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Comment

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Comment by the Editor

OLD AGE

There are many kinds of old people. There are those who sit on quiet porches or potter about gardens in the early morning. Occasionally with feeble steps they venture upon the street. They are beings apart — lingerers from yesterday's throng. Perhaps they see but dimly now the landmarks they have known so long, and there is a deepening hush for them in the street which yesterday rang with tumult. Those who pass them by see only the ashes of burnt-out years — forgetting that there must be the embers of fires kindled in the far-off days of youth. They are waiting now for the time when the glow of the spirit shall fade utterly and they shall slip away from a company that is strange to them and join their own generation.

There are others whose spirit and flesh seem to disregard the years. They say goodbye to the friends of their own time and yet they make themselves a part of the newer order. They go down the years, wide awake but serene; full of the dignity of experience, and enjoying to the utmost "the last of life for which the first was made".

The minds of the old are deep pools of memory — sometimes opaque, sometimes murky, often clear as crystal. And the tales that old people tell vary

accordingly. Sometimes they are mere water, poured out endlessly; often they have a rich flavor of old times and strange ways, but are turbid and confused; sometimes they transport us, clear-visioned and unprejudiced, into the heart of yesterday.

In spite of weakness of flesh and memory, these men and women heavy with years are the living ties that bind us to the past. It is a foolish generation that neglects the lingering visitors from another day, or refuses to listen to the tales they have to tell.

MRS. JANE CLARK KIRKWOOD

An oil painting hangs upon the wall at a point which I pass a dozen times a day. It is the picture of an old woman with white hair surmounted by a lace cap. She is sitting by a window reading a book and smiling, and outside the window are hollyhocks in bloom. A few days ago — in her hundredth year — she quietly closed her book and left the hollyhock window to join her own generation.

She was not a native Iowan. When she was born, in 1821, there were no white residents in Iowa. She grew up in Richland County, Ohio, and was doubtless — at nineteen — somewhat interested in the stirring campaign of 1840 when the favorite son of her State, William Henry Harrison, was elected President. She hardly expected then to live to see his grandson, nearly half a century later, chosen to the same position, and to live on until that same grandson had become a part of a bygone generation.

She married, in 1843, a young lawyer — Samuel J. Kirkwood — and came out with him to Iowa a decade later. She faced with him the difficulties of the war governorship; she lived at Washington, D. C., while he was in the United States Senate and while he was Secretary of the Interior under President Hayes. In 1883 they took a trip to California and the Northwest; then they settled down quietly in the house they had built in 1864 on the edge of Iowa City. Governor Kirkwood died in 1894, but Mrs. Kirkwood continued to occupy the old home for more than a quarter of a century more.

Ninety-nine years is a long time to live; it is an unusually long time for one to keep an interest in living. Mrs. Kirkwood was a mature woman when the Mexican War was fought. It is not too much to say that she took part in the Civil War. She observed with interest the Spanish-American War, and when the World War was in progress she knit dozens of articles for the soldiers. She heard the fanfare and tumult of the log cabin and hard cider presidential campaign of 1840. Eighty years later, in November, 1920, she went proudly to the polls herself and cast her vote for President.

The years were kind to her and spared her faculties, and she looked with sympathetic and intelligent eyes upon the world. Such are the characters that dignify old age, that make life seem worth while, and that give to history a sequence and a meaning.

J. C. P.