

Nine Years Since

By Miss Catharine M. Sedgwick.

Joy's opening buds, affection's glowing flowers
Once lightly sprang within her beaming track.
Oh life was beautiful in those lost hours.

MRS. FRANCIS KERMIT was loitering over her breakfast table—her young people dropping in one after another to take their morning meal—(my friend Mrs. Kermit's *ménage* leans to rather too wide an indulgence;) last came Morgan Kermit, who was at home during a vacation in the Cambridge law-school, and his friend Charles Boyne, then his guest.

The young people were in the midst of a discussion of the opera which had enchanted them on the preceding evening, when the bell rang, and the servant announced “Miss Adelaide Rutherford.”

“Ask her to come down into the breakfast room, John,” said Mrs. Kermit.

“Oh, mamma, don't,” uttered two young remonstrants of fifteen and seventeen. ‘Mamma,’ whose instinct it is to give a guest her best welcome, motioned to the servant to obey her order, and said, “The fire is not yet made in the drawing-room, Lizzie, and I really do not see why you should not all be pleased to see Miss Adelaide here.”

“Miss Adelaide! the very sound is enough,” said one of the girls, and in reply to Charles Boyne's inquiry, “Is Miss Adelaide an ogress?” Ruth replied, shrugging her shoulders, “No, but an old maid, which is next door to it, you know.”

“Pardon me,” replied Charles Boyne, with something like a shade of disapprobation passing over his charming countenance; “I know no such thing; my dearest friend belongs to the category of old maids, so called, and for her sake, I rather dislike to hear that term of contempt used.”

The young ladies were, in sailor phrase, rather ‘taken aback’ by this sentiment from their favorite cavalier, and it evidently placed Miss Rutherford in a new light, for when she entered, Caroline thought she had a high bred air which she had never before observed; Lizzie was struck with the remarkable sweetness of her voice, and my young favorite Ruth Kermit—a noble creature is Ruth, but with the presumption and confidence too apt to mark our girls of fifteen—even Ruth, to whom it had not before occurred that beauty could outlive two or three and twenty, thought Miss Rutherford must have been handsome.

Miss Rutherford had come on some errand quickly done, and with a painful consciousness that the young people were constrained by her presence, she soon took her

leave. Morgan Kermit, with a characteristic politeness, which gives me the agreeable assurance that the heart of courtesy has not passed away with the generation that is gone, attended Miss Adelaide to the door, and re-entered, saying, "Is this the lady, Ruth, that you say is next door to an ogress? I should like to see the young lady who promises to be as lovely at thirty as Miss Rutherford."

"Thirty!" exclaimed Ruth.

"Not more than thirty, I imagine," said Morgan; "is she, mother?"

"Yes, thirty-three or four—let me see—yes, thirty-three. She was just twenty-four nine years ago."

"Thirty-three! Pretty old, mother."

"That depends upon the point of sight, Caroline. To me, at forty-five, thirty-three appears quite young."

"Oh, yes, mother," exclaimed Ruth; "forty-five is young enough for you—I never think of your being old—but it is quite a different thing for an unmarried person. Now there is your old schoolmate—I suppose Miss Eleanor is not older than you are, but she seems to me as old as the hills. I call a woman of four or five and twenty, that is not married, an old maid!"

"How old are you, Caroline?"

"Twenty-two, mother."

"Then in two years, my dear, you may sit yourself down in that limbo of desolation that old maids inhabit, according to your sister Ruth." All eyes turned to Caroline's brilliant face—to her lips still bright with the freshest dew of youth—and all laughed at the ridiculous picture suggested.

"I am glad to see even a soupcon of a blush on your cheek, Ruth," said her brother. "There is a saying that hawks won't pick out hawks' een."

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I do not think women verify it. They use that term of reproach, 'old maids,' for so it is in their estimation, very freely; one would think it were more natural to hedge about the unfortunate of their own sex (if it be a misfortune) with reverence."

"Well, Morgan!" exclaimed Ruth.

"Well, Ruth, what surprises you?"

"Why, Morgan, you talk like an old man that has half a dozen old maid daughters."

"On the contrary, I mean to talk like a young man who has half a dozen young maid sisters, perchance, may be" –

"Not old maid sisters—no, no, Morgan."

“No, indeed, never!” seconded Ruth; and she whispered something to Caroline, hinting that her eldest sister, at least, was sure of escaping that destiny.

“Supposing,” continued Morgan__

“No, Morgan,” said Ruth, “don’t make any such supposition.”

“Please hear me out, Ruth; I have great hopes, if my mother comes to my aid—my mother and you Charles—that I shall root this vulgarity out of my family.”

“Oh, Mr. Boyne, is not Morgan too bad?”

“In his mode of expression, yes, Miss Ruth, but I agree with him in sentiment.”

“And I have great hopes that you will be converted, now,” said Mrs. Kermit, “that these two gallant champions have come forth in the cause of your elder sisters”—

“Oh, mamma, how can you call them our sisters—all the Miss Pattys, and Miss Judys, the Beckey do-goods, and Beckey do-nothings in the world—but go on, Morgan; mount your Rosinante, Mr. Boyne, and do better for—what did Mr. Boyne call them? Oh, the category!”

“I shall do no battle, Ruth,” replied her brother, “but marshal my forces after a good precedent, and set them in the front rank, while I, their humble auxiliary, stand behind them, sure you will not strike me through them. To begin then, there is Miss Sara Alston, sailing somewhere on what you would call the dead sea, between thirty and forty.”

“Mercy! Cousin Sara! I don’t call her an old maid.”

“No,” interrupted Mrs. Kermit; “but any impertinent young woman of fifteen, who had not the happiness to be Miss Alston’s cousin, would infallibly call her so. Go on, my son.”

“Miss Sara,” resumed Morgan, “(a very old maidish sound, Ruth!) cousin Sara I must call her, for thus she stands from the days of our childhood printed on my heart. Who is more beloved than our cousin Sara? The light of her own household, whence so many lights have been removed—like an oriental lamp, diffusing sweet odors as well as light. Is cousin Sara a gossip? She is profoundly ignorant of all her neighbors’ doings, except their good deeds. Is she exacting? She claims nothing but the privilege of doing self-sacrificing kindnesses, and rejecting all praise or notice for them. She makes no pretensions to accomplishments, but if any one needs an accurate and beautiful drawing, she produces it. She does not verge on blue-stockingsism—but if an elegant and accurate translation is wanted by a friend to be incorporated in his article, cousin Sara does the work, and when it is printed, not even a dim smile betrays her right to the praise. As to the sweet charities of life, there is not an humble person within her reach that does not feel happier and safer for being near her. She works, like all the gentler heavenly influences, without noise. See what a bed of roses, and sweet of all kinds she has made of the old garden. Cousin Sara might not produce an effect in a town drawing-room; though to me, the health lighting her clear eye and blooming on her cheek, and the quiet elegance of her dress and manner, are far more attractive than the glare of your so-called belles, Lizzie.”

“Come, Morgan,” said Ruth, “you have said quite enough about cousin Sara, though I do love her dearly, and never even thought of her being an old maid; but then she lives in the country, you know, where it does not signify what you are; I don’t think I should like to be cousin Sara in a party.”

“Perhaps not—for a party, you would prefer the gas-lights and suffocating heat to the pure outward air of a star-lit evening.”

Charles Boyne, either thinking Ruth was ‘cornered,’ or from an impulse of chivalry, came to her aid. “Morgan has made out one fair case, Miss Ruth,” he said; “but we all know that ‘one swallow don’t make a summer.’”

“Please, Mr. Charles Boyne,” resumed Morgan, “repeat what you said to me last evening of Miss Seaman, another old maid—verbatim, Charles.” Charles smiled, but remained silent. “Allow me then, young ladies, to quote my friend; he had been talking for half an hour with Miss Seaman, when I told him I would introduce him to the beautiful Miss Rolson for the next polka. He declined, and I afterward asked him how he could lose such a chance; he replied that he could dance the polka with beautiful young ladies any evening, but it was a rare chance to hear so charming a talker as Miss Seaman. So you see, my sweet sisters, that young beauties don’t always carry the day against old maids. Even you, Ruth, will allow that poor Miss Seaman must be called an old maid.”

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“Oh, but, Morgan, when one gets as old as Miss Seaman one does not think whether she is a miss or mistress.”

“Besides, Morgan,” interrupted Caroline, “I should like to know where there is another miss or mistress like Miss Seaman? She has been everywhere; she knows everybody. If you are inclined to sadness, she is as consoling as the old prophets; and if you would be merry, she has a million merry stories to feed your humor; if you are dull, she can entertain you with the essence of the best French novel, or tell you anecdotes of the French courts. She knows Madame de Sevigné and Horace Walpole by heart, and can repeat half the old English poetry. One must live a long life-time to have such stories. It is not fair to put such a woman as Miss Seaman against us.”

“It is not, Caroline,” said her mother; “but I think you would have found her quite too powerful a rival at any other period of her life. She began with gifts, with a command of language, not a pomp of words, but always the best word rightly fitted in; fluency without loquacity, and grace without mannerism, and above all, with that almost divine instinct called tact, which taught her how and when to use her several gifts. I remember when we were young, some of us were beauties, some fortunes, &c. Anna Seaman, without fortune or beauty, almost the plainest woman among us, attracted all the charming, clever young men.”

“But had she lovers, mamma?” inquired Miss Ruth, who evidently thought life was not life without them.

“Lovers were not quite in her line, Miss Ruth; but if you mean opportunities of being married, she was not a person to proclaim them in the marketplace; but I doubt not she had them, for as you all know, Anna Seaman has a thousand loveable qualities.”

“Oh, yes, mamma, qualities that are charming in an old lady—but—“

“But love, I suppose, is quite independent of generosity, magnanimity, prompt kindness, social cheerfulness and the rarest, domestic efficiency—qualities that bind you all to Ann Seaman more than her genius.”

“Well, mamma, we give up Miss Anna; but it takes even more than ‘*two* swallows to make a Summer.’”

“Yes, my dear,” retorted Morgan; “and so we will have a flock of them, Miss Wilson!”

“Oh, Miss Wilson!” said Caroline; “that is not fair; she has a home of her own, and no one thinks of her being an old maid.”

“But she is nevertheless forty years old, and single. No lord to her household, no children, those birds of paradise, to embellish it.”

“No lord to her household!” exclaimed Lizzie. “To be sure she has no husband to lord it over her; but there is no house you young men like so well as Miss Wilson’s—”

“And—therefore, you young ladies like it?”

“For shame, Morgan—no, we like to go and see Miss Wilson for her own sake, she is so kind and agreeable, and as to the children, I am sure her sisters’ hundred children love her quite as well as they do their mothers.”

“Then I may count Miss Wilson as a third swallow, may I not?”

“Yes.”

“And her sister Esther, still very pretty and attractive, and with wit as keen and as polished as that of Beatrice?”

“Yes, yes, you may count Esther Wilson, though I think she is a little—acid, now and then.”

“Acid! Esther Wilson acid? I deny it; but if she were, are not those married dames, Mrs. Jones and Mrs. Ledson, vinegar and lemon-juice?”

“You must not forget,” said Charles Boyne, “our friend Emma Smith, a sort of Atlas in her family, holding its whole world on her head.”

“Oh, no,” replied Morgan, “I do not forget her; but I confine myself to my sisters’ own circle of friends—I am talking for their conversion. There are Susan Goddard and Emily Wheaton—a rest to the weary and sick—a balm in life, coming into the sick chamber like the light, pleasant to behold. And Mary Lewis, picking up the stitches that everybody else has dropped—doing neglected, omitted or forgotten duties for all her married friends.”

“Your *flock* is large enough to migrate, Morgan,” said Caroline; “you may stop there—you have not been to the law school in vain. You have made out a fair case with

your 'modern' instances. Even Ruth, a few years hence, may look forward to the possibility of being one on the list of your old maids, without dismay."

"Provided I am not called one."

"It is the vulgar name," said Mrs. Kermit, "with its old associations, Ruth, that your brother is contending against. There are women, I allow, who, partly owing to beginning with your ideas of an old maid, and remaining single, make the character true to its ideal. They are selfishly neat, prudish, sordid, mean, and of course, repulsive; but I have seen such married women—or they are gossiping, garrulous, flippant and ridiculous."

"I think you might name some of your married friends that are all that, too, mother," said Morgan.

"Certainly I could; but some of their qualities or all of them have been given by the male satirists to the ideal old maid. She has been set up in novels, comedies and farces, as a

sort of target in which to fix the arrows of ridicule. Married wo-

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men have joined in this cruel sport, and the world have been amused by it. So that a woman who courageously remains single rather than marry a man she does not love has not only to endure all the trials inseparable from the condition, but she must bear, even from her own sex, reproach and contumely. She may have been once disappointed and never trusted again. She may have nobly sacrificed the happiest destiny of woman to opposing circumstances; she may, when life was at its fairest, when promise was so near to fulfillment that no thought of failure could intervene, have lost all, and a little after, perhaps not more than *nine years*, a new generation has sprung up, and some flippant girl will say of her, she is an old maid, next door to an ogress, you know!"

"Oh, dear, mamma! That is not fair," said Ruth; "I spoke quite thoughtlessly."

"And it is to prevent your speaking thoughtlessly in future, Ruth," said her brother, "that my mother and I are crusading."

"And I am sure," resumed Ruth, "I knew nothing of Miss Rutherford's history. I did not know she had one. I never saw her till last week."

"If you had then thought an 'old maid' worth considering, Ruth," said her mother, "you might have inferred a history from Miss Rutherford's sunken, melancholy eye, that for years wept, and did nothing but weep—from that marble paleness that has scarcely varied for the last nine years."

"*Nine years*, mamma! There is something awful in that sound. Do tell us Miss Rutherford's story."

"Not now. If you can be curious to hear the story of an 'old maid,' I will tell it this evening; now the family machine must be wound up; John is waiting for orders for market; there are notes to be answered, accounts to be settled, &c., &c."

Late in the evening, when all the family were gathered in, Ruth sat down on a footstool beside her mother, and said, "Mamma, my sisters and I have made up our minds either never to say 'old maid' again, or to pronounce the words with delicate reverence; and father, I am not sure but we shall devote ourselves to the excellent calling—except Caroline. Now are we worthy to hear Miss Rutherford's story?"

"Scarcely, you saucy child; but as Mr. Boyne and Morgan are, I shall tell it. It will not keep you long."

"Adelaide Rutherford was born on her father's plantation, Bellefield, in South Carolina. Her mother was a Scotch woman and a beauty who, when not more than seventeen, was sent to Charleston as a governess. Mr. Rutherford fell in love with her, and overlooking her want of fortune and a vocation rather looked down upon, he married her. I believe he never forgave himself this imprudence, for fortune, and what he proudly called family, were his *sine qua non* in the marriage of his children. He had one daughter then; after an interval of several years, Adelaide was born and two younger brothers. Adelaide was the pet and plaything of her sister. This sister married when Adelaide was four years old, and removed to Georgia, where, left alone on a plantation by the rich husband her father had selected for her, she wore through a few miserable years and died. Adelaide was educated by her mother, and accomplished and thoroughly instructed as few women are. She appeared at eighteen in Charleston, the star of the Winter. That she had so little apparent pleasure in the admiration she excited, that she refused half a dozen offers, and one very brilliant one, was the wonder of her acquaintance, and the cause of serious and trying displeasure from her father, who was continually reproaching her with being spoiled by her mother's 'notions,' which he stigmatized with words not repeatable.

"Why Adelaide was made happy by her return to Bellefield, why she, a girl of eighteen, was indifferent to admiration and deaf to lovers' vows, was a riddle soon solved by her mother, by certain infallible signs that are revelations to a woman's eye. At Bellefield, she again joined her brothers in their studies—she rode with them, walked with them, went with them on their sailing parties, and with a feminine delicacy of habit nurtured by southern education, had no dread or perception of discomfort or peril of any sort."

"I guess there was somebody of the company beside the rampaging brothers," suggested Ruth.

"Yes, Ruth, there was a tutor of the brothers, a graduate of Harvard and of the law-school, a Mr. Francis Izbel, who had overworked himself in his preparation for life, and was sent to the South by his physician to repair the waste by a year or two's residence there. Like most of our young men, he had his living to get, and he thought himself fortunate in obtaining a place in Mr. Rutherford's family as tutor to his boys, and a sufficient salary. I have seen him but once. He dined with us on his way to the South. He was a man, even once seen not to be forgotten; highly cultivated, with charming manners, erect, well-formed, and no alarming indication of ill health."

"Oh, Mamma," said Caroline, "I am sure I remember him; was there not a German gentleman dining with us the same day, who could not speak a word of English, and did not Mr. Izbel interpret for him?"

“Yes; but it is strange you remember it; it must have been sixteen years ago.”

“I was six years old. I do remember it. I remember his cutting some funny little figures in orange-peel for me.”

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“Quite characteristic, I should think, for it seems he had the art of winning all hearts—excepting poor Adelaide’s father’s. The young people, continually thrown together, soon came to a mutual understanding, and were perfectly happy, till Adelaide, who at once made her mother her confidant, was alarmed by her mother’s firm conviction that her father’s consent could never be obtained. ‘But why,’ urged Adelaide; ‘it is true that Frank Izbel is not rich, neither am I—but he has a profession, and talents, and industry, and hope, and now he has health, and his family are people in good condition; what can my father ask more, when he knows that I love Frank and can love none other?’

“‘Frank is a teacher.’

“‘Your father forgot that for a few short months.’ Mrs. Rutherford blushed painfully as she added, ‘he has remembered it ever since.’

“‘Oh, but, mamma, that’s an old-fashioned prejudice; kings have been teachers in these days – Louis Philippe for instance—papa will get over that, I am sure. Can he have any other objection?’

“‘Frank is a northern man.’

“‘Papa will forgive him that, I am sure he will.’

“‘I am as sure he will not, my dear child; but we must try our best by patience and prudence to compass our end; in all events, my child, you have my entire sympathy; you may hope for God’s blessing on an affection so well-founded—matrimony on any other ground is but a blight and misery.’ Her mother said this with an emphasis that pierced Adelaide’s heart.

”But I must not dwell on particulars—I know the story almost as if I had lived among them, from reading a journal kept jointly by the mother and daughter.

“Mr. Rutherford, as his wife foresaw put his veto on the engagement, and Francis Izbel withdrew from the family, but not till he and Adelaide had exchanged vows of eternal fidelity. High principled, truth itself, she communicated to her father her solemn engagement to her lover, and when his wrath had subsided, she told him she should remain in patient submission to his authority till she was twenty-one, and then she should consider herself equally bound to another duty. Three years passed—she was twenty-one and free. But circumstances had changed. Mr. Rutherford long before this had so involved his fortune by extravagance and gambling, that his estates and slaves were first mortgaged and then sold, and at the expiration of the three years, he was penniless, crippled by gout and paralysis, and he and his sons were dependent on the income of a school established by his accomplished wife and daughter in Charleston. Poor old Mr.

Rutherford! He had just sense and conscience enough left to abjure his old ideas of the vocation of a teacher.

Three more years passed; Adelaide would not leave her mother to struggle alone. Francis Izbel, who was making rapid headway in his profession, waited with what patience he could; at the end of this three years he would wait no longer, and it was settled that as Adelaide's brothers were entering on the business of life, the family should be transferred to the North, and Adelaide's parents should be members of her household.

"This was a period of strangely accumulating events in the Rutherford family. The father died suddenly, and his widow, by the death of a relative in Scotland, became heiress to a considerable property.

"Frank Izbel had gone to Charleston to superintend the removal. The marriage was to have taken place there, but it was delayed till their arrival in New York, in consequence of the father's death. Some delay was occasioned by Adelaide's resolve to redeem, bring to the North, and, of course, set free, a slave who had been mortgaged and sold with her father's property. With this servant, one of her brothers, her mother and her lover, she embarked about the middle of June, in '38, on board the Pulaski."

"The Pulaski! Mother!" exclaimed Caroline. The rest of her auditors had no association with Pulaski, and Mrs. Kermit proceeded. "Never was Adelaide, at any period of her life, more attractive or so worthy of all admiration and love as now. Time had but matured the beauty of her dawn. The widened horizon of her knowledge was reflected in the expressive intelligence of her countenance. The angels of Hope and Memory shed their light there. Years of sweet patience, of cheerful resolution and self-sacrifice tell their beautiful history on the face. Adelaide's last record in her journal before embarking was, 'I am too happy; the past, the present and the future are full of happiness to me!'

"I think it was the second night of the Pulaski's voyage when, owing to gross mismanagement, the boiler burst. The ladies had retired to their berths; Frank Izbel and Adelaide's brother were sitting on the deck, and were uninjured. Izbel immediately rushed to the ladies' cabin. Adelaide and her mother occupied one state-room. He bade them come with him, and without speaking they followed him to the bow of the boat, where he believed they should have the best chance of escape—at least, they should be together there and share the same fate. There he had told Adelaide's brother to await him, but what he did or how he was lost, no one knew—nothing was known of him after Izbel parted from him. He was Adelaide's youngest brother and dearly beloved by her. As soon as they reached the bow of the boat,

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Adelaide exclaimed, 'Oh, my God! I have forgotten Lilly!' Lilly was the woman who had been her slave and the nurse of her childhood. She was now her freed-woman and devoted servant. She had sat by Adelaide, who had complained of pain her head that evening, and bathed her temples till she had herself fallen asleep.

“ ‘I will return for her—she shall share with us,’ said Izbel, and before Adelaide could speak he disappeared.

On minute after the boat broke up, the bow and stern were separated, and when Adelaide next saw Izbel, he stood with more than fifty others, nearly all women and children, on that part of the stern still floating. It was a moon-lit night, and she clearly distinguished him from the others; Lilly was kneeling beside him with her arms stretched out and her hands clasped. He stood immovable, with his face turned toward the bow of the boat. It was a scene not to be described and never to be forgotten. Husbands were on one portion of the wreck, wives on another; fathers parted from their children, brothers from their sisters—all facing death. This was endured for one whole hour—an hour—it seemed eternity; then the stern sank amidst shrieks, and groans and prayers; some were kneeling; children were clinging to their mothers; sisters clasped together—and so they vanished forever from sight.

“Adelaide and her mother were left with those on the bow; poor Adelaide was nearly unconscious of all that passed for the next three days. I think there were some twenty with them. They lightened the wreck by throwing overboard every thing they could part with, erected what I think is called a juremast and hoisted a sail. A rain storm came on, and a strong easterly wind, and for three days they were blown along the coast—they were then picked up by a schooner and carried into Wilmington, North Carolina, nearly famished and quite exhausted.

“Adelaide has since told me that her mental agony made her unconscious of physical suffering. She remained for weeks and months in a state approaching mental alienation. She was roused from this by a severe illness of her mother. Poor Mrs. Rutherford, either from having less vigor than Adelaide, or less heart-agony, had suffered more in her health, and her anxiety for Adelaide had worn out the little strength she had left. Adelaide’s filial piety again called forth her energies, and for the last nine years she has watched and tended her invalid mother, and devoted herself soul and body to works of Christian love. The paleness stricken on her cheek on that awful night has never varied, nor has her eye ever been relit with its former animation—but there are deep in her heart faith and resignation, and she lives patiently the life—of an old maid!”

“Of a saint, mother,” said Caroline.

“Indeed, a saint!” exclaimed my young friend Ruth, her fine eyes swimming in tears,” and the next time I see her, I shall down on my knees and say “Sweet saint, in thy orisons be all my sins remembered, especially that atrocious one against thee!””