has retained, in all their force, the silliest passions of the silliest women — love of dress, of pleasure, of admiration; who, in short, is in the condition of the spirits in the ancients' Tartarus, an impalpable essence tormented with the desires of humanity. Now turn, my dear Anne, from this hideous picture to some of our acquaintance who certainly have missed the happiest destiny of woman, but who dwell in light, the emanation of their own goodness. I shall refer you to actual living examples — no fictions."

"No fictions, indeed, for then you must return to the McTabs and Grizzles. Whatever your philanthropy may hope for that most neglected portion of our sex, no author has ventured so far from nature as to portray an attractive old maid. Even Mackenzie, with a spirit as gentle as my Uncle Toby's, and as tender as that of his own 'Man of Feeling,' has written an essay in ridicule of 'old maids.'"

"And you are not perhaps aware, Anne, that he has written a poem called the 'Recantation,' and dedicated it to his single daughter, a most lovely woman, who was the staff and blessing of his old age. In your wide range of reading cannot you think of a single exception to the McTabs and Grizzles?"

"Miss Farrer's 'Becca Duguid,' but she is scarcely above contempt, trampled on by the children, and the tool of their selfish and lazy mammas."

"There is one author, Anne, the most beloved, and the most lamented of all authors, who has not ventured to depart from nature, but has escaped prejudice, and prejudice in some of its most prevailing forms. He has dared to exhibit the Paynim Saladin as superior to the Christian crusader. He has dispelled the thick clouds that enveloped the 'poor Israelite,' the most inveterate of all prejudices, transmitted from age to age, and authorised by the fancied sanctions of religion. I said the clouds were dispelled, but do they not rather hang around the glorious Rebecca, the unsullied image of her Maker, as the clouds that have broken away from the full moon encircled her, and are converted by her radiance to a bright halo?"

"Mrs. Seton! Mrs. Seton! you are, or I am getting lost in all this mist and fog. What have Paynims and Jews to do with old maids? I do not remember an old maid in all Sir Walter's novels, excepting, indeed, Alison — Martha Trapbois — Meg Dods — one of Monkbarne's womankind, and Miss Yellowley, a true all-saving, fidgeting, pestering old maid, and the rest of them are entertaining but certainly not very exalting members of any sisterhood."

"But these are not my examples, Anne. I confess that they are fair examples of follies and virtues that, if not originated, are exaggerated and made conspicuous by single life. I confess too that for such foibles matrimony is often a kind and safe shelter. But to my examples. Sir Walter — and who is more poetically just than Sir Walter? — has abandoned to the desolate, tragic, and most abhorred fate of old maids, his three first female characters — first in all respects, in beauty, in mind, in goodness, first in our hearts. The accomplished Flora M'lvor — the peerless Rebecca, and the tender, beautiful Minna."

"Bless me! I never thought of this."

"No, nor has one in a thousand of the young ladies who have admired these heroines laid the moral of their story to heart. Perhaps not one of the fair young creatures who has dropped a tear over the beautiful sentence that closes the history of

Minna,* has been conscious that she was offering involuntary homage to the angelic virtues of an old maid. The very term would have wrought a disenchanting spell."

"I confess, Mrs. Seton, I am in what is vulgarly called a 'blue maze.' My perceptions are as imperfect as the man's in scripture who was suddenly cured of blindness. Besides I was never particularly skilful at puzzling out a moral; will you have the goodness to extract it for me?"

"Certainly, Anne, as I am the lecturer, this is my duty. First, I would have young ladies believe that all beautiful and loveable young women do not of course get married — that charms and virtues may exist, and find employment in single life — that a single woman, an old maid, (I will not eschew the name,) may love and be loved if she has not a husband, and children of her own. I would have her learn that if, like Flora M'lvor, she has been surrounded by circumstances that have caused her thoughts and affections to flow in some other channel than love, she need not wed a chance Waverly to escape single life; that if, like Rebecca, she is separated by an impassable gulf from him she loves, she need not wed one whom she does not love, but like the high souled Jewess she may transmute 'young Cupid's fiery shafts,' to chains that shall link her to all her species; and if like poor Minna she has thrown away her affections on a worthless object, she may live on singly, and so well that she will be deemed but 'little lower than the angels.'

"After all it is not such high natures as these that need to be fortified by argument, or example. They are born equal to either fortune. But I would entreat all my sex — those even who have the fewest and smallest gifts — to reverence themselves, to remember that it is not so much the mode of their brief and precarious existence that is important, as the careful use of those faculties that make existence a blessing here, and above all hereafter, where there is certainly 'no marrying, nor giving in marriage;' but I am growing serious, and of course, I fear, tiresome to young ears."

"Oh, no, no, Mrs. Seton. These are subjects on which girls are never tired of talking nor listening; besides, you know you promised me some examples — such as Miss Hamilton and Miss Edgeworth, I suppose."

"No, Anne, these belong to the great exceptions I have mentioned, 'equal to either fortune,' who, in any condition, would have made their 'owne renowne, and happie days.'"

I could adduce a few in our own country, known to both of us, who are the ornament of the high circles in which they move, but for obvious reasons I select humble persons — those who, like some little rivulet unknown to fame, bless obscure and sequestered places. There is Violet Flint — I always wondered how she came by so appropriate a name. That little flower is a fit emblem for her — smiling in earliest spring, and in latest fall — requiring no culture, and yet rewarding it — neglected and forgotten when the gay tribes of summer are caressed, and yet always looking from its humble station with the same cheerful face — bright and constant through

the sudden reverses of autumn, and the adversity of the roughest winter. Sucli is the flower, and such is Violet Flint. But as I am now in realities, I must call her by the old maidenish appellation that, spoiling her pretty name, they have given to her, 'Miss Vily.' She lives, and has for the last twenty years lived, with her brother Sam. He married young, a poor invalid, who, according to Napoleon's scale of merit, is a great woman, having given to the commonwealth nine or ten — more or less — goodly sons and daughters. After the children were born, all care of them, and of their suffering mother, devolved on Violet. Without the instincts, the claims, the rights, or the honours of a mother, she has not only done all the duties of a mother, but done them on the sure and broad basis of love. She has toiled and saved, and made others comfortable and enjoying, while she performed the usually thankless task of ordering the economy of a very frugal household. She has made the happy happier, tended the sick, and solaced the miserable. She sheltered the weak, and if one of the children strayed she was the apologist and intercessor. With all this energy of goodness the cause is lost in the blessed effects — she never appears to claim applause or notice. She is not only second best; but when indulgence or pleasure is to be distributed, her share is last and least — that is, according to the usual selfish reckoning. But according to a truer and nobler scale, her amount is greatest, for she has her share in whatever happiness she sees in any living thing."

How many married dames are there who repeat every fifteen minutes, my husband, my children, my house, and glorify themselves in all these little personalities, who might lay down their crowns at the feet of Violet Flint ! — Miss Vily, the old maid.

"The second example that occurs to me, is Sarah Lee. Sarah has not, like Violet, escaped all the peculiarities that are supposed to characterise the 'Single-sides.' With the chartered rights of a married lady to fret, to be particular, and to have a way of her own, her temper would pass without observation; but being an old maid, she is called, and I must confess is, rather touchy. But what are these sparks, when the same fire that throws them off keeps warm an over flowing stream of benevolence? — look into her room."

"Oh, Mrs. Seton! I have seen it, and you must confess it is a true 'Singleside' repository."

"Yes, I do confess it — nor will I shrink from the confession, for I wish to select for my examples, not any bright particular star, but persons of ordinary gifts, in the common walks of life. Had Sarah been married she would have been a thrifty wife, and pains taking mother, but she wore away her youth in devotion to the sick and old — and now her kindness, like the miraculous cruise, always imparting and never diminishing, is enjoyed by all within her little sphere. Experience has made her one of the best physicians I know. She keeps a variety of labelled medicines for the sick, plasters and salves of her own compounding, and materials with which she concocts food and beverages of every description, nutritious and diluent; in short, she has some remedy or solace for every ill that flesh is heir to. She has a marvelous knack of gathering up fragments, of most ingeniously turning to account what would be

wasted in another's hands. She not only has comfortables for shivering old women, and well patched clothes for neglected children, but she has always some pretty favour for a bride — some kind token for a new-born baby. And then what a refuge is her apartment for the slip-shod members of the family who are in distress for scissors, penknife, thimble, needle, hook and eye, buttons, a needle-full of silk or worsted of any particular colour. How many broken hearts she has restored with her inexhaustible glue-pot — mending tops, doll's broken legs, and all the luckless furniture of the baby-house — to say nothing of a similar ministry to the 'minds diseased' of the mammas. Sarah Lee's labours are not always in so humble a sphere — 'He who makes two blades of grass grow where one grew before,' says a political economist, 'is a benefactor to his race.' If so, Sarah Lee takes high rank.

"Two blades of grass! Her strawberry beds produce treble the quantity of any other in the village. Her potatoes are the 'greatest yield' — her corn the earliest — her peas the richest — her squashes the sweetest — her celery the tenderest — her raspberries and currants the greatest bearers in the country. There is not a thimble-full of unoccupied earth in her garden. There are flowers of all hues, seasons, and climes. None die — none languish in her hands.

"My dear Anne, I will not ask you if an existence so happy to herself, so profitable to others, should be dreaded by herself, neglected or derided by others. Yet Sarah Lee is an old maid."

"You are, I confess, very happy in your instances, Mrs. Seton, but remember the old proverb, 'one swallow does not make a summer.'"

"I have not done yet — and you must remember that in our country, where the means of supporting a family are so easily attained, and when there are no entails to be kept up at the expense of half a dozen single sisters, the class of old maids is a very small one. Many enter the ranks, but they drop off in the natural way of matrimony. Few maintain the 'perseverance of saints.' Among those few is one, who, when she resigns the slight covering that invests her spirit, will lay down 'all she has of humanity' — our excellent friend, Lucy Ray.

"She is now gently drawing to the close of a long life, which I believe she will offer up without spot or blemish. She began life with the most fragile constitution. She has had to contend with that nervous susceptibility of temperament that so naturally engenders selfishness and irascibility, and all the miseries and weaknesses of invalidism. Not gifted with any personal beauty, or grace, she was liable to envy her more fortunate cotemporaries. Without genius, talents, or accomplishments to attract or delight, she has often been slighted — and what is far worse, must have been always liable to the suspicion of slights. But suspicion, that creator and purveyor of misery, never darkened her serene mind. She has lived in others and for others, with such an entire forgetfulness of self that even the wants and weakness of her mortal part seem scarcely to have intruded on her thoughts. She has resided about in the families of her friends — a mode of life which certainly has a tendency

to nourish jealousy, servility, and gossiping. But for what could Lucy Ray be jealous or servile? She craved" nothing — she asked nothing, but, like an unseen, unmarked Providence, to do good ; and as to gossiping, she had no turn for the ridiculous, no belief of evil against any human being — and as to speaking evil, 'on her lips was the law of kindness.' You would hardly think, Anne, that a feeble, shrinking creature, such as I have described, and truly, Lucy Ray, could have been desired, as an inmate with gay young people, and noisy, turbulent children. She was always welcome, for, like her Divine Master, she came to minister — not to be ministered unto.

"Lucy, like the Man of Ross, is deemed passing rich by the children, and an unfailing resource to the poor in their exigencies, though her income amounts to rather less than one hundred dollars!!

"We sometimes admire the art of the Creator more in the exquisite mechanism of an insect than in the formation of a planet, and I have been more struck with the power of religion in the effect and exaltation it gave to the humble endowments of this meek woman, than by its splendid results in such a life as Howard's. Lucy Ray, by a faithful imitation of her master, by always aiding and never obstructing the principle of growth in her soul, has, through every discouragement and disability, reached a height but 'little lower than the angels;' and when her now flickering light disappears, she will be lamented almost as tenderly (alas! for that almost) as if she were a mother; and yet, Anne, Lucy Ray is an old maid."

"You half persuade me to be one too, Mrs. Seton."

"No, Anne, I would by no means persuade you or any woman to prefer single life. It is not the 'prim rose path.' Nothing less than a spirit of meekness, of self-renunciation, and of benevolence, can make a woman, who has once been first, happy in a subordinate and second best position. And this under ordinary circumstances is the highest place of a single woman. Depend upon it, my dear young friend, it is safer for most of us to secure all the helps to our virtues that attend a favourable position; besides, married life is the destiny Heaven has allotted to us, and therefore best fitted to awaken all our powers, to exercise all our virtues, and call forth all our sympathies. I would persuade you that you may give dignity and interest to single life, that you may be the cause of happiness to others, and of course happy yourself — for when was the fountain dry while the stream continued to flow? If single life, according to the worst view of it, is a moral desert, the faithful, in their passage through it, are refreshed with bread from Heaven and water from the rock.

"I shall conclude with a true story. The parties are not known to you. The incidents occurred long ago, and I shall take the liberty to assume names; for I would not, even at this late day, betray a secret once confided to me, though time may long since have outlawed it. My mother had a school-mate and friend whom I shall call Agnes Gray. Her father was a country clergyman with a small salary, and the blessing that usually attends it — a large family of children. Agnes was the eldest, and after her

following a line of boys, as long as Banquo's. At least, some ten years after Agnes, long waited and prayed for, appeared a girl, who cost her mother her life.

"The entire care of the helpless little creature devolved on Agnes. She had craved the happiness of possessing a sister, and now, to a sister's love, she added the tenderness of a mother. Agnes' character was formed by the discipline of circumstances — the surest of all discipline. A host of turbulent boys, thoughtless and impetuous, but kind-hearted, bright, and loving, had called forth her exertions and affections, and no one can doubt, either as lures or goads, had helped her on the road to heaven. Nature had, happily, endowed her with a robust constitution, and its usual accompaniment, a sweet temper; so that what were mountains to others, were mole hills to Agnes. 'The baby,' of course, was the pet lamb of the fold. She was named, for her mother, Elizabeth; but, instead of that queenly appellation, she was always addressed by the endearing diminutive of Lizzy. Lizzy Gray was not only the pet of father, brothers, and sister at home — but the plaything of the village. ..

"The old women knit their brightest yarn into tip pets and stockings for the 'minister's motherless little one' (oh, what an eloquent appeal was in those words!) the old men saved the 'red cheeked' apples for her — the boys drew her, hour after hour, in her little wagon, and the girls made her rag babies. Still she was not in any disagreeable sense an enfant gatee. She was like those flowers that thrive best in warm and continued sunshine. Her soft hazel eye, with its dark sentimental lashes, the clear brunette tint of her complexion, and her graceful flexible lips, truly expressed her tender, loving, and gentle spirit. She seemed formed to be sheltered and cherished — to love and be loved; and this destiny appeared to be secured to her by her devoted sister, who never counted any exertion or sacrifice that procured an advantage or pleasure for Lizzy. When Lizzy was about fourteen, a relative of the family, who kept a first rate boarding school in the city, offered to take her for two years, and give her all the advantages of her school, for the small consideration of fifty dollars per annum. Small as it was, it amounted to a tithe of the parson's income. It is well known, that, in certain parts of our country, everything (not always discreetly) is sacrificed to the hobby — education. Still the prudent father, who had already two sons at college, hesitated — did not consent till Agnes ascertained that by keeping a little school in the village she might obtain half the required sum. Her father, brothers, and friends all remonstrated. The toils of a school, in addition to the care and labour of her father's family, was, they urged, too much for her — but she laughed at them. 'What was labour to her if she could benefit Lizzy — dear Lizzy!' All ended, as might be expected, in Lizzy going to the grand boarding school. The parting was a great and trying event in the family. It was soon followed by a sadder. The father suddenly sickened and died — and nothing was left for his family hut his house and well kept little garden. What now was to be done?— - College and schools to be given up? — No such thing. In our country, if a youth is rich he ought to be educated; if he is poor he must be. The education is the capital whereby they are to live hereafter. It is obtained in that mysterious but unfailing way — 'by hook and by crook.'"

The elder Grays remained in college — Agnes enlarged her school — learned lessons in mathematics and Latin one day, and taught them the next ; took a poor, accomplished young lady from some broken down family in town into partnership, and received a few young misses as boarders into her family. Thus, she not only was able to pay ' dear Lizzy's' bills regularly, but to aid her younger brothers. Her energy and success set all her other attractions in a strong light, and she was admired and talked about, and became quite the queen of the village.

"I think it was about a year after her father's death, that a Mr. Henry Orne, a native of the village, who was engaged in a profitable business at the south, returned to pass some months at his early home. His frequent visits to the parsonage, and his attentions, on all occasions, to Agnes, soon became matter of very agreeable speculation to the gossips of the village. 'What a fine match he would be for Agnes! — such an engaging, well-informed young man, and so well off!' Agnes' heart was not steel; but though it had been exposed to many a flame she had kindled, in had never yet melted."

"Pardon me, Mrs. Seton, for interrupting you — was Agnes pretty?"

"Pretty? The word did not exactly suit her. At the time of which I am now speaking, she was at the mature age of five and twenty; which is called the perfection of womanhood. Prettiness is rather appropriate to the bud than the ripened fruit. Agnes, I have been told, had a fine person — symmetrical features, and so charming an expression that she was not far from beautiful, in the eyes of strangers, and quite a beauty to her friends and lovers. Whether it were beauty, manners, mind, or heart, I know not — one and all probably — but Henry Orne soon became her assiduous and professed admirer. Till now Agnes had lived satisfied and happy with subordinate affections. She had never seen anyone that she thought it possible she could love as well as she loved those to whom nature had allied her. But now the sun arose, and other lights became dim — not 'that she loved Caesar less, but she loved Rome more.' Their mutual faith was plighted, and both believed, as all real lovers do, that the world never contained so happy, so blessed a pair, as they were.

"Lizzy's second year at school was nearly ended, and one month after her return the marriage was to be solemnised. In the meantime Agnes was full of the cares of this world. The usual preparations for the greatest occasion in a woman's life are quite enough for any single pair of hands, but Agnes had to complete her school term, and the possibility of swerving from an engagement never occurred to her.

"Lizzy arrived, as lovely a creature as she had appeared in the dreams of her fond sister. In the freshness and untouched beauty of her young existence, just freed from the trammels of school, her round cheek glowing with health, and her heart overflowing with happiness. 'Here is my own dear Lizzy,' said Agnes, as she presented her to Henry Orne, 'and if you do not love me for anything else, you must for giving you such a sister.'

"Henry Orne looked at Lizzy and thought, and said, ' the duty would be a very easy one.' 'For the next month,' continued Agnes, 'I shall be incessantly occupied, and you must entertain one another. Henry has bought a nice little pony for me, Lizzy, and he shall teach you to ride, and you shall go over all his scrambling walks with him — to Sky-cliff, Rose- glen, and Beech-cove — the place he says nature made for lovers; but my poor lover has had to accommodate himself to my working day life and woo me in beaten paths.'

"The next month was the most joyous of Lizzy's life; every day was a festival. To the perfection of animal existence in the country, in the month of June, was added the keen sense of all that physical nature conveys to the susceptible mind.

"Wherever she was, her sweet voice was heard ringing in laughter, or swelling in music that seemed the voice of irrepressible joy — the spontaneous breathing of her soul. To the lover approaching his marriage day Time is apt to drag along with leaden foot, but to Henry Orne he seemed rather to fly with Mercury's wings at his heels; and when Agnes found herself compelled by the accumulation of her affairs, to defer her wedding for another month, he submitted with a better grace than could have been expected. Not many days of this second term had elapsed, when Agnes, amidst all her cares, as watchful of Lizzy as a mother of an only child, observed a change stealing over her. Her stock of spirits seemed suddenly expended, her colour faded — her motions were languid, and each successive day she became more and more dejected. 'She wants rest,' said Agnes to Henry Orne; she has been unnaturally excited, and there is now a reaction. She must remain quietly at home for a time, on the sofa, in a darkened room, and you, Henry, I am sure, will, for my sake, give up your riding and walking for a few days, and stay within doors, and play on your flute, and read to her.' Agnes' suggestions were promptly obeyed, but without the happy effect she anticipated. Lizzy, who had never before had a cloud on her brow, seemed to have passed under a total eclipse. She became each day more sad and nervous. A tender word from Agnes — a look, even, would make her burst into tears.

"I am miserable, Henry,' said Agnes, ' at this unaccountable change in Lizzy — the doctor says she is perfectly free from disease — perhaps we have made too sudden a transition from excessive exercise to none at all. The evening is dry and fine, I wish you would induce her to take a walk with you. She is distressed at my anxiety, and I cannot propose any thing that does not move her to tears.'

"It is very much the same with me,' replied Henry, sighing deeply, but if you wish it I will ask her.' He accordingly did so — she consented, and they went out together.

"Agnes retired to her own apartment, and there, throwing herself upon her knees, she entreated her Heavenly Father to withdraw this sudden infusion of bitterness from her brimming cup of happiness. 'Try me in any other way,' she cried, in the intensity of her feeling, and, for the first time in her life, forgetting that every

petition should be in the spirit of 'Thy will be done,' 'try me in any other way, but show me the means of restoring my sister — my child to health and happiness!'

"She returned again to her little parlour. Lizzy had not come in, and she sat down on the sofa near an open window, and resigned herself to musings, the occupation, if occupation it may be called, of the idle, but rarely, and never of late, of Agnes"

In a few moments Lizzy and Henry returned, and came into the porch, adjoining the parlour. They perceived the candles were not lighted, and concluding Agnes was not there, they sat down in the porch.'

"'Oh, I am too wretched!' said Lizzy. Her voice was low and broken, and she was evidently weeping. 'Is it possible,' thought Agnes, 'that she will express her feelings more freely to Henry than to me? I will listen. If she knows any cause for her dejection, I am sure I can remove it.'

"'Why, my beloved Lizzy,' replied Orne, in a scarcely audible voice, 'will you be so wretched — why will you make me so, and forever, when there is a remedy?'

"'Henry Orne!' she exclaimed, and there was resolution and indignation in her voice. 'If you name that to me again, I will never, so help me God, permit you to come into my presence without witnesses. No, there is no remedy, but in death. Would that it had come before you told me you loved me — before my lips confessed my sinful love for you — no, no — the secret shall be buried in my grave.;

"'Oh, Lizzy, you are mad — Agnes does not, cannot love as we do. Why sacrifice two to one? Let me, before it is too late, tell her the whole, and cast myself on her generosity.'

"'Never, never — I now wish, when I am in her presence, that the earth at her feet would swallow me up; and how can you, for a moment, think I will ask to be made happy — that I could be made happy, at her expense? No, I am willing to expiate with my life, my baseness to her — that I shall soon do so is my only comfort — and you will soon forget me — men can forget, they say —'

"'Never — on my knees, I swear never!' —

"'Stop, for mercy's sake, stop. You must not speak another such word to me — I will not hear it.' She rose to enter the house. Agnes slipped through a private passage to her own apartment.

"She heard Lizzy ascending the stairs. She heard Henry call after her, 'One word, Lizzy — for mercy's sake, one last word.' But Lizzy did not turn. Agnes heard her feebly drag herself into the little dressing-room adjoining their apartment, and after, there was no sound but the poor girl's suppressed, but still audible sobs.

"None but He who created the elements that compose the human heart, and who can penetrate its mysterious depths, can know which of the sisters was most wretched at that moment. To Agnes who had loved deeply, confidently without a shadow of fear or distrust, the reverse was total. To Lizzy who had enjoyed for a moment the bewildering fervours of a young love, only to feel its misery, that misery was embittered by a sense of wrong done to her sister. And yet it had not been a willing, but an involuntary and resisted, and most heartily repented wrong. She had recklessly rushed down a steep to a fearful precipice, and now felt that all access and passage to return was shut against her. Agnes without having had one dim fear — without any preparation, saw an abyss yawning at their feet — an abyss only to be closed by her self-immolation.

"She remained alone for many hours — she resolved — her spirit faltered — she re-resolved. She thought of all Lizzy had been to her, and of all she had been to Lizzy, and she wept as if her heart would break. She remembered the prayer that her impatient spirit had sent forth that evening. She prayed again, and a holy calm, never again to be disturbed, took possession of her soul.

"There is a power in goodness, pure self-renouncing goodness, that cannot be overcome, but overcometh all things.'

"Lizzy waited till all was quiet in her sister's room. She heard her get into bed, and then stole softly to her. Agnes, as she had done from Lizzy's infancy, opened her arms to receive her, and Lizzy pillowed her aching head on Agnes' bosom, softly breathing, — 'My sister — mother !'

"My own Lizzy — my child' answered Agnes. There was no tell-tale faltering of the voice. She felt a tear trickle from Lizzy's cold cheek on to her bosom, and not very long after both sisters were in a sleep that mortals might envy, and angels smile on.

"The rest you will anticipate, my dear Anne. The disclosure to the lovers of her discovery, was made by Agnes in the right way, and at the right time. Everything was done as it should be by this most admirable woman. She seemed, indeed, to feel as a guardian angel might, who, by some remission of his vigilance, had suffered the frail mortal in his care to be beguiled into evil. She never, by word, or even look, reproached Lizzy. She shielded her, as far as possible, from self-reproach, nor do I believe she ever felt more unmixed tenderness and love for her, than when, at the end of a few months, she saw her married to Henry Orne.

"My story has yet a sad supplement. Madame Cotin, I believe it is, advises a story teller to close the tale when he comes to a happy day; for, she says, it is not probable another will succeed it. Poor Lizzy had experience of this sad mutability of human life. Hers was chequered with many sorrows.

"Lapses from virtue at eight and twenty, and at six teen, afford very different indications of the character; you cannot expect much from a man, who, at eight and

twenty, acted the part of Henry Orne. He was unfaithful in engagements with persons less merciful than Agnes Gray. He became inconstant in his pursuits — self-indulgent, and idle, and finally intemperate, in his habits. His wife — as wives will — loved him to the end.

"Agnes retained her school, which had become in her hands a profitable establishment. There she laboured, year after year, with a courageous heart, and serene countenance, and devoted the fruit of all her toils to Lizzy, and to the education of her children.

"I am telling no fiction, and I see you believe me, for the tears are trembling in your eyes — do not repress them, but permit them to embalm the memory of an old maid."

Sedgwick's Notes

* "Thus passed her life, enjoying, from all who approached her, an affection enhanced by reverence, insomuch that when her friends sorrowed for her death, which arrived at a late period of her existence, they were comforted by the fond reflection, that the humanity which she then laid down, was the only circumstance which had placed her, in the words of scripture, ' A little lower than the angels.'"