

IN PRAISE OF UNMARRIED WOMEN

By DANIEL A. LORD, S.J.

I like everything about spinsters except that awful name.

Yet thus far no one has found a new and satisfactory name to take its place.

May God long continue to give us splendidly generous, holy, influential unmarried women. And may some genius soon find for them a name that is descriptive, complimentary, and in a sense befitting the great work they do for the world in general and for each of us in special ways.

ORIGINS

The name spinster really had, I suppose, a beautiful origin. The spinners of early days were among the world's most important people. Spinning and weaving not only made possible the clothes that supplied warmth, comfort, and adornment but covered walls with the gorgeous panoply of tapestries and turned hard chairs into comfortable and even luxuriously upholstered lounges and sofas. In other words the spinners (or spinsters) made possible all that warm and lovely drapery that serves to conceal the grim skeleton of life.

So it came about that since the unmarried woman at her loom or at her spinning wheel was the one most responsible for this transmutation of the hard into the soft, the ugly into the beautiful, the grim into the gentle, the cold into the warm, she became known as the family's spinner, the family spinster—simply the spinster.

The trade and art and craft of spinning have disappeared. The name has remained. Gradually the sound of that name grew as harsh and rough as its origin was beautiful and humanely important.

SYNONYMS

Unfortunately, there has not been found anything like a satisfactory synonym for the word.

Since any unmarried girl is called a maid or a maiden, women who have never married remain technically maids or maidens until the end of their days. But common usage has linked the words maid and maiden with youth. So we hesitate to speak of a maid of forty or of a maiden entering her seventy-second year. Technically correct though it is, common usage makes it sound odd and wrong.

The words girl and girls have now been appropriated by the entire feminine persuasion. Girls of seventeen are unfailingly amused when they hear mother (plump, forty-ish, very mature, and unquestionably matronly) telling dad that she is having "the girls" over for bridge and tea. Whenever she mentions the Girls, she seems to spell the word with an invisible but inescapable capital G. You see, she has lumped in the May-time of girlhood all her feminine contemporaries, though they are, like herself, plump, forty-ish, mature, and matronly.

So though spinsters have the real right to the name girls, it is the married women who have elbowed themselves into the capacious embrace of that category.

CRUEL WORDS

Horribly the combination of the two words, old maid, has taken on grim connotations. It has been too often used as a term of pity, distaste, or contempt. Pupils hurl it as an insult at the teachers they do not like. Husbands in a sort of indirect flattery of their wives refer with verbal dislike to "that old maid next door." "Old-maidish" has a descriptive power that suggests waspish ways, preoccupation with the petty, fussiness, a cat by the hearth, and probably a tongue that stings.

It is sad that language has a way of taking cruel twists now and then.

Unmarried women must suffer from the common use of the insulting adjective old-maidish—as we Jesuits have to suffer from the nasty implications of the deliberately affronting adjective Jesuitical. The word Jesuitical has come to be defined as lying, deceitful, crooked, intriguing, undercover, and generally untrustworthy and two-faced. I don't think that we Jesuits deserve those epithets. And I know that the unmarried women of my friendship and acquaintance do not fit even slightly the picture that is suggested by the adjective old-maidish.

MAKESHIFTS

When women first broke into the business world, for a time writers tried to tag them with the manufactured title, bachelor girls. But it didn't take. Quite obviously it was a makeshift. For a while the word bachelor still suggested a debonair, dashing, slightly devil-may-care fellow who deliberately avoided and skilfully dodged the traps set for him by scheming females, the term, bachelor girl, was just another tag to indicate a woman who probably went into business because nobody invited her into marriage. A bachelor was regarded as single by deliberate choice. A bachelor girl was to the thoughtless public single because of an unwilling accident.

When girls really deserved the title, bachelor, they got it. They became, as did men, Bachelor of Arts, or Bachelor of Music, or Bachelor of Science. Here no one coined for them a makeshift like Bachelor Girl of Arts, Bachelor Maid of Science, Bachelor Maiden of Music.

Thank heaven no one seriously attempted to foist upon these girls the title bachelorette.

Yet spinster remains an unpleasant word spitting s's and antique suggestions. The term, unmarried woman, is at best a clumsy description. So public speakers sometimes find themselves in hot water when they try to designate precisely the group of women they are addressing.

TOO BAD

I recall with a shudder a good, learned, holy, but not too tactful priest who, in my hearing, once addressed a convention that was made up largely of unmarried women and referred to them humorously (and, I thought, cruelly) as "unclaimed treasures." There was nervous laughter when he said it the first time. Laughter is, alas! a drug that goes swiftly and intoxicatingly to a speaker's head. He continued to address them by that term and then varied it with "undiscovered jewels" and "unstaked gold." I waited in horror for the moment when he might become Elizabethan and call them "unredeemed baggage." Thanks be, they were spared that.

It does seem strange that there should be no dignified title to describe the unmarried women who are among the most important figures in our world. They are in a thousand fields of work that make for human happiness and progress. And often they add to their work the work of rearing large families of motherless children.

The word spinster is almost in the nature of an insult.

THE POINT OF TRANSITION

Nobody notices age in an unmarried man—well, almost nobody. But people seem eternally busybody about the age of an unmarried woman.

The exact day or year when a maid becomes a spinster is something that no one has as yet analysed and determined.

In fact, the time is bound to vary according to circumstances. For instance: What part of the country are you talking about? What are the marriage customs of the people from which the unmarried lady comes? What is the age of the person?

WHEN YOUTH DECIDES

Let us take the last and least important element and dispose of it at once. I recall many years ago three of us boys making preparations for a party. Each of us was about seventeen years old. We were selecting the girls we intended to invite. (The boys needed no tryout; they were all part of our normal crowd.) At the time I was very much interested, as are most lads sometime in their late teens, in a young woman a little my senior. I thought her—and she was—very lovely to look at. In sincere compliment, I contrasted her mature grace and dignity, her sensible conversation and tempered laughter with the giggles and wiggles and nervous desire to please that characterized the callow girls of our own age. So tentatively I presented her name as one of the girls I should like to invite. I did not dare confess that she was for me the one and only of the moment.

My friends regarded me with disgusted astonishment.

"Her?" said they. "I should say not. Why, she's on the shelf."

She was, I now sadly realize, of that period of venerable antiquity that comes to a girl who has lived for twenty-two

years.

So don't ask young people how old is old. They think that anyone two years older than themselves is ready for the old-folks' home.

NATIONAL CUSTOMS

National custom has much to do with the setting of the boundaries that separate maiden years from the years of spinsterhood. Italian girls usually married early. Irish girls were more likely to approach the altar considerably later. That may have been because Italian parents were deeply interested in the early marriage of their daughters. Irish parents, on the other hand, were not too anxious to see either their sons or their daughters leave the family home: The Irish sons lingered on well into maturity before they left their parental homes to found homes of their own. And the colleens inevitably had to wait until the rather leisurely and almost reluctant males decided that it was not yet quite too late.

POSTPONEMENT TODAY

Today marriages have been by custom postponed until rather late years.

At least that was true until the Second World War and the hysterical spirit of romance swept young people in a sort of marital tidal wave toward the window of the marriage-licence clerk.

In our day there are many things that tend to prolong the period before a girl's marriage. Those who can, pack off for college, spending there the years that in their grandmothers' lives were devoted to courtship, marriage, and motherhood. Many girls decide after college or high school that they want to use their training for an interim sally into the professional or the business world. Since they have spent many years and probably much money to get an education, they prefer to put their education to the test, see how well it works. And since "society" on any extended scale has been largely abolished or abrogated, some wise maidens go out from their homes to the places where they think that men are likely to be—offices, business houses, shops, stores.

My good friend, Fr. Edward Dowling, will probably shake a disapproving head over all this. He is persuaded that girls do well to marry when they are sixteen or seventeen years old—nature's normal age, he would call it. For that matter he would like to see men's education telescoped so that the male would marry not later than his eighteenth year.

Until that revolution occurs, however (or would, this be less a revolution than a reversal to the Middle Ages, when those were the normal marrying ages?), the modern girl in most parts of the country will not be regarded with pity if she get far along in her twenties without more than a casual flirtation and no serious intentions.

CHILDHOOD IS CRUEL

Whatever the age of spinsterhood, and whatever the customs that govern it, literature has not, in the main, treated it kindly. Nor has history. First impressions are vivid and lasting, and I often find myself recalling my nursery rhymes. To each of them I early attached a clear illustrative picture. To two of them I had in cruel childish fashion attached the connotation of spinsters—though now as I recite them, I am not sure that spinsterhood was at all suggested by the verses.

One rhyme concerned two girls of indefinite and indeterminate age, Polly and Sukey.

Polly, put the kettle on;

Polly, put the kettle on;

Polly, put the kettle on;

We'll all have tea.

Sukey, take it off again,

Sukey, take it off again,

Sukey, take it off again,

They're all gone away.

(Did you notice that in the English of that remote age tea rhymed with away? The next time you hear an Irishman talking about his “tay,” don’t smile; that was how the English was meant to be pronounced.)

Whatever the original and anonymous author had in mind, I as a very small child pictured Polly and Sukey, the tea-drinking sisters, as identical with a pair of fabulous maiden aunts who were legend in my father’s family. Quite obviously tea-making and tea-drinking were expected to be the normal pastime of spinsters.

The second rhyme mentioned no name. But again I childishly associated the unpleasant female with the fairy-tale characters of unpleasant and unmarried older sisters of the kind who made life difficult for Cinderella. You remember the rhyme, I’m sure, from your own youth:

Crosspatch, draw the latch,
Sit by the fire and spin.
Take a cup and drink it up,
Then call your neighbours in.

To me it seemed a hard but accurate characterization of spinster activity: alone by the fire, drinking tea, the latch so closed that no visitors could enter; then a call to the neighbours for after-tea gossip.

I must have read too many fairy tales about stepsisters and stepmothers and witches and generally unpleasant females who either had no husbands or had lost their husbands in fashions that would now be grist for murder stories for any tabloid’s front page.

THE CHURCH MAKES A CHANGE

Whatever literature may say about spinsters, and however much history may ignore them—except for outstanding spinsters like Elizabeth of England—the Church’s attitude toward unmarried women has been, from the first, one of reverence. This I came to know when my faith emerged from mere youthful practice to intelligent study and appreciation. Among the Jews a spinster was merely an unfortunate girl not lucky enough to have won a husband for herself. Among the pagans she was usually the slave or bondmaiden, the grudgingly tolerated hanger-on in the house of her parents or her luckier married sisters.

With St. Paul all that was changed. He loved virginity, and he turned to the ministrations and loyalty—as many a parish has done since—of the splendid young and older unmarried women of his time. The legends of St. Paul and St. Tecla—whose name was the Greek word for pearl—are many and beautiful. Phoebe, to whom Paul sends affectionate messages, seems to have been one of the first consecrated Catholic virgins.

ST. PAUL SPEAKS

It was left for the great St. Paul, who could find for marriage no more appropriate comparison than that of the love which Christ bears for His Church (see Ephesians 5: 21-32), to speak almost the first words in praise of those who deliberately did not marry or who, for any good reasons, remained unmarried.

“But,” he wrote to the Corinthians, “I say to the unmarried and to widows, it is good for them if they so remain, even as I.” (1 Cor 7: 8)

Then he directs to men who remain unmarried and cherish their virginity strong praise that quite clearly he means for both men and women. For he continues: “I would have you free from care. He who is unmarried is concerned about the things of the Lord, how he may please God. Whereas he who is married is concerned about the things of the world, how he may please his wife; and he is divided. And the unmarried woman, and the virgin, thinks about the things of the Lord, that she may be holy in body and in spirit. Whereas she who is married thinks about the things of the world, how she may please her husband.” (1 Cor 7: 32-34)

UNMARRIED SAINTS

This was an astonishing teaching to people who had regarded virginity as rather a futile thing and the unmarried girl as the object of a none too gentle pity. Yet instantly the early Church, which loved the virgin Christ and the Virgin

Mary and the beloved virgin John, took to heart the good advice. It is noteworthy that the virgin martyrs of those early days were not nuns in any modern sense. They had in some cases taken the veil of virginity at the hands of Peter or of Paul, but they lived at home, served the poor in the big cities, and, save for their intense concentration on the love of God and their neighbours, lived, as we would say, in the world.

Such was the young Agnes, the older Agatha, Cecilia, and half a dozen others forced into marriage against their will and carrying to God through martyrdom the glory of their virginity. They had detached themselves from the love of any man to give their whole love to the greatest of the sons of men. They cared for their houses and were devoted to their parents. They ministered to the poor and at dawn or at dusk went to the catacombs for Mass and prayer. They were saintly spinsters, if you wish, or spinster saints. True, the pagan world regarded them as abnormal and queer and fit only for death. The Christians loved them unforgettably.

GREAT CONTRIBUTION

Their contribution to the early Church is beyond computation. They lived the purity that was supposed to characterize the religion of the Saviour. They did the good works that He had listed as sign and proof of His followers. They were personally the great correctives for the abuses of marriage and for the corruption of morals. They demonstrated with shining and spectacular force that it was possible for married couples to remain faithful since normal girls with all the normal desires and impulses could remain pure while unmarried. They led along paths of maidenly modesty other girls who could not accept a lifetime of virginity, until premarital purity made them worthy to be mothers of the little sons and daughters of our God and Father.

The Church has never forgotten those first unmarried saints, the models of the millions who were to be the most distinctive and unique contribution of Christianity to world morality. Christian marriage would never have been possible without them. Christian virginity got its pattern from their unforgettable acceptance of Christ's new purity.

It is not at all an exaggeration to say that the unmarried Catholic woman of the present can look upon herself as the legitimate successor to these virgins and martyrs of earliest Christian times. She may be proud of that association and conscious of the possibility within her to repeat in our generation their great contribution to life, love, and the decencies.

TODAY'S TYPES

Coming now to the unmarried women of the present, the spinsters of the current year . . . there are many kinds of spinsters, and they remain unmarried for various reasons.

We might start with a popular type—start with her, that is, and discard her promptly. She could not properly be included within the compass of our praise.

For she is a frankly, indeed an unblushingly, selfish woman. She rates with those bachelors of old Rome on whom the pagans slapped heavy fines. She remains unmarried simply because she declines to take on the heavy responsibilities of married life. Children bore her. Home is to her a sort of modified and not too modernized prison. She wants all her money for herself. More than all else she clings to the selfish privileges of her freedom.

She may sometimes drop in at church; in mind and purpose she is a throwback to the days of pagan selfishness.

SELFISH

But there are spinsters who remain unmarried for motives that are almost as selfish. They do not find a man who can match the salary they are earning or the education they have been given. Or they do a simple problem in addition and discover that if they have to get along on the earnings of the man who wants to marry them, the income will, in the long run, be considerably less for two than their present income for one. They occupy important positions that they do not intend to relinquish for a kitchen and a nursery. Unmarried, they issue orders, not take them; they rebel at the implication that marriage would give a man any power over them.

Often they are generous in other ways; often they are virtuous and good.

I leave it to history and their more observant contemporaries to decide how much of sheer selfishness goes into their choice of the unmarried state.

Let's go ahead and see why other thoroughly normal women remain unmarried.

NO MEN

We may in all fairness start with the contemporary girl whose hopes of marriage were utterly blighted by the Second World War and other calamities—or postponed to an indefinite day.

There is, of course, the currently tragic figure of the girl whose future husband, perhaps bound to her by a ring and a solemn engagement, died in the service. Certainly marriage has for her suffered a setback.

But, may I pause—even at the risk of spoiling a sequence of thought—to ask this type of young woman not to develop a romantic and wasteful loyalty to the dead hero? Her sharp, immediate grief is normal and right.

Her sense of loss is unaffectedly genuine. But there is no possible excuse for her hugging a grief and nurturing a loss. She is foolish if she decides that with the death of one man, love and marriage for her is over. She is not meant to be a lifelong widow when she never was even a wife. A grief can become an avocation and an expensive luxury. It can be a bad habit and a wasteful one. Be sad for a time, you whose love was lost in war; but do not make sadness the custom of your life and the drapery of your heart, which should, in normal course, come to love again.

TOO FEW MEN

There is, in addition, the painful fact that after a great war the number of marriageable women exceeds the number of available men. Death took too, too many young men in this war. Accidents and sickness and wounds disabled another large sector of the men that the current crop of maidens should or could have married. Then there are some young men who have been unsettled by their years in the service, so unsettled that they do not want to assume the responsibilities of marriage. The thought of a permanent home frightens them; they are reluctant to face the possibility of parenthood.

After wars competition for the available men becomes both consciously and unconsciously keen. Often it will happen that the aggressive, not too modest, or boldly unscrupulous woman turns out to be—to the great bad luck of the males—the winner. The more modest woman who is loath to follow the Jungle law may be left unmarried; the woman who goes out to get her man at whatever price to herself or to him may seem the winner.

The smart man sees through the hunter type of woman. The less smart may be taken in, usually to his own tragedy.

NO APPEAL IN MARRIAGE

In these times, and much more in normal times, there is the girl to whom marriage simply does not appeal. Usually she is perfectly normal. But for any of many reasons she regards other careers as more interesting than marriage—at least, for the immediate present and into a rather indeterminate future. She has a job that appeals to her. She is engaged in some work that will continue to absorb her energies for quite a time. She is so well satisfied with her parents' home that she hates to leave it. Men of her own age she finds very juvenile, immature, self-centred, dull, below her standard of education or breeding. Wisely she does not want to marry a man much older than herself. She is not condescending; she is simply absorbed in what she is doing at the time and content with life as it is.

DIFFICULT CAREER

I should most certainly warn this young woman to be careful. She may be deliberately making the choice; or she may be, without knowing it, drifting into a very difficult life. For there is a great difference between the life of a young unmarried woman and that of an older unmarried woman. While she is young, her job may seem all important. Because of her own perhaps unrecognized physical and social charms there may be a number of men who are paying her attention. She gets dates easily and finds herself 'phoned, invited, mildly or even fervently, courted. Her parents' home is satisfactory, and she has easy access to its facilities for entertaining. She enjoys her own bank account and cheque book and the liberty that makes it possible for her to go and come on whim or will.

But these delightful things do not last. For a woman a job is seldom an equivalent for her own home and family. With the decline of her physical attractions and the dulling of her social graces the number of men who invite her out and enjoy her company grows smaller and smaller, and those men who do remain grow older, duller, less interesting—

or younger, more callow, and annoyingly filial.

Liberty is not the greatest joy in a woman's life. She misses that wonderful sense of "belonging to someone." She wants, she realizes, to be bossed around a bit and be worried over, and to have to report where she is and where she intends to go and what she has been doing. A cheque book is not much of a substitute for a child. A beautiful duplex shared with a girl friend becomes each succeeding year a more and more difficult thing to transform into a home of her own.

The girl with this deliberate or unconscious choice of the unmarried state must be realistic about the future. Indeed, I should urge any woman not to choose this life in cold blood—except for the very highest motives.

SELFISH PARENTS

Too, too many girls remain unmarried because they happen to have selfish, interfering, or doting parents.

Often it is merely a matter of these parents' making their home so attractive that the daughter feels that she could never duplicate it. Certainly none of the boys that she meets are as yet in a position to match the house and the appointments, the means, the comforts, and the entertaining to which she is accustomed.

The ancient funny-paper wheeze that runs, "Young man, can you support my daughter in the style to which she is accustomed?" is seldom asked by a modern father. The questions (with a few minor changes) are unconsciously asked by many a modern daughter, and it may easily motivate her in her refusal to accept a young man who otherwise has everything to recommend him.

Then, there is the parent, usually the mother, who talks down marriage. She hasn't a good word for it. This is more common in the case of broken marriages. The parent who has reared the child will decry marriage, will relate over and over again her own unhappiness, will paint an ugly picture of the nastiness of men and their arrant selfishness. The child comes to be afraid to enter a state that seems to have brought her beloved parent little but unhappiness.

DISCOURAGING SUITORS

In these days of very small families, parents have a way of holding on almost desperately to a beloved daughter. They block her marriage in subtle or violent ways. They build up in her a conviction that if she leaves, their homes will be broken, their happiness gone, their future blighted. They cling to her almost tearfully when she seems to be interested in some young man. They try to fill her days and nights so completely with social events of their choosing that she has little time for the normal parties and dates in the company of other young girls and eligible young men.

Or whatever man she brings to the house at once becomes a target for their steadily aimed arrows. Did you notice how second-rate his clothes were? It was obvious at the restaurant that he didn't know how to order a decent dinner. How absurd he was when they mentioned Gauguin; he'd never even heard of him. And didn't he make a terrible blunder in grammar when he was describing that football game? Has he no interest higher than football and sports? How much is he making? You'd think that a person who had been with such a good firm for three years would be earning considerably more than he was earning. Was he really first-rate in his line? And he'd been through only high school. Would she, in the long run, be satisfied with a man who had no higher education?

PARENTAL SELFISHNESS

Sometimes this attitude is just the case of possessive love on the part of parents. Sometimes it is real greed. I have known families where the parents regarded the education they gave their daughter as a sort of investment and annuity. She was competent now, so she could go out and earn the living for them. In one case I saw a father resign, give up all work, and calmly proceed to live off the fruits of the training he sunk into his smart daughter.

Parents have their rights, but not rights that interfere with their children's normal marriage. In the long run a girl does her parents no favour if she yields to their importunities or their silly stiletto-ing of her suitors. She will, as a rule, be able to do more for them if she is married than she will be able to do if she remains single.

NO INTERESTING MEN?

Then there is the girl who simply never meets men who interest her. Usually if the men are interested in her, she is

not at all interested in them.

The reverse of this type is the girl so terribly eager to get married that she frightens away possible suitors. Men, like other forms of wild life, are quick to scent a hunter. The girl who seemed to me most eager to get married and most relentless in her pursuit of available males remained unmarried for two marriageable decades. She only had to come near a man, and he fled from her huntress eye.

It is my conviction, however, that any girl who really wants to marry probably can and will marry. It may take a little time. In some cases it will take some deliberate skill. Thought is needed, and planning: a study of the ways to make oneself attractive; the things men like to talk about and listen to; a charming home, for which the girl will be at least partly responsible.

This is not, I hasten to add, a discussion of how to get a man. So I merely revert to the fact that there are undoubtedly girls who are not interested in men. They prefer women, and in an entirely wholesome companionship. They do not marry because they do not want to marry.

THE NOBLE TYPE

Finally, we come to that magnificent, unselfish, altogether outstanding girl who with the possibilities of marriage before her takes up the burdens of others and remains unmarried in order to do a job for those others.

There is no possibility of our over-praising that fine elder sister (or, for that matter, younger sister) who undertakes to rear the family of a sister who died when, let's say, her third child was born.

Parents in heaven spend long sectors of eternity praying for the splendid daughter who turned their life of poverty into one of comfort, who watched over their long years of sickness, and who gave her own bright youth that the old age of father and mother might know peace and security and a roof of their own over the bed in which they rested.

One day out of each year we call Mother's Day.

Might I suggest the possibility of a full week dedicated to unselfish aunts?

How many do you know? How many have you met in the course of even a limited experience? I myself could not begin to count the number I've known.

Yet few people pause to thank these saints and heroines. Few if any songs are dedicated to them. Indeed, few of those who profit most by the utter selflessness of these people appreciate the greatness of what these noble women have done—until long years after, when repayment is too late.

A TYPICAL AUNT

I am thinking, as I write these lines, of a beautiful woman in mature middle age who never married but who made a home for her brothers and sisters and later for the children of a younger sister who died in early marriage.

Once as we sat in her living-room, a small group of her close friends, we talked of her past. She was much alone by that time. Her foster family had gone their individual ways; and she had gone back to the work that she had interrupted in her youth and had swiftly mounted to a high executive post.

That evening because the fire was warm and the light was soft and we were all close friends, she opened a chapter in her life that I had always guessed but had never had the, privilege of hearing.

He was, she admitted, a wonderfully fine young Catholic man. They had loved with a strong fidelity ever since they were in the parochial school. He was two grades ahead of her, and he used to take her home after school. Never really had there been anyone else for either of them. As they grew toward young manhood and womanhood, they often talked of their marriage, which they took for granted, and of the home of which they dreamed.

ROMANCE CALLS

"I shall never forget," she said, "the night that we both knew it was all over. We went together to Benediction, and for the last time we knelt together in the pew near Our Lady's altar. Then we came out and walked home along the familiar streets. In front of the house we paused and talked. We both knew it was the last time. He had just been offered his big chance—a job on the far coast—that meant important promotion and the certainty of a career and success.

“ ‘Please come with me,’ he pleaded.

“We both knew that he would never ask again.

“It wasn’t easy . . . no, not a bit easy. For a moment I wanted to say, ‘Wait till I pack my bag.’

“But romance wasn’t meant for my life, I guess. It would be just that moment that little Tutti, my smallest orphan niece, chose to scramble down the stairs and then run out onto the porch. She was in her night-gown, and she was screaming at the top of her healthy little lungs. Grace, my third sister, tore out after her, growling, as Grace used to do before she had children of her own. My little niece and my orphaned brothers and sisters were all waiting for me, depending on me.

“I don’t think I answered his last plea.

“Tutti and Grace were the answer, and we both knew it. When Grace picked the baby up and piled back into the house, he kissed me good-bye. And that was that.

“If you’re in the mood to do a stale, hackneyed sort of novel, you might use my story’The Old Maid’s Romance.’ Only I wasn’t old in those days. I was a maid of twenty-three with someone else’s family dropped down into my lap, a family to love and provide for and bring to maturity.”

She laughed wryly.

“Will someone please shake up the remains of those cocktails and turn on the radio? . . . dance music by preference.”

TOO USUAL

None of us could use that story. She was entirely right when she called it stale. It is stale as the action of God’s grace; stale as the routine heroism of martyrdom; stale as mother love is stale; stale as the greatness that lies in a woman’s heroic heart. I remembered her story simply because I was young then and the romance seemed fresher than it was. I have known about it in a hundred variants since that time.

If there was anything at all unusual about that story, it was the romance, not the renunciation. She at least had her glimpse of romance: In the case of most of the heroic aunts I have known, they so clearly saw their responsibilities and they accepted them with such concentrated single-mindedness that they never allowed themselves even the possibility of a romance. God had handed them a job to do for others. They did it without heroics or even a passing glimpse at the loves that might have been. A husband was not for them. The home they had to keep going had been started by another and for others. Their children were children less of love than of responsibility—but of a responsibility that grew into devotion and affection and finally the most generous sort of love. They received their families all ready-made. They played no part in those children’s coming into the world; they played every possible part in the shaping of the splendid men and women that those youngsters became.

In the great goodness of God I have known more than my share of these heroically unselfish Catholic aunts, and I have somehow had the great good fortune to experience a measurable overflow of their generosity. I have been happy to have closely associated with me in my work aunts who had for long years learned and practised loyalty and devotion to duty, a great love of God, and the art of doing a splendid job with a minimum of ostentation. Believe me, I know their worth; and I thank God, Who let me have the inspiration of their lives and their collaboration.

TITLE OF NOBILITY

Yes, I like spinsters. I like them very much.

I should like to pause at this point to do something that I should perhaps have done before: give the full descriptive definition of spinster as it is given in the unabridged “Webster-Merriam.” I find to my delighted surprise that though the title originated at the spinning wheel it became a title of nobility. For years it was borne only by unmarried women of the upper classes. It was given to the daughters of a count or of a duke. Later it was considered so much a term of honour that women often kept it after their marriage, especially if the men they married had no title of their own.

Dull piece of antiquarian information?

I don’t think so. I am happy to realize that the despised name is revealed to be a badge of honour. Certainly there should be some title of nobility for the wonderful aunts and elder sisters and noble daughters that you and I have

known, women who have remained unmarried in order that they might do great things out of love for God and for His dependent little ones.

WIDE INFLUENCE—and TEACHERS

It might do us all good if right here and now we took a wide, swift glance about the modern world to see what place is held there by the unmarried woman. What would modern times be without their power, their cleverness, their efficiency, their goodness?

There's a chapter to be written on the unmarried woman in the teaching profession. Into the classrooms of the land women have brought their patience, their gentleness, their consistent good manners. They have done splendid things with our children. They have made English-speaking schools especially Australian and American schools unique in history. They can be rightly proud of their part in those schools, which are largely a monument to the women teachers of the English-speaking world especially in Australia and the North American continent.

A special section could easily be devoted, however, to the Catholic teachers in the public schools particularly in the United States. Observing strictly the regulations of a system that forbids the mention of God and the teaching of Christian ethics, they still carry into their classrooms the Eucharistic Saviour, whom they received that morning at Mass. They set before their pupils the standard of the Christ-like lives that they lead. They are able to present right as right and wrong as wrong, outlining the beautiful and cancelling out the base. They do a great job for the country, a far greater job for its goodness and decency than the country will ever know. (This is certainly true of Australia as well.)

Most young women who deliberately choose the profession of the classroom do so for noble motives. They do not wish to expose themselves to the temptations of the business world. They see in the classroom greater safety for their own souls. And they know that in their contact with the growing young people of the world, Australians, Americans, Canadians, British, Irish, or whoever, they can do fine things for character and for the future.

I believe that most women teachers make a real and recognized sacrifice when they accept the profession. For they know that some men are a little afraid of women school teachers. Men remember the teacher who taught them in the primary classes: an omniscient creature (and they do not like women to be smarter than themselves), an omnipotent being (and they like to be chief rulers of the roost), a creature infinitely old (as her venerable twenty-one years seemed to their infantile seven). Men shy away from marrying a teacher. So when a girl selects a teaching career, it may be a heroic choice, almost a renunciation for many a very attractive girl.

NURSES AND SECRETARIES

There are the wonderful young women who give us their gentle skilled service as nurses. I have liked to quote the great historian who said that the most important invention of the last hundred years since the 1850's Crimean War is modern nursing. Anyone who has ever been under the care of nurses in a modern Catholic hospital gives this comment a hearty second of applause.

Then we can thank the fine unmarried women who have done so much to ameliorate the conditions in that cockpit and bull pen that is modern business.

Hats off to the brilliant secretaries who sit at desks doing the bosses' work while they are out on the golf course "making contacts". The women who stand back of the executives in big business often do the detailed work that makes possible the males' final brilliant decisions and important deals. The quiet, uncomplimented brains of office managers are a blessing to business. And watch the swift rise of those women who today are purchasing agents and advertising chiefs and executives in a dozen fields.

If modern business has retained something of gentility, if it has not become all ruthlessness and fierce masculine competition, I am sure that the record would throw the credit to these fine women who have brought feminine characteristics and virtues where, heaven knows, these virtues and characteristics were and are badly needed.

GRATEFUL PRIESTS

Perhaps the greatest apologist for unmarried women could turn out to be the Catholic parish priest. I do not know half a dozen priests having the heavy responsibilities of parishes who do not look at these women as their finest

auxiliaries. They are the backbone of parish organizations. They are the ones that the pastor can with assurance call upon in every emergency. They are the parishioners most generous with their time and money. They are willing to do the difficult work—moving chairs, cleaning the altar, visiting the sick. They stand ready and eager to do for the Church and the parish the lovely, gracious, self-effacing things that the holy women of Jerusalem did for the Saviour as they followed Him humbly but persistently during His public life.

In Catholic life today there stand magnificently apostolic figures of Catholic lay women who are giving to the Church inspiring service and to every Catholic and humanitarian cause trained intelligence and saintly wills.

And in that same role as apologists for unmarried women the Catholic parish priest could well startle the world with the story—until now untold—of the parish priests' housekeeper. Perhaps most startling of all in that recital would be the multitude of works and careers covered by the term priest's housekeeper.

I sometimes wonder whether the Catholic men of Australia, of America, indeed of the world, may not be shamed into a fuller participation in the awakening apostolate of the laity by the fact that the women, chiefly these unmarried women, are so far ahead of them in zeal and enterprise and interest in the cause of Christ's kingdom.

REWARD

No doubt about it, the unmarried woman has the chance to win a reward exceeding great.

She is able daily to offer to God the beautiful perfume that is her virginal innocence. God loves her for that and honours her with the same kind of reverence that is due Mary. So do those of His followers who see life and measure values with a Christ-like eye.

If the cup of cold water given in Christ's name wins eternal reward, what of the food and drink and clothes and housing that are provided by these generous women again and again and again?

May this saintly woman come very close to God. For there is no interfering love in her life. Those she loves, she loves unselfishly, almost without human reward but in the calm certainly that God is pleased by her life. "Whatsoever you do for the least of these my little ones, you do for me." The words of the Saviour, tremendously reassuring, never fitted anyone more perfectly than they do Catholic teachers, Catholic nurses, Catholic businesswomen, and those sisters, daughters, and aunts who do and do and do—endlessly and without probability of repayment—for the sons and daughters of others—and of God.

The fine Catholic example of this kind of women has far more influence than she herself dreams.

Her laborious unselfishness is a constant rebuke to the greed and self-indulgence of the world. She is one of those unrecognized heroines whose work is never properly praised but is always effective to a degree that will be measured by celestial weights and measures.

She is a not unworthy successor of the holy women of the primitive Church who, with the Apostles and the doctors of the Church, taught a new way of life to humanity.

VISION

Nor can we forget the bright and inspiring vision of St. John. There upon the mount that is Sion he saw the Lamb of God surrounded by the specially honoured one hundred and forty-four thousand, a mystical number embracing the vast host of those who will be nearest the Saviour in eternity. Their closeness to the Saviour, Saint John explains by one simple statement: "For they are virgins." (See Rev 14:4)

Lift up your eyes, you heroines called spinsters! The Saviour of the world loves you most especially and has a place for you in eternity in His own immediate company. It is a glorious certainty.

And if a certain group of spinsters will permit me to bring them back from those sublime heights to a more immediately grateful person . . . I thank you . . . and you . . . and you . . . and you . . . and all you others with whom it has been my happy privilege to be associated in a common enterprise during these many years. I know your holiness. I have felt your unselfishness. I know your shining beauty.

Surely my life has been made rich and full by the fact that I have counted you among my friends and partners in a work for the unmarried Christ and the Virgin Mary.
