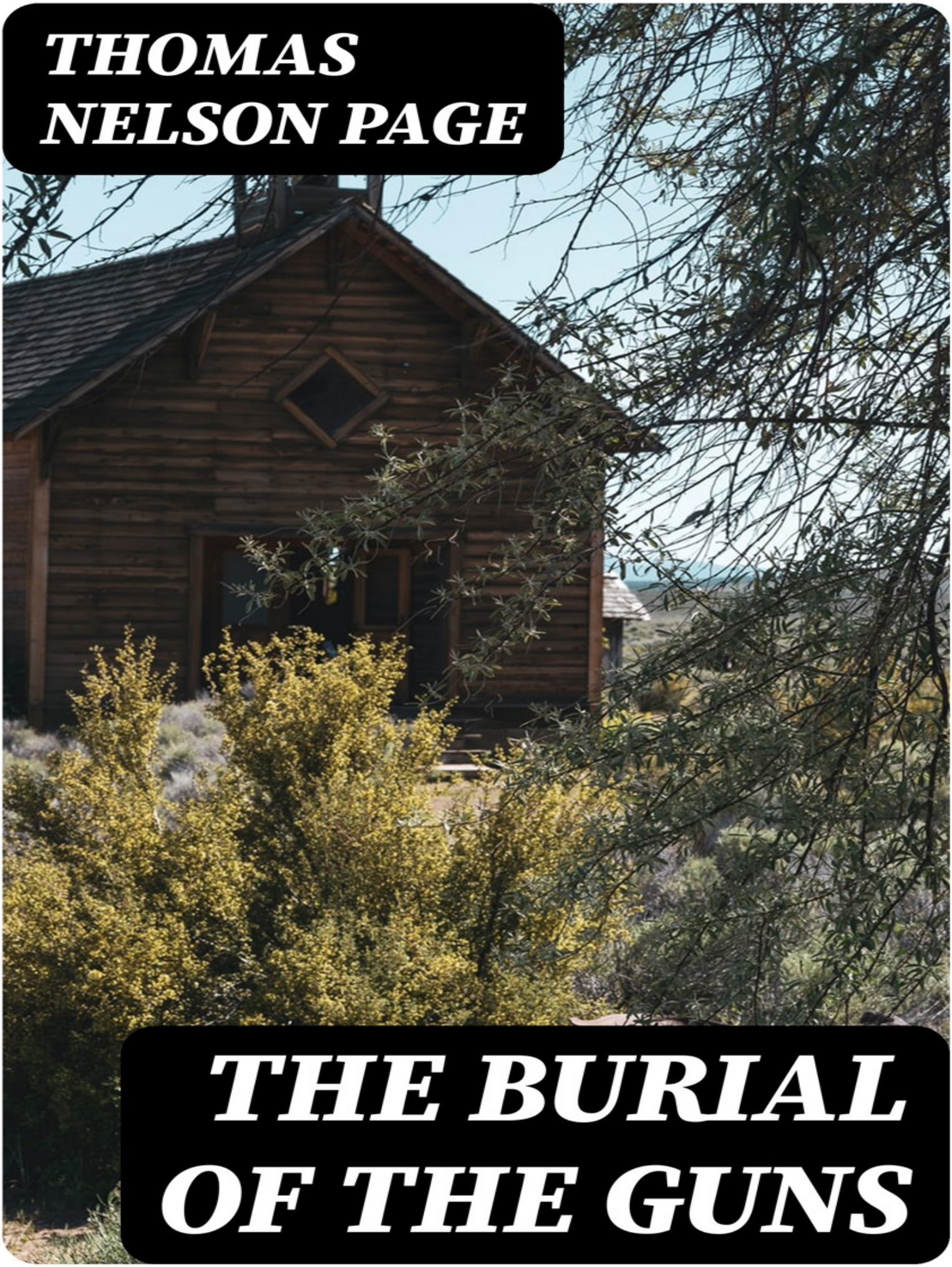
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The Burial of the Guns

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MY COUSIN FANNY

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We do not keep Christmas now as we used to do in old Hanover. We have not time for it, and it does not seem like the same thing. Christmas, however, always brings up to me my cousin Fanny; I suppose because she always was so foolish about Christmas.

My cousin Fanny was an old maid; indeed, to follow St. Paul's turn of phrase, she was an old maid of the old maids. No one who saw her a moment could have doubted it. Old maids have from most people a feeling rather akin to pity—a hard heritage. They very often have this feeling from the young. This must be the hardest part of all—to see around them friends, each "a happy mother of children," little ones responding to affection with the sweet caresses of childhood, whilst any advances that they, their aunts or cousins, may make are met with indifference or condescension. My cousin Fanny was no exception. She was as proud as Lucifer; yet she went through life—the part that I knew of—bearing the pity of the great majority of the people who knew her.

She lived at an old place called "Woodside", which had been in the family for a great many years; indeed, ever since before the Revolution. The neighborhood dated back to the time of the colony, and Woodside was one of the old places. My cousin Fanny's grandmother had stood in the door of her chamber with her large scissors in her hand, and defied Tarleton's red-coated troopers to touch the basket of old communion-plate which she had hung on her arm.

The house was a large brick edifice, with a pyramidal roof, covered with moss, small windows, porticos with pillars somewhat out of repair, a big, high hall, and a staircase wide enough to drive a gig up it if it could have turned the corners. A grove of great forest oaks and poplars densely shaded it, and made it look rather gloomy; and the garden, with the old graveyard covered with periwinkle at one end, was almost in front, while the side of the wood—a primeval forest, from which the place took its name—came up so close as to form a strong, dark background. During the war the place, like most others in that neighborhood, suffered greatly, and only a sudden exhibition of spirit on Cousin Fanny's part saved it from a worse fate. After the war it went down; the fields were poor, and grew up in briers and sassafras, and the house was too large and out of repair to keep from decay, the ownership of it being divided between Cousin Fanny and other members of the family. Cousin Fanny had no means whatever, so that it soon was in a bad condition. The rest of the family, as they grew up, went off, compelled by necessity to seek some means of livelihood, and would have taken Cousin Fanny too if she would have gone; but she would not go. They did all they could for her, but she preferred to hang around the old place, and to do what she could with her "mammy", and "old Stephen", her mammy's husband, who alone remained in the quarters. She lived in a part of the house, locking up the rest, and from time to time visited among her friends and relatives, who always received her hospitably. She had an old piece of a mare (which I think she had bought from Stephen), with one eye, three legs, and no mane or tail to speak of, and on

which she lavished, without the least perceptible result, care enough to have kept a stable in condition. In a freak of humor she named this animal “Fashion”, after a noted racer of the old times, which had been raised in the county, and had beaten the famous Boston in a great race. She always spoke of “Fash” with a tone of real tenderness in her voice, and looked after her, and discussed her ailments, which were always numerous, as if she had been a delicate child. Mounted on this beast, with her bags and bundles, and shawls and umbrella, and a long stick or pole, she used occasionally to make the tour of the neighborhood, and was always really welcomed; because, notwithstanding the trouble she gave, she always stirred things up. As was said once, you could no more have remained dull where she was than you could have dozed with a chinkapin-burr down your back. Her retort was that a chinkapin-burr might be used to rouse people from a lethargy (she had an old maid’s tongue). By the younger members of the family she was always welcomed, because she furnished so much fun. She nearly always fetched some little thing to her host—not her hostess—a fowl, or a pat of butter from her one old cow, or something of the kind, because, she said, “Abigail had established the precedent, and she was ‘a woman of good understanding’—she understood that feeding and flattery were the way to win men.” She would sometimes have a chicken in a basket hung on the off pummel of her old saddle, because at times she fancied she could not eat anything but chicken soup, and she did “not wish to give trouble.” She used to give trouble enough; for it generally turned out that she had heard some one was sick in the

neighborhood, and she wanted the soup carried to her. I remember how mad Joe got because she made him go with her to carry a bucket of soup to old Mrs. Ronquist.

Cousin Fanny had the marks of an old maid. She was thin (“scrawny” we used to call her, though I remember now she was quite erect until she grew feeble); her features were fine; her nose was very straight; her hair was brown; and her eyes, which were dark, were weak, so that she had often to wear a green shade. She used to say herself that they were “bad eyes”. They had been so ever since the time when she was a young girl, and there had been a very bad attack of scarlet fever at her home, and she had caught it. I think she caught a bad cold with it—sitting up nursing some of the younger children, perhaps—and it had settled in her eyes. She was always very liable to cold.

I believe she had a lover then or about that time; but her mother had died not long before, and she had some notion of duty to the children, and so discarded him. Of course, as every one said, she’d much better have married him. I do not suppose he ever could have addressed her. She never would admit that he did, which did not look much like it. She was once spoken of in my presence as “a sore-eyed old maid”—I have forgotten who said it. Yet I can now recall occasions when her eyes, being “better”, appeared unusually soft, and, had she not been an old maid, would sometimes have been beautiful—as, for instance, occasionally, when she was playing at the piano in the evenings before the candles were lighted. I recollect particularly once when she was singing an old French love-song. Another time was when on a certain occasion some

one was talking about marriages and the reasons which led to or prevented them. She sat quite still and silent, looking out of the window, with her thin hands resting in her lap. Her head was turned away from most of the people, but I was sitting where I could see her, and the light of the evening sky was on her face. It made her look very soft. She lifted up her eyes, and looked far off toward the horizon. I remember it recalled to me, young as I was, the speech I had heard some one once make when I was a little boy, and which I had thought so ridiculous, that “when she was young, before she caught that cold, she was almost beautiful.” There was an expression on her face that made me think she ought always to sit looking out of the window at the evening sky. I believe she had brought me some apples that day when she came, and that made me feel kindly toward her. The light on her hair gave it a reddish look, quite auburn. Presently, she withdrew her eyes from the sky, and let them fall into her lap with a sort of long, sighing breath, and slowly interlaced her fingers. The next second some one jocularly fired this question at her: “Well, Cousin Fanny, give us your views,” and her expression changed back to that which she ordinarily wore.

“Oh, my views, like other people’s, vary from my practice,” she said. “It is not views, but experiences, which are valuable in life. When I shall have been married twice I will tell you.”

“While there’s life there’s hope, eh?” hazarded some one; for teasing an old maid, in any way, was held perfectly legitimate.

“Yes, indeed,” and she left the room, smiling, and went up-stairs.

This was one of the occasions when her eyes looked well. There were others that I remember, as sometimes when she was in church; sometimes when she was playing with little children; and now and then when, as on that evening, she was sitting still, gazing out of the window. But usually her eyes were weak, and she wore the green shade, which gave her face a peculiar pallor, making her look old, and giving her a pained, invalid expression.

Her dress was one of her peculiarities. Perhaps it was because she made her clothes herself, without being able to see very well. I suppose she did not have much to dress on. I know she used to turn her dresses, and change them around several times. When she had any money she used to squander it, buying dresses for Scroggs’s girls or for some one else. She was always scrupulously neat, being quite old-maidish. She said that cleanliness was next to godliness in a man, and in a woman it was on a par with it. I remember once seeing a picture of her as a young girl, as young as Kitty, dressed in a soft white dress, with her hair down over her ears, and some flowers in her dress—that is, it was said to be she; but I did not believe it. To be sure, the flowers looked like it. She always would stick flowers or leaves in her dress, which was thought quite ridiculous. The idea of associating flowers with an old maid! It was as hard as believing she ever was the young girl. It was not, however, her dress, old and often queer and ill-made as it used to be, that was the chief grievance against her. There was a much stronger ground of complaint; she had NERVES! The word

used to be strung out in pronouncing it, with a curve of the lips, as “ner-erves”. I don’t remember that she herself ever mentioned them; that was the exasperating part of it. She would never say a word; she would just close her thin lips tight, and wear a sort of ill look, as if she were in actual pain. She used to go up-stairs, and shut the door and windows tight, and go to bed, and have mustard-plasters on her temples and the back of her neck; and when she came down, after a day or two, she would have bright red spots burnt on her temples and neck, and would look ill. Of course it was very hard not to be exasperated at this. Then she would creep about as if merely stepping jarred her; would put on a heavy blue veil, and wrap her head up in a shawl, and feel along by the chairs till she got to a seat, and drop back in it, gasping. Why, I have even seen her sit in the room, all swathed up, and with an old parasol over her head to keep out the light, or some such nonsense, as we used to think. It was too ridiculous to us, and we boys used to walk heavily and stumble over chairs—“accidentally”, of course—just to make her jump. Sometimes she would even start up and cry out. We had the incontestable proof that it was all “put on”; for if you began to talk to her, and got her interested, she would forget all about her ailments, and would run on and talk and laugh for an hour, until she suddenly remembered, and sank back again in her shawls and pains.

She knew a great deal. In fact, I recall now that she seemed to know more than any woman I have ever been thrown with, and if she had not been an old maid, I am bound to admit that her conversation would have been the

most entertaining I ever knew. She lived in a sort of atmosphere of romance and literature; the old writers and their characters were as real to her as we were, and she used to talk about them to us whenever we would let her. Of course, when it came from an old maid, it made a difference. She was not only easily the best French scholar in our region, where the ladies all knew more or less of French, but she was an excellent Latin scholar, which was much less common. I have often lain down before the fire when I was learning my Latin lesson, and read to her, line by line, Caesar or Ovid or Cicero, as the book might be, and had her render it into English almost as fast as I read. Indeed, I have even seen Horace read to her as she sat in the old rocking-chair after one of her headaches, with her eyes bandaged, and her head swathed in veils and shawls, and she would turn it into not only proper English, but English with a glow and color and rhythm that gave the very life of the odes. This was an exercise we boys all liked and often engaged in—Frank, and Joe, and Doug, and I, and even old Blinky—for, as she used to admit herself, she was always worrying us to read to her (I believe I read all of Scott's novels to her). Of course this translation helped us as well as gratified her. I do not remember that she was ever too unwell to help us in this way except when she was actually in bed. She was very fond of us boys, and was always ready to take our side and to further our plans in any way whatever. We would get her to steal off with us, and translate our Latin for us by the fire. This, of course, made us rather fond of her. She was so much inclined to take our part and to help us that I remember it used to be said of her

as a sort of reproach, “Cousin Fanny always sides with the boys.” She used to say it was because she knew how worthless women were. She would say this sort of thing herself, but she was very touchy about women, and never would allow any one else to say anything about them. She had an old maid’s temper. I remember that she took Doug up short once for talking about “old maids”. She said that for her part she did not mind it the least bit; but she would not allow him to speak so of a large class of her sex which contained some of the best women in the world; that many of them performed work and made sacrifices that the rest of the world knew nothing about. She said the true word for them was the old Saxon term “spinster”; that it proved that they performed the work of the house, and that it was a term of honor of which she was proud. She said that Christ had humbled himself to be born of a Virgin, and that every woman had this honor to sustain. Of course such lectures as that made us call her an old maid all the more. Still, I don’t think that being mischievous or teasing her made any difference with her. Frank used to worry her more than any one else, even than Joe, and I am sure she liked him best of all. That may perhaps have been because he was the best-looking of us. She said once that he reminded her of some one she used to know a long time before, when she was young. That must have been a long time before, indeed. He used to tease the life out of her.

She was extraordinarily credulous—would believe anything on earth anyone told her, because, although she had plenty of humor, she herself never would deviate from the absolute truth a moment, even in jest. I do not think she

would have told an untruth to save her life. Well, of course we used to play on her to tease her. Frank would tell her the most unbelievable and impossible lies: such as that he thought he saw a mouse yesterday on the back of the sofa she was lying on (this would make her bounce up like a ball), or that he believed he heard—he was not sure—that Mr. Scroggs (the man who had rented her old home) had cut down all the old trees in the yard, and pulled down the house because he wanted the bricks to make brick ovens. This would worry her excessively (she loved every brick in the old house, and often said she would rather live in the kitchen there than in a palace anywhere else), and she would get into such a state of depression that Frank would finally have to tell her that he was just “fooling her”.

She used to make him do a good deal of waiting on her in return, and he was the one she used to get to dress old Fashion’s back when it was raw, and to put drops in her eyes. He got quite expert at it. She said it was a penalty for his worrying her so.

She was the great musician of the connection. This is in itself no mean praise; for it was the fashion for every musical gift among the girls to be cultivated, and every girl played or sang more or less, some of them very well. But Cousin Fanny was not only this. She had a way of playing that used to make the old piano sound different from itself; and her voice was almost the sweetest I ever heard except one or two on the stage. It was particularly sweet in the evenings, when she sat down at the piano and played. She would not always do it; she either felt “not in the mood”, or “not sympathetic”, or some such thing. None of the others

were that way; the rest could play just as well in the glare of day as in the twilight, and before one person as another; it was, we all knew, just one of Cousin Fanny's old-maid crotchets. When she sat down at the piano and played, her fussiness was all forgotten; her first notes used to be recognized through the house, and people used to stop what they were doing, and come in. Even the children would leave off playing, and come straggling in, tiptoeing as they crossed the floor. Some of the other performers used to play a great deal louder, but we never tiptoed when they played. Cousin Fanny would sit at the piano looking either up or right straight ahead of her, or often with her eyes closed (she never looked at the keys), and the sound used to rise from under her long, thin fingers, sometimes rushing and pouring forth like a deep roar, sometimes ringing out clear like a band of bugles, making the hair move on the head and giving strange tinglings down the back. Then we boys wanted to go forth in the world on fiery, black chargers, like the olden knights, and fight giants and rescue beautiful ladies and poor women. Then again, with her eyes shut, the sound would almost die away, and her fingers would move softly and lingeringly as if they loved the touch of the keys, and hated to leave them; and the sound would come from away far off, and everything would grow quiet and subdued, and the perfume of the roses out of doors would steal in on the air, and the soft breezes would stir the trees, and we were all in love, and wanted to see somebody that we didn't see. And Cousin Fanny was not herself any longer, but we imagined some one else was there. Sometimes she suddenly began to sing (she sang old songs, English or

French); her voice might be weak (it all depended on her whims; SHE said, on her health), in that case she always stopped and left the piano; or it might be “in condition”. When it was, it was as velvety and mellow as a bell far off, and the old ballads and chansons used to fill the twilight. We used even to forget then that she was an old maid. Now and then she sang songs that no one else had ever heard. They were her own; she had composed both the words and the air. At other times she sang the songs of others to her own airs. I remember the first time I ever heard of Tennyson was when, one evening in the twilight, she sang his echo song from “The Princess”. The air was her own, and in the refrain you heard perfectly the notes of the bugle, and the echoes answering, “Dying, dying, dying.” Boy as I was, I was entranced, and she answered my enthusiasm by turning and repeating the poem. I have often thought since how musical her voice was as she repeated

Our echoes roll from soul to soul,
And grow forever and forever.

She had a peculiarly sentimental temperament. As I look back at it all now, she was much given to dwelling upon old-time poems and romances, which we thought very ridiculous in any one, especially in a spinster of forty odd. She would stop and talk about the branch of a tree with the leaves all turning red or yellow or purple in the common way in which, as everyone knows, leaves always turn in the fall; or even about a tangle of briers, scarlet with frost, in a corner of an old worm-fence, keeping us waiting while she fooled around a brier patch with old Blinky, who would just as lief have been in one place as another, so it was out of doors; and even when she reached the house she would still

carry on about it, worrying us by telling over again just how the boughs and leaves looked massed against the old gray fence, which she could do till you could see them precisely as they were. She was very aggravating in this way. Sometimes she would even take a pencil or pen and a sheet of paper for old Blinky, and reproduce it. She could not draw, of course, for she was not a painter; all she could do was to make anything look almost just like it was.

There was one thing about her which excited much talk; I suppose it was only a piece of old-maidism. Of course she was religious. She was really very good. She was considered very high church. I do not think, from my recollection of her, that she really was, or, indeed, that she could have been; but she used to talk that way, and it was said that she was. In fact, it used to be whispered that she was in danger of becoming a Catholic. I believe she had an aunt that was one, and she had visited several times in Norfolk and Baltimore, where it was said there were a good many. I remember she used to defend them, and say she knew a great many very devout ones. And she admitted that she sometimes went to the Catholic church, and found it devotional; the choral service, she said, satisfied something in her soul. It happened to be in the evening that she was talking about this. She sat down at the piano, and played some of the Gregorian chants she had heard, and it had a soothing influence on everyone. Even Joe, the fidgetiest of all, sat quite still through it. She said that some one had said it was the music that the angels sing in heaven around the great white throne, and there was no other sacred music like it. But she played another thing that evening which she said

was worthy to be played with it. It had some chords in it that I remembered long afterward. Years afterward I heard it played the same way in the twilight by one who is a blessed saint in heaven, and may be playing it there now. It was from Chopin. She even said that evening, under the impulse of her enthusiasm, that she did not see, except that it might be abused, why the crucifix should not be retained by all Christian churches, as it enabled some persons not gifted with strong imaginations to have a more vivid realization of the crucified Saviour. This, of course, was going too far, and it created considerable excitement in the family, and led to some very serious talk being given her, in which the second commandment figured largely. It was considered as carrying old-maidism to an extreme length. For some time afterward she was rather discountenanced. In reality, I think what some said was true: it was simply that she was emotional, as old maids are apt to be. She once said that many women have the nun’s instinct largely developed, and sigh for the peace of the cloister.

She seemed to be very fond of artists. She had the queerest tastes, and had, or had had when she was young, one or two friends who, I believe, claimed to be something of that kind; she used to talk about them to old Blinky. But it seemed to us from what she said that artists never did any work; just spent their time lounging around, doing nothing, and daubing paint on their canvas with brushes like a painter, or chiselling and chopping rocks like a mason. One of these friends of hers was a young man from Norfolk who had made a good many things. He was killed or died in the war; so he had not been quite ruined; was worth something