

# The Old Folks' Party

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*Freeditorial* 

## THE OLD FOLK'S PARTY

1898

"And now what shall we do next Wednesday evening?" said Jessie Hyde, in a business-like tone. "It is your turn, Henry, to suggest."

Jessie was a practical, energetic young lady, whose blue eyes never relapsed into the dreaminess to which that color is subject. She furnished the "go" for the club. Especially she furnished the "go" for Henry Long, who had lots of ideas, but without her to stir him up was as dull as a flint without a steel.

There were six in the club, and all were present to-night in Jessie's parlor. The evening had been given to a little music, a little dancing, a little card-playing, and a good deal of talking. It was near the hour set by the club rule for the adjournment of its reunions, and the party had drawn their chairs together to consult upon the weekly recurring question, what should be done at the next meeting by way of special order of amusement. The programmes were alternately reading, singing, dancing, whist; varied with evenings of miscellaneous sociality like that which had just passed. The members took

turns in suggesting recreations. To-night it was Henry Long's turn, and to him accordingly the eyes of the group turned at Jessie's question.

"Let's have an old folks' party," was his answer.

Considering that all of the club were yet at ages when they celebrated their birthdays with the figure printed on the cake, the suggestion seemed sufficiently irrelevant.

"In that case," said Frank Hays, "we shall have to stay at home."

Frank was an alert little fellow, with a jaunty air, to whom, by tacit consent, all the openings for jokes were left, as he had a taste that way.

"What do you mean, Henry?" inquired George Townsley, a thick-set, sedate young man, with an intelligent, but rather phlegmatic look.

"My idea is this," said Henry, leaning back in his chair, with his hands clasped behind his head, and his long legs crossed before him. "Let us dress up to resemble what we expect to look like fifty years hence, and study up our demeanor to correspond with what we expect to be and feel like at that time, and just call on Mary next Wednesday evening to talk over old times, and recall what we can, if anything, of our vanished youth, and the days when we belonged to the social club at C———."

The others seemed rather puzzled in spite of the explanation. Jessie sat looking at Henry in a brown study as she traced out his meaning.

"You mean a sort of ghost party," said she finally; "ghosts of the future, instead of ghosts of the past."

"That's it exactly," answered he. "Ghosts of the future are the only sort worth heeding. Apparitions of things past are a very unpractical sort of demonology, in my opinion, compared with apparitions of things to come."

"How in the world did such an odd idea come into your head?" asked pretty Nellie Tyrrell, whose dancing black eyes were the most piquant of interrogation points, with which it was so delightful to be punctured that people were generally slow to gratify her curiosity.

"I was beginning a journal this afternoon," said Henry, "and the idea of Henry Long, aetat. seventy, looking over the leaves, and wondering about the youth who wrote them so long ago, came up to my mind."

Henry's suggestion had set them all thinking, and the vein was so unfamiliar that they did not at once find much to say.

"I should think," finally remarked George, "that such an old folks' party would afford a chance for some pretty careful study, and some rather good acting."

"Fifty years will make us all not far from seventy. What shall we look like then, I wonder?" musingly asked Mary Fellows.

She was the demurest, dreamiest of the three girls; the most of a woman, and the least of a talker. She had that poise and repose of manner which are necessary to make silence in company graceful.

"We may be sure of one thing, anyhow, and that is, that we shall not look and feel at all as we do now," said Frank. "I suppose," he added, "if, by a gift of second sight, we could see tonight, as in a glass, what we shall be at seventy, we should entirely fail to recognize ourselves, and should fall to disputing which was which."

"Yes, and we shall doubtless have changed as much in disposition as in appearance," added Henry. "Now, for one, I 've no idea what sort of a fellow my old man will turn out. I don't believe people can generally tell much better what sort of old people will grow out of them than what characters their children will have. A little better, perhaps, but not much. Just think how different sets of faculties and tastes develop and decay, come into prominence and retire into the background, as the years pass. A trait scarcely noticeable in youth tinges the whole man in age."

"What striking dramatic effects are lost because the drama of life is spun out so long instead of having the ends brought together," observed George. "The spectators lose the force of the contrasts because they forget the first part of every rôle before the latter part is reached. One fails in consequence to get a realizing sense of the sublime inconsistencies of every lifetime."

"That difficulty is what we propose, in a small way, to remedy next Wednesday night," replied Henry.

Mary professed some scruples. It was so queer, she thought it must be wrong. It was like tempting Providence to take for granted issues in his hands, and masquerade with uncreated things like their own yet unborn selves. But Frank reminded her that the same objection would apply to any arrangement as to what they should do next week.

"Well, but," offered Jessie, "is it quite respectful to make sport of old folks, even if they are ourselves?"

"My conscience is clear on that point," said Frank. "It's the only way we can get even with them for the deprecating, contemptuous way in which they will allude to us over their snuff and tea, as callow and flighty youth, if indeed they deign to remember us at all, which is n't likely."

"I 'm all tangled up in my mind," said Nellie, with an air of perplexity, "between these old people you are talking about and ourselves. Which is which? It seems odd to talk of them in the third person, and of ourselves in the first. Are n't they ourselves too?"

"If they are, then certainly we are not," replied Henry. "You may take your

choice.

"The fact is," he added, as she looked still more puzzled, "there are half-a dozen of each one of us, or a dozen if you please, one in fact for each epoch of life, and each slightly or almost wholly different from the others. Each one of these epochs is foreign and inconceivable to the others, as ourselves at seventy now are to us. It's as hard to suppose ourselves old as to imagine swapping identities with another. And when we get old it will be just as hard to realize that we were ever young. So that the different periods of life are to all intents and purposes different persons, and the first person of grammar ought to be used only with the present tense. What we were, or shall be, or do, belongs strictly to the third person."

"You would make sad work of grammar with that notion," said Jessie, smiling.

"Grammar needs mending just there," replied Henry. "The three persons of grammar are really not enough. A fourth is needed to distinguish the ego of the past and future from the present ego, which is the only true one."

"Oh, you're getting altogether too deep for me," said Jessie. "Come, girls, what in the world are we going to get to wear next Wednesday?"

"Sure enough!" cried they with one accord, while the musing look in their eyes gave place to a vivacious and merry expression.

"My mother is n't near as old as we 're going to be. Her things won't do," said Nellie.

"Nor mine," echoed Jessie; "but perhaps Mary's grandmother will let us have some of her things."

"In that case," suggested Frank, "it will be only civil to invite her to the party."

"To be sure, why not?" agreed Jessie. "It is to be an 'old folks' party, and her presence will give a reality to the thing."

"I don't believe she 'll come," said George. "You see being old is dead earnest to her, and she won't see the joke."

But Mary said she would ask her anyway, and so that was settled.

"My father is much too large in the waist for his clothes to be of any service to me," said George lugubriously.

But Frank reminded him that this was a hint as to his get-up, and that he must stuff with pillows that the proverb might be fulfilled, "Like father like son."

And then they were rather taken aback by Henry's obvious suggestion that there was no telling what the fashion in dress would be in a. d. 1925, "even if," he added, "the scientists leave us any A. D. by that time," though Frank remarked here that a. d. would answer just as well as Anno Darwinis, if worst came to worst. But it was decided that there was no use trying after

prophetical accuracy in dress, since it was out of the question, and even if attainable would not suggest age to their own minds as would the elderly weeds which they were accustomed to see.

"It's rather odd, is n't it," said Jessie gravely, "that it did n't occur to anybody that in all probability not over one or two of us at most will be alive fifty years hence."

"Let's draw lots for the two victims, and the rest of us will appear as ghosts," suggested Frank grimly.

"Poor two," sighed Nellie. "I 'm sorry for them. How lonely they will be. I'm glad I have n't got a very good constitution."

But Henry remarked that Jessie might have gone further and said just as truly that none of them would survive fifty years, or even ten.

"We may, some of us, escape the pang of dying as long as that," said he, "but that is but a trifle, and not a necessary incident of death. The essence of mortality is change, and we shall be changed. Ten years will see us very different persons. What though an old dotard calling himself Henry Long is stumping around fifty years hence, what is that to me? I shall have been dead a half century by that time."

"The old gentleman you speak so lightly of will probably think more tenderly of you than you do of him," said Jessie.

"I don't believe it," answered Henry. "In fact, if we were entirely true to nature next Wednesday, it would spoil the fun, for we probably should not, if actually of the age we pretend, think of our youth once a year, much less meet to talk it over."

"Oh, I don't think so," protested Nellie. "I 'm sure all the story-books and poetry say that old folks are much given to reviewing their youth in a pensive, regretful sort of way."

"That's all very pretty, but it 's all gammon in my opinion," responded Henry. "The poets are young people who know nothing of how old folks feel, and argue only from their theory of the romantic fitness of things. I believe that reminiscence takes up a very small part of old persons' time. It would furnish them little excitement, for they have lost the feelings by which their memories would have to be interpreted to become vivid. Remembering is dull business at best. I notice that most persons, even of eventful lives, prefer a good novel to the pleasures of recollection. It is really easier to sympathize with the people in a novel or drama than with our past selves. We lose a great source of recreation just because we can't recall the past more vividly."

"How shockingly Henry contradicts to-night," was the only reply Nellie deigned to this long speech.

"What shall we call each other next Wednesday?" asked Mary. "By our first names, as now?"

"Not if we are going to be prophetically accurate," said Henry. "Fifty years hence, in all probability, we shall, most of us, have altogether forgotten our present intimacies and formed others, quite inconceivable now. I can imagine Frank over there, scratching his bald head with his spectacle tips, and trying to recall me. 'Hen. Long, Hen. Long,—let me think; name sounds familiar, and yet I can't quite place him. Did n't I know him at C——, or was it at college? Bless me, how forgetful I 'm growing!'"

They all laughed at Henry's bit of acting. Perhaps it was only sparkles of mirth, but it might have been glances of tender confidence that shot between certain pairs of eyes betokening something that feared not time. This is in no sort a love story, but such things can't be wholly prevented.

The girls, however, protested that this talk about growing so utterly away from each other was too dismal for anything, and they would n't believe it anyhow. The old-fashioned notions about eternal constancy were ever so much nicer. It gave them the cold shivers to hear Henry's ante-mortem dissection of their friendship, and that young man was finally forced to admit that the members of the club would probably prove exceptions to the general rule in such matters. It was agreed, therefore, that they should appear to know each other at the old folks' party.

"All you girls must, of course, be called 'Mrs.' instead of 'Miss,'" suggested Frank, "though you will have to keep your own names, that is, unless you prefer to disclose any designs you may have upon other people's; "for which piece of impertinence Nellie, who sat next him, boxed his ears,—for the reader must know that these young people were on a footing of entire familiarity and long intimacy.

"Do you know what time it is?" asked Mary, who, by virtue of the sweet sedateness of her disposition, was rather the monitress of the company.

"It's twelve o'clock, an hour after the club's curfew."

"Well," remarked Henry, rousing from the fit of abstraction in which he had been pursuing the subject of their previous discussion, "it was to be expected we should get a little mixed as to chronology over such talk as this."

"With our watches set fifty years ahead, there 'll be no danger of overstaying our time next Wednesday, anyhow," added Frank.

Soon the girls presented themselves in readiness for outdoors, and, in a pleasant gust of good-bys and parting jests, the party broke up.

"Good-by for fifty years," Jessie called after them from the stoop, as the merry couples walked away in the moonlight.

The following week was one of numerous consultations among the girls. Grandmother Fellows's wardrobe was pretty thoroughly rummaged under that good-natured old lady's superintendence, and many were the queer effects of old garments upon young figures which surprised the steady-going mirror in her quiet chamber.

"I 'm afraid I can never depend on it again," said Mrs. Fellows.'

She had promised to be at the party.

"She looked so grave when I first asked her," Mary explained to the girls, "that I was sorry I spoke of it. I was afraid she thought we wanted her only as a sort of convenience, to help out our pantomime by the effect of her white hair. But in a minute she smiled in her cheery way, and said, as if she saw right through me: 'I suppose, my child, you think being old a sort of misfortune, like being hunchbacked or blind, and are afraid of hurting my feelings, but you need n't be. The good Lord has made it so that at whichever end of life we are, the other end looks pretty uninteresting, and if it won't hurt your feelings to have somebody in the party who has got through all the troubles you have yet before you, I should be glad to come.' That was turning the tables for us pretty neatly, eh, girls?"

The young ladies would not have had the old lady guess it for worlds, but truth compels me to own that all that week they improved every opportunity furtively to study Mrs. Fellows's gait and manner, with a view to perfecting their parts.

Frank and George met a couple of times in Henry's room to smoke it over and settle details, and Henry called on Jessie to arrange several concerted features of the programme, and for some other reasons for aught I know.

As each one studied his or her part and strove in imagination to conceive how they would act and feel as old men and old women, they grew more interested, and more sensible of the mingled pathos and absurdity of the project, and its decided general effect of queerness. They all set themselves to make a study of old age in a manner that had never occurred to them before, and never does occur to most people at all. Never before had their elderly friends received so much attention at their hands.

In the prosecution of these observations they were impressed with the entire lack of interest generally felt by people in the habits and manners of persons in other epochs of life than their own. In respect of age, as in so many other respects, the world lives on fiats, with equally little interest in or comprehension of the levels above or below them. And a surprising thing is that middle age is about as unable to recall and realize youth as to anticipate age. Experience seems to go for nothing in this matter.

They thought they noticed, too, that old people are more alike than middle-

aged people. There is something of the same narrowness and similarity in the range of their tastes and feelings that is marked in children. The reason they thought to be that the interests of age have contracted to about the same scope as those of childhood before it has expanded into maturity. The skein of life is drawn together to a point at the two ends and spread out in the middle. Middle age is the period of most diversity, when individuality is most pronounced. The members of the club observed with astonishment that, however affectionately we may regard old persons, we no more think of becoming like them than of becoming negroes. If we catch ourselves observing their senile peculiarities, it is in a purely disinterested manner, with a complete and genuine lack of any personal concern, as with a state to which we are coming.

They could not help wondering if Henry were not right about people never really growing old, but just changing from one personality to another. They found the strange inability of one epoch to understand or appreciate the others, hard to reconcile with the ordinary notion of a persistent identity.

Before the end of the week, the occupation of their minds with the subject of old age produced a singular effect. They began to regard every event and feeling from a double standpoint, as present and as past, as it appeared to them and as it would appear to an old person.

Wednesday evening came at last, and a little before the hour of eight, five venerable figures, more or less shrouded, might have been seen making their way from different parts of the village toward the Fellows mansion. The families of the members of the club were necessarily in the secret, and watched their exit with considerable laughter from behind blinds. But to the rest of the villagers it has never ceased to be a puzzle who those elderly strangers were who appeared that evening and were never before or since visible. For once the Argus-eyed curiosity of a Yankee village, compared with which French or Austrian police are easy to baffle, was fairly eluded.

Eight o'clock was the hour at which the old folks' party began, and the reader will need a fresh introduction to the company which was assembled at that time in Mary Fellows's parlor. Mary sat by her grandmother, who from time to time regarded her in a half-puzzled manner, as if it required an effort of her reasoning powers to reassure her that the effect she saw was an illusion. The girl's brown hair was gathered back under a lace cap, and all that appeared outside it was thickly powdered. She wore spectacles, and the warm tint of her cheeks had given place to the opaque saffron hue of age. She sat with her hands in her lap, their fresh color and dimpled contour concealed by black lace half-gloves. The fullness of her young bosom was carefully disguised by the arrangement of the severely simple black dress she wore, which was also in other respects studiously adapted to conceal, by its stiff and angular lines, the luxuriant contour of her figure. As she rose and advanced to welcome Henry



and Jessie, who were the last to arrive, it was with a striking imitation of the tremulously precipitate step of age.

Jessie, being rather taller than the others, had affected the stoop of age very successfully. She wore a black dress spotted with white, and her whitened hair was arranged with a high comb. She was the only one without spectacles or eyeglasses. Henry looked older and feebler than any of the company. His scant hair hung in thin and long white locks, and his tall, slender figure had gained a still more meagre effect from his dress, while his shoulders were bowed in a marked stoop; his gait was rigid and jerky. He assisted himself with a gold-headed cane, and sat in his chair leaning forward upon it.

George, on the other hand, had followed the hint of his father's figure in his make-up, and appeared as a rubicund old gentleman, large in the waist, bald, with an apoplectic tendency, a wheezy asthmatic voice, and a full white beard.

Nellie wore her hair in a row of white curls on each side of her head, and in every detail of her dress and air affected the coquettish old lady to perfection, for which, of course, she looked none the younger. Her cheeks were rouged to go with that style.

Frank was the ideal of the sprightly little old gentleman. With his brisk air, natty eye-glasses, cane and gloves, and other items of dress in the most correct taste, he was quite the old beau. His white hair was crispy, brushed back, and his snowy mustache had rather a rakish effect.

Although the transformation in each case was complete, yet quite enough of the features, expression, or bearing was apparent through the disguise to make the members of the party entirely recognizable to each other, though less intimate acquaintances would perhaps have been at first rather puzzled. At Henry's suggestion they had been photographed in their costumes, in order to compare the ideal with the actual when they should be really old.

"It is n't much trouble, and the old folks will enjoy it some day. We ought to consider them a little," Henry had said, meaning by "the old folks" their future selves.

It had been agreed that, in proper deference to the probabilities, one, at least, of the girls ought to illustrate the fat old lady. But they found it impossible to agree which should sacrifice herself, for no one of the three could, in her histrionic enthusiasm, quite forget her personal appearance. Nellie flatly refused to be made up fat, and Jessie as flatly, while both the girls had too much reverence for the sweet dignity of Mary Fellows's beauty to consent to her taking the part, and so the idea was given up.

It had been a happy thought of Mary's to get her two younger sisters, girls of eleven and sixteen, to be present, to enhance the venerable appearance of the party by the contrast of their bloom and freshness.

"Are these your little granddaughters?" inquired Henry, benevolently inspecting them over the tops of his spectacles as he patted the elder of the two on the head, a liberty she would by no means have allowed him in his proper character, but which she now seemed puzzled whether to resent or not.

"Yes," replied Mary, with an indulgent smile. "They wanted to see what an old folks' party was like, though I told them they wouldn't enjoy it much. I remember I thought old people rather dull when I was their age."

Henry made a little conversation with the girls, asking them the list of fatuous questions by which adults seem fated to illustrate the gulf between them and childhood in the effort to bridge it.

"Annie, dear, just put that ottoman at Mrs. Hyde's feet," said Mary to one of the little girls. "I 'm so glad you felt able to come out this evening, Mrs. Hyde! I understood you had not enjoyed good health this summer."

"I have scarcely been out of my room since spring, until recently," replied Jessie. "Thank you, my dear" (to the little girl); "but Dr. Sanford has done wonders for me. How is your health now, Mrs. Fellows?"

"I have not been so well an entire summer in ten years. My daughter, Mrs. Tarbox, was saying the other day that she wished she had my strength. You know she is quite delicate," said Mary.

"Speaking of Dr. Sanford," said Henry, looking at Jessie, "he is really a remarkable man. My son has such confidence in him that he seemed quite relieved when I had passed my grand climacteric and could get on his list. You know he takes no one under sixty-three. By the way, governor," he added, turning around with some ado, so as to face George, "I heard he had been treating your rheumatism lately. Has he seemed to reach the difficulty?"

"Remarkably," replied George, tenderly stroking his right knee in an absent manner. "Why, don't you think I walked half the way home from my office the other day when my carriage was late?"

"I wonder you dared venture it," said Jessie, with a shocked air. "What if you had met with some accident!"

"That's what my son said," answered George. "He made me promise never to try such a thing again; but I like to show them occasionally that I'm good for something yet."

He said this with a "he, he," of senile complacency, ending in an asthmatic cough, which caused some commotion in the company. Frank got up and slapped him on the back, and Mary sent Annie for a glass of water.

George being relieved, and quiet once more restored, Henry said to Frank:—

"By the way, doctor, I want to congratulate you on your son's last book. You

must have helped him to the material for so truthful a picture of American manners in the days when we were young. I fear we have not improved much since then. There was a simplicity, a naturalness in society fifty years ago, that one looks in vain for now. There was, it seems to me, much less regard paid to money, and less of morbid social ambition. Don't you think so, Mrs. Tyrrell?"

"It's just what I was saying only the other day," replied Nellie. "I'm sure I don't know what we're coming to nowadays. Girls had some modesty when I was young," and she shook her head with its rows of white curls with an air of mingled reprobation and despair.

"Did you attend Professor Merryweather's lecture last evening, Mrs. Hyde?" asked Frank, adjusting his eye-glasses and fixing Jessie with that intensity of look by which old persons have to make up for their failing eyesight. "The hall was so near your house, I did n't know but you would feel like venturing out."

"My daughters insisted on my taking advantage of the opportunity, it is so seldom I go anywhere of an evening," replied Jessie, "and I was very much interested, though I lost a good deal owing to the carrying on of a young couple in front of me. When I was a girl, young folks didn't do their courting in public."

Mary had not heard of the lecture, and Frank explained that it was one of the ter-semi-centennial course on American society and politics fifty years ago.

"By the way," remarked George, "did you observe what difficulty they are having in finding enough survivors of the civil war to make a respectable squad. The papers say that not over a dozen of both armies can probably be secured, and some of the cases are thought doubtful at that."

"Is it possible!" said Henry. "And yet, too, it must be so; but it sounds strangely to one who remembers as if it were yesterday seeing the grand review of the Federal armies at Washington just after the war. What a host of strong men was that, and now scarcely a dozen left. My friends, we are getting to be old people. We are almost through with it."

Henry sat gazing into vacancy over the tops of his spectacles, while the old ladies wiped theirs and sniffed and sighed a little. Finally Jessie said:—

"Those were heroic days. My little granddaughters never tire of hearing stories about them. They are strong partisans, too. Jessie is a fierce little rebel and Sam is an uncompromising Unionist, only they both agree in denouncing slavery."

"That reminds me," said Frank, smiling, "that our little Frankie came to me yesterday with a black eye he got for telling Judge Benson's little boy that people of his complexion were once slaves. He had read it in his history, and appealed to me to know if it was n't true."

"I 'm not a bit surprised that the little Benson boy resented the imputation," said George. "I really don't believe that more than half the people would be certain that slavery ever existed here, and I 'm sure that it rarely occurs to those who do know it. No doubt that company of old slaves at the centennial—that is, if they can find enough survivors—will be a valuable historical reminder to many."

"Dr. Hays," said Nellie, "will you settle a question between Mrs. Hyde and myself? Were you in C——, it was then only a village, along between 1870 and '80, about forty or fifty years ago?"

"No—and yet, come to think—let me see—when did you say?" replied Frank doubtfully.

"Between 1870 and '80, as nearly as we can make out, probably about the middle of the decade," said Nellie.

"I think I was in C—— at about that time. I believe I was still living with my father's family."

"I told you so," said Nellie to Jessie, and, turning again to Frank, she asked:—

"Do you remember anything about a social club there?"

"I do," replied Frank, with some appearance of interest. "I recall something of the sort quite distinctly, though I suppose I have n't thought of it for twenty years. How did you ever hear of it, Mrs. Hyde?"

"Why, I was a member," replied she briskly, "and so was Mrs. Tyrrell. We were reminded of it the other day by a discovery Mrs. Tyrrell made in an old bureau drawer of a photograph of the members of the club in a group, taken probably all of fifty years ago, and yellow as you can imagine. There was one figure that resembled you, doctor, as you might have looked then, and I thought, too, that I recalled you as one of the members; but Mrs. Tyrrell could not, and so we agreed to settle the matter by appealing to your own recollection."

"Yes, indeed," said Frank, "I now recall the club very perfectly, and it seems to me Governor Townsley was also in it."

"Yes, I think I was a member," assented George, "though my recollections are rather hazy."

Mary and Henry, being appealed to, failed to remember anything about the club, the latter suggesting that probably it flourished before he came to C——. Jessie was quite sure she recalled Henry, but the others could not do so with much positiveness.

"I will ask Mrs. Long when I get home," said Henry. "She has always lived at C——, and is great for remembering dates. Let's see; what time do you

think it was?"

"Mrs. Tyrrell and I concluded it must have been between 1873 and 1877," said Jessie; adding slyly, "for she was married in 1877. Mrs. Tyrrell, did you bring that old photograph with you? It might amuse them to look at it."

Nellie produced a small picture, and, adjusting their spectacles and eye-glasses, they all came forward to see it. A group of six young people was represented, all in the very heyday of youth. The spectators were silent, looking first at the picture, and then at each other.

"Can it be," said Frank, "that these were ever our pictures? I hope, Mrs. Tyrrell, the originals had the forethought to put the names on the back, that we may be able to identify them."

"No," said she, "we must guess as best we can. First, who is that?" pointing to one of the figures.

"That must be Mrs. Hyde, for she is taller than the others," suggested Grandma Fellows.

"By the same token, that must be Mrs. Tyrrell, for she is shorter," said Jessie; "though, but for that, I don't see how we could have told them apart."

"How oddly they did dress in those days!" said Mary.

"Who can that be?" asked Frank, pointing to the finest-looking of the three young men. "If that is one of us, there was more choice in our looks than there is now,—eh, Townsley?"

"No doubt," said George, "fifty years ago somebody's eye scanned those features with a very keen sense of proprietorship. What a queer feeling it would have given those young things to have anticipated that we should ever puzzle over their identities in this way!"

They finally agreed on the identity of Jessie, Nellie, and Frank, and of George also, on his assuring them that he was once of slender figure. This left two figures which nobody could recognize, though Jessie insisted that the gentleman was Henry, and Mary thought the other young lady was a Miss Fellows, a girl of the village, who, she explained, had died young many, many years ago.

"Don't you remember her?" she asked them, and her voice trembled with a half-genuine sort of self-pity, as if, for a moment, she imagined herself her own ghost.

"I recall her well," said Frank; "tall, grave, sweet, I remember she used to realize to me the abstraction of moral beauty when we were studying Paley together."

"I don't know when I have thought so much of those days as since I received

cards for your golden wedding, Judge," said Nellie to Henry, soon after. "How many of those who were present at your wedding will be present at your golden wedding, do you suppose?"

"Not more than two or three," replied Henry, "and yet the whole village was at the wedding."

"Thank God," he said a moment after, "that our friends scatter before they die. Otherwise old people like us would do nothing but attend funerals during the last half of our lives. Parting is sad, but I prefer to part from my friends while they are yet alive, that I may feel it less when they die. One must manage his feelings or they will get the better of him."

"It is a singular sensation," said George, "to outlive one's generation. One has at times a guilty sense of having deserted his comrades. It seems natural enough to outlive any one contemporary, but unnatural to survive them as a mass,—a sort of risky thing, fraught with the various vague embarrassments and undefined perils threatening one who is out of his proper place. And yet one does n't want to die, though convinced he ought to, and that's the cowardly misery of it."

"Yes," said Henry, "I had that feeling pretty strongly when I attended the last reunion of our alumni, and found not one survivor within five classes of me. I was isolated. Death had got into my rear and cut me off. I felt ashamed and thoroughly miserable."

Soon after, tea was served. Frank vindicated his character as an old beau by a tottering alacrity in serving the ladies, while George and Henry, by virtue of their more evident infirmity, sat still and allowed themselves to be served. One or two declined tea as not agreeing with them at that hour.

The loquacious herb gave a fresh impulse to the conversation, and the party fell to talking in a broken, interjectory way of youthful scenes and experiences, each contributing some reminiscence, and the others chiming in and adding scraps, or perhaps confessing their inability to recall the occurrences.

"What a refinement of cruelty it is," said Henry at last, "that makes even those experiences which were unpleasant or indifferent when passing look so mockingly beautiful when hopelessly past."

"Oh, that's not the right way to look at it, Judge," broke in Grandma Fellows, with mild reproof. "Just think rather how dull life would be, looking forward or backward, if past or coming experiences seemed as uninteresting as they mostly are when right at hand."

"Sweet memories are like moonlight," said Jessie musingly. "They make one melancholy, however pleasing they may be. I don't see why, any more than

why moonlight is so sad, spite of its beauty; but so it is."

The fragile tenure of the sense of personal identity is illustrated by the ease and completeness with which actors can put themselves in the place of the characters they assume, so that even their instinctive demeanor corresponds to the ideal, and their acting becomes nature. Such was the experience of the members of the club. The occupation of their mind during the week with the study of their assumed characters had produced an impression that had been deepened to an astonishing degree by the striking effect of the accessories of costume and manner. The long-continued effort to project themselves mentally into the period of old age was assisted in a startling manner by the illusion of the senses produced by the decrepit figures, the sallow and wrinkled faces, and the white heads of the group.

Their acting had become spontaneous. They were perplexed and bewildered as to their identity, and in a manner carried away by the illusion their own efforts had created. In some of the earlier conversation of the evening there had been occasional jests and personalities, but the talk had now become entirely serious. The pathos and melancholy of the retrospections in which they were indulging became real. All felt that if it was acting now, it was but the rehearsal of a coming reality. I think some of them were for a little while not clearly conscious that it was not already reality, and that their youth was not forever vanished. The sense of age was weighing on them like a nightmare. In very self-pity voices began to tremble and bosoms heaved with suppressed sobs.

Mary rose and stepped to the piano. It indicated how fully she had realized her part that, as she passed the mirror, no involuntary start testified to surprise at the aged figure it reflected. She played in a minor key an air to the words of Tennyson's matchless piece of pathos, —

"The days that are no more," accompanying herself with a voice rich, strong, and sweet. By the time she had finished, the girls were all crying.

Suddenly Henry sprang to his feet, and, with the strained, uncertain voice of one waking himself from a nightmare, cried:—

"Thank God, thank God, it is only a dream," and tore off the wig, letting the brown hair fall about his forehead. Instantly all followed his example, and in a moment the transformation was effected. Brown, black, and golden hair was flying free; rosy cheeks were shining through the powder where handkerchiefs had been hastily applied, and the bent and tottering figures of a moment ago had given place to broad-shouldered men and full-breasted girls. Henry caught Jessie around the waist, Frank Nellie, and George Mary, and with one of the little girls at the piano, up and down the room they dashed to the merriest of waltzes in the maddest round that ever was danced. There was a reckless

abandon in their glee, as if the lust of life, the glow and fire of youth, its glorious freedom, and its sense of boundless wealth, suddenly set free, after long repression, had intoxicated them with its strong fumes. It was such a moment as their lifetime would not bring again.

It was not till, flushed and panting, laughing and exhausted, they came to a pause, that they thought of Grandma Fellows. She was crying, and yet smiling through her tears.

"Oh, grandma," cried Mary, throwing her arms around her, and bursting into tears, "we can't take you back with us. Oh, dear."

And the other girls cried over her, and kissed her in a piteous, tender way, feeling as if their hearts would break for the pity of it. And the young men were conscious of moisture about the eyes as they stood looking on.

But Grandma Fellows smiled cheerily, and said:—

"I'm a foolish old woman to cry, and you mustn't think it is because I want to be young again. It's only because I can't help it."

Perhaps she could n't have explained it better.

***Freeditorial*** 

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