The Woman Who Was Forgotten

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Shortly after this story was published in *The American Magazine* (June 1926), the National Education Association wrote Aldrich requesting permission, which she granted, to publish it in their journal. The story was also made into a movie of the same name; in the contract for the movie, Aldrich required that a portion of the proceeds go to fund homes for retired teachers in Washington DC. Still later, as a warning about the dangers of not planning for retirement years, the story was purchased by an insurance company as an advertising vehicle.

There are strong similarities between this story and *Miss Bishop*, although Aldrich claimed they were two distinct stories as this teacher was less hopeful than Miss Bishop. However, the similarities are pervasive: the building to be torn down, the finances, the conclusion.

The ceremony at the end of the story was reenacted for Aldrich's cousin in 1932, six years after publication of "The Woman Who Was Forgotten." The cousin, Miss Louise Barrett, was being honored for teaching for fifty-two years at Whittier School in Brainerd, Minnesota. While Aldrich claimed she never used one specific person but an amalgam of many individuals in her stories, Miss Barrett is probably the closest single model for *Miss Bishop*, for the two cousins, though a generation apart, corresponded and knew each other well.

The occasional use of "Whittier School" in this and other stories is a kind of private greeting from Aldrich to Miss Barrett.

Miss Miller sat on the porch of her little cottage in the soft June dusk. Miss Miller had a given name, but no one ever used it. In spite of the fact that there were a half-dozen others entitled to the same cognomen, she alone was "Miss Miller" to the entire town. Miss Miller, who had come from the East to this Midwest state in her young womanhood, had been principal of the high school for years upon years. And now she was old, with not much to show for those years of service to the community. Service is not a substance. It is immaterial, a disembodied thing. You cannot see it, nor show it to your friends, nor put it in the bank. Because this is true, Miss Miller, sitting in the lush warmth of the new-summer evening, faced The Visitor. Naturally cheerful and optimistic, she had avoided it hitherto. If it had been just Old Age she could have gone out to meet it with cheery greeting. But it was harsher—Dependent Old Age. It is a cruel guest.

A year had gone by since Miss Miller resigned her position. Voluntarily she had given up her work, to forestall any possible action of the school board. Like a surgeon she had operated. Never must anyone say that she had stayed too long, outgrown her usefulness. The phase of the affair which hurt was the agility with which the board had accepted the resignation. They must have been waiting for it. With hurt pride she had packed her house-hold things, rented her cottage, and gone back East to live for a time with a married niece. Because she had helped the niece through college, she carried in the secret place of her heart, like an unborn hope, the thought that the niece would want her to remain for the rest of her life.
By a system of arithmetic as old as the science itself she had worked her problem. It was very simple: a fourth-grade child could have done it. The sum of money in the bank, plus that which would come from the sale of the cottage, made the dividend. The possible number of years which she might live became the rather pathetic divisor. The quotient resulted in a yearly sum which, with good judgment, would cover all her expenses, independent of the niece.

But inherent caution and good sense had caused her to rent her cottage until she could try out the visit. It was well that she had done so, for although the relative's roof was fully forty feet by fifty-eight, it had not seemed quite large enough for her.

The niece had been kind—but the husband, and the children! Miss Mil-ler's sensitive soul shrank from the intrusion which she felt she made. So she had come back to the Midwest town which had seen the work of her life. After all, it was home.

To-day she had finished settling. The old furnishings seemed cordial and friendly. She had a foolish notion that they were glad to see her. Well, she would not leave them again. All day she had been settling them in their accustomed places. It had taken a long time to put the books on the shelves, for she had visited for a few moments with each one. The Shakespeare set, a geometry textbook, the orations of Cicero. The Latin grammar had fallen open at "amo, amas, amat, amamus, amatis, amant." She smiled at the thought of the yearly struggle she had had with the freshmen to keep them from sing-songing it.

And now to-night everything was in order, and Miss Miller sat and faced The Thing. It seemed to have developed horns and cloven hoofs, to have taken on a demonlike leer. For the first time she felt genuine panic. If only she might have her old position back. She was not ill, not even so tired, since the year away. Not a faculty was impaired. To slip back into the old groove would not be at all hard. But to start in another town under new conditions seemed to her almost impossible.

Hitherto she had brushed away all cobwebby troubles with a broom of sane philosophy. But all her keen intelligence, all her humor and brave spirit, could not hide The Thing which stood before her to-night. As she faced the future, she told herself that there was one final sanctuary open to her when the time came—the old people's home which her church supported. She had visited it once.

A cold hand seemed closing around her heart as she recalled the visit. The home had been pleasant and comfortable; but the old ladies sitting on the porch aimlessly watching the world go by were alien souls, women from whom the glow of living had departed. Two of them had been having a long and tiresome argument over their knitting. Miss Miller laughed a little to herself. At least, if she had to go there eventually she would find plenty of things to amuse her. Pathetic roles were not meant for her.

Over and over in the deepening dusk she worked on the problem of her life. If she sold her house, she would have nowhere to go. If she retained it, she would not have money enough to keep her many years. She might do private tutoring, take a roomer or two. Again and again, with sweet courage, she tried to work her problem—so much harder than algebra. "Let $x$ equal the unknown quantity," she said bravely to herself. But there was no answer in the back of the book or anywhere. Not
until God closed the book would she find what \( x \) equaled.

A little boy came running around the corner of the porch with the evening paper. Breathlessly he explained his tardiness: how the cow got out and they had to catch her before he could start with his papers. Miss Miller made a sympathetic comment. She had always been fair with children. She took the paper, went inside, and turned on the light. In a big chair beside her library table she settled herself and looked at the front page. In big black headlines it called to her:

Old High School to be Razed  
Work Begins June Tenth

And then, because the editor was an alumnus, the third line said quite simply:

"Old School, Hail and Farewell!"

It affected her unaccountably, this coincidence of the building and her own life. They were both through, she and the old school, both to be torn down. If Miss Miller sat idly for a long time, let no one enter into the hushed aisle of her thoughts.

After a time she rose with that energetic birdlike movement which characterized her motions, got her knitted white shawl from the closet, and went out of the back door.

Down the walk she passed through a little gate in the rear of the yard and turned down the alley to Mr. Larson's home. That is what she had called him, in dignified courtesy, for all the years that he had been janitor of the high school: Mr. Larson, instead of Chris.

Old Chris was sitting near the back steps with his feet in the cool, dewy grass. He was tipped back in a kitchen chair against the side of the house, a sooty old pipe in his mouth. Seeing Miss Miller, he dropped his chair down on its natural legs, surreptitiously slipped the pipe into the grass, and curled his blue and white socks under his chair. That was the way Miss Miller had affected him for several decades. Jim Larson was there too, with his father. Jim had been one of Miss Miller's high-school boys, one of the few that she never seemed able to get hold of. A taciturn, gloomy-acting boy he had been, with no kindling response to her overtures of friendship. She had done her best to draw him out, but he had graduated with apparently no attachment for her. He had a wife now and two babies, and a harness shop.

"Mr. Larson, I saw by the paper to-night that the old building is to be torn down." Miss Miller had to make an effort to keep her voice steady. She had not realized that it was meaning so much to her.

"Yes; they'll begin the tenth, I see." Old Chris made signs to Jim to bring out another chair for the caller. Even if he retained his own seat, Old Chris knew enough to provide another.

"You still have the key, I suppose, Mr. Larson?"

Old Chris nodded. "Yes, ma’am," he added.

"I wonder if you would let me take it the evening of the ninth . . . that last night before they begin to demolish the building. I’d just like to go over the old place for the last time with a sort of—‘We who are about to die, salute you!’" Old Chris had never heard of the Morituri Salutamus, but he recognized the emotion in Miss Miller's voice.

"You two men will laugh at me for being so sentimental?" Miss Miller questioned apologetically.

"I won't laugh at you." Old Chris, at the risk of a conflagration in his thick woolen sock, pushed his pipe farther under the chair. "It's got me a-feelin' blue already."
Before the two had finished talking Jim Larson left. "He doesn't want to visit with me," Miss Miller thought; "I never got hold of Jim."

There was a little more conversation relative to the school board's plans, and then Miss Miller left with, "Good-night, Mr. Larson, and thank you. I'll come for the key, so if you see someone prowling around the old building don't shoot or call out the constable."

All week the old teacher went about her simple household tasks with something hanging over her. It was as though she had a meeting with a friend or a tryst with a lover, a little like a rendezvous with death.

The evening of the ninth was beautiful. As she stopped for the key, old Chris said, "Well, to-morrow is the day they begin. Sort o' sad, ain't it, Miss Miller?"

There was a moon and the heavy scent of syringa, a warm breeze, and crimson ramblers. It had the smell and feel of old commencements.

At the school grounds Miss Miller went up the broad front walk, worn with the steps of a thousand youthful feet. In the moonlight all discrepancies in the old building were hidden. One could not see the cracks in the brick nor the settling window frames nor the sagging steps. It looked sturdy, unyielding. It seemed to be holding up its head proudly. Like Miss Miller!

She turned the key and pushed the huge iron latch which had clicked to three generations. Softly she stepped into the shadows of the lower hall. It was warm and friendly, as though it welcomed her home. She crossed the room and mounted the stairs, her hand slipping along the banister, as smooth as old ivory from the polishing of countless human palms.

Straight to the main study hall she passed—a huge room with row upon row of seats half in the moonlight and half in the shadow. Her eyes took in the familiar bookcases along one side, the dictionary stand in the corner, and the big desk on a raised platform in front, with the straight-backed chair behind it. Toward the front of the room Miss Miller walked softly, as people do in the presence of the dead.

A composite picture of all the schools seemed before her. Personalities looked at her from every seat, but Miss Miller did not realize that in point of time they were sometimes twenty-five years apart. There sat Mart Richardson, mischievous, indolent, even stupid in the things he did not like. Mart Richardson was a banker now, heavy-set and opulent . . . her banker, who knew her small bank account to its last cent. There was Annie Grayson's seat; Annie was a missionary in China now. Over there had sat "Red" Hamilton; "Red" was a member of the legislature, slated for Congress by his party. Here sat laughing Nan Buskirk, a happy wife and mother. Their old teacher summoned them back, not grown nor successful, but young and needing her.

Slowly she circled the room, recalling a hundred events, funny, exciting, or serious. Then she turned toward an inner room, opened the door and stepped into her own office. Once it had been her Gethsemane: One day she had gone in there full of happiness and the joy of living, engaged to be married. The superintendent had come in to her with drawn face, and told her the heart-tearing contents of the telegram he was bringing. When she came out, some of her had died. The part that lived she had dedicated to her boys and girls, warming her heart at the fire of their youth, putting into her work all
the love and interest she would have given to a husband and home.

Miss Miller crossed the little room, opened the one window and sat down by it. The June breeze, sweet with the smell of flowering things, came in and lifted the tendrils of her gray hair.

Memory went over the road of the years.

After a time she summed them up—the results of the journey. Foolishly she had eaten for thought all her the love and admiration of her boys and girls would com-
decaying devotion. But one could not eat past love nor clothe her. It was not right, nor just, to give all and receive nothing. She had been a fool to think that if she gave her best, the knowledge of service rendered would be its own reward.

Across the street and a block down, some evening social affair was in progress. A dozen cars were gathered at the curbing, and the sound of high gay voices came from across the way. She was left out of even those events now. She had returned from the East, and only a neighbor or two had noticed. She had not been in a pupil's home for a long time. They had forgotten her. Slow tears came, the more painful, because she had hitherto met life with high hope, deep courage, broad

Miss Miller raised her face to the June sky as though to hold intimate converse with someone. How foolish she had been to think that by binding herself to Youth she could hold her own light spirits. That early dedication of hers to the lives of her pupils was all Quixotic. That old idea of carrying a torch ahead to show them the way to unrevealed truths was all wasted effort.

Not only had she dedicated her life to high-school boys and girls, but also specifically to the ones of this community. Several times when she had thought to go to a larger city the junior class had prevailed upon her to stay. "Just to see us graduate;" they had pleaded, and she had been weak, soft, yielding like a mother who could not forsake a younger child. Every waking thought she had given to her pupils. There were teachers who heard lessons, and then left their responsibility, like a raincoat, hanging in the hall. She had not been able to do that.

It had told on her, too. One cannot expend such energy and not age. Service, like sorrow, may beautify only the heart not the face of a woman. She had given the best that was in her, not only that their minds should unfold, but for those other sides of their lives—the physical and moral. Strained eyes in a pupil—and she had not rested until the matter was rec-tified. Recurring headaches—and she had not known peace until the source was traced. And then that other thing, that elusive thing which was neither all physical nor all moral, the attachment of one for another. How she had pondered over it, questioned and advised. Many a mother, less motherly than herself, had either not sensed the danger or, having seen, had lifted no hand to guide. All this she had done for her boys and girls. And what was her reward? Poverty and loneliness. Tears came once more. Some were for her own lost youth and some were for shattered faith in humanity.

Suddenly, in a great whirl of beating wings, a mass of pigeons flew from the bell tower, their bodies almost brushing the window. And then, quite plainly, the bell tapped. Miss Miller heard it, distinctly, a long, low, resonant sound.

Startled, she jumped and looked furtively behind her. She had that queer suffocating feeling that one has when he is conscious of a presence near. For the first
time she felt a creepy, frightened sensation. Her heart was pounding madly. All at once the building was cold and forbidding. It was as though there were soft footfalls, phantom whisperings. The ghosts of all her yester-days seemed haunting the place. Was her brain addled? Had she played too long with her memories? All her poise was gone. She wanted to fly as from a tomb.

It seemed now almost a physical impossibility for her to return through that huge shadow-laden study hall. But there was no other way of egress. She must gather herself together.

With sheer will-power she made herself cross the office to the door. They came again—those eerie rustlings, low murmurs, faint, mocking laughter. There even seemed a far-away uncanny chant of "amo, amas, amat, amamus, amatiss, amant." The bell tapped again, low, reverberating. The pigeons swirled past the window. With an effort Miss Miller swung open the door.

If the room was full of memories they were substantial ones. If it har-bored only dreams, they were materialized. In the moonlight she could see that the seats were full of people. The tops of the desks supported some. Others crowded the aisles. Several layers were banking themselves around the walls.

"Amo, amas, amat," they chanted; "amamus, amatiss, amant." Then there was laughter, high and excited. Someone said, "Oh, don't frighten her." And someone else said, "Turn on the lights, Mart."

Blinding lights flashed on. Miss Miller blinked a moment before she could distinguish the countenances. And then—they were as familiar as the faces of children to a mother.

Miss Miller gasped, "Why, boys and girls, what is it?" She reached out for something to steady herself and caught at the chair behind the desk. Wide-eyed, she slipped into it and gazed questioningly at the sea of faces.

The laughing, buzzing crowd ceased its noise, for someone was raising his hand. It was "Red" Hamilton, sitting in his old seat and snapping his fingers. "Miss Miller, please may I speak?"

Everyone giggled nervously. But it was the Hon. A. J. Hamilton who arose and stood by the side of the seat:

"Years ago to many of us, more recently to others," his smooth, pleasant voice began, "we had a loved teacher who gave the very best that was in her that we might become good men and women. Many times after leaving her we said, 'Some day we will send her a box of flowers.' . . . 'To-morrow we will write her a letter.' . . . 'Soon we will go to see her.' But Time sped by on silver wings, and all the to-morrows became the yesterdays.

"So to-night we have put those promises to ourselves into action. All that is dross in us has melted away. All that is weak has been left behind. Only that which is best in us has come back to pay her homage. My mind is crowded with a hundred things she did for us, things that came to us forcibly only in years after, when lighted by the experiences of our own parenthood: the way she looked after our bodies as well as our minds, the manner in which she helped us and advised us in our small troubles, the way she increased our capacity for the enjoyment of good reading, her Shakespeare class, which inculcated in us an undying love for the greatest of bards. I have heard the lovely throaty voice of Ethel Barrymore, and the liquid, melting tones of Julia Marlowe, but never have I heard them read with more depth of feeling that her own:

"Good night, good night! As sweet repose and rest
Come to thy heart as that within my breast.”

He dropped the third person and turned to the little lady on the platform:

"Miss Miller, all the things that you did for us will never be known. They cannot be counted, nor measured, nor weighed. And because this is so, we have come back to-night to tell you that many times in the midst of the world's work we think of you, that we appreciate you, that as long as life lasts we will love you."

When he sat down, Miss Miller half started from the chair. But there was no opening for her to speak: another hand was swinging in midair. It was Mart Richardson, president of the First National Bank. With a great creaking of the desk he succeeded in pulling his bulk from it and rose.

"'I'm no speechmaker like Red here;' he began jerkily. "But down at my place of business we handle something that speaks louder than words, some-thing that really talks. Now, Miss Miller, years ago you used to make out our report cards, and have us take them home to our folks to sign. I'm not mentioning the time you mailed mine to my father all year instead of giving it to me, having a sort of foolish notion that Uncle Sam would deliver it more safely than I would."

There was a general laugh, and the banker resumed: "What I'm trying to say is that turn about is fair play. Each class you graduated has a report card ready for you to sign. Each class has given you a grade and, just like our old cards, they have to be signed on the back and returned. You sign these on the back, Miss Miller, and return them to my bank to-morrow morning. . . . All right, now. Roll call. Class of '88."

A middle-aged farmer squeezed out from the crowd around the wall, came forward and dropped the "report card " into Miss Miller's lap. It was an oblong piece of paper, thin and white. In the upper right-hand corner a number in three figures kept close company to a dollar sign.

“Class of '89!"

A pleasant-faced woman rose from a front seat and laid another piece of paper in her old teacher's lap.

“Class of ‘90!”

A. J. Hamilton went forward with the gift of his class. And each class, on to the last one Miss Miller had graduated, continued the little ceremony. Thirty-six checks lay in Miss Miller's lap-three dozen white messengers of love.

“Now, Miss Miller;' — Mart Richardson had more to say— "we wanted to give you something, tried to think what you would like best. You know people have to let out their feelings in presents. The boys wanted to buy up all the flowers in town, and the girls wanted to get all the candy. But we finally decided we'd just give you the money and let you make your own choice. You know, even the wise men brought gifts of gold. And say that's where they were wise." There was a general laugh, and then the banker continued: "But don't think for a minute that mere dollars and cents can ever—can ever—"

Something was going wrong with the fat speaker. His voice broke, but he rallied his forces: "Why, when I think of all you've done for this commu-nity— I— I— " He ran his fingers through his hair in an impatient gesture, and then finished lamely, "Oh, pshaw! I might have known better than to try to make a speech. Let's open the baskets now and eat."

There was another laugh. But someone else had risen and was calling out, "Just a minute. Before we eat let's give a vote of thanks to Jim Larson for getting us stirred up. There isn't one of us but was anxious to do something for you, Miss Miller; but it took Jim to have
enough gumption to get us started. I know that he took several days from his business to go to every member of the alumni in town, talk over the ‘phone to those in the country, and write a lot of letters.”

Jim! A great warmth flooded Miss Miller. Jim Larson, whom she had never been able to get hold of!

They did not ask Miss Miller to speak. For that she was very grateful. The baskets were opened and the picnic feast spread in the gymnasium. There were a great many foolish pranks. Someone drew cartoons of all his class-mates, and someone else got out the old physiology skeleton. Eternal Age, pretending that there is no age! And Old Chris rang the bell for the last time . . . the tolling of the death of the building.

But it was when they were ready to go that the last drop was poured into Miss Miller’s overrunning chalice. It was A. J. Hamilton who broached it:

"A few of us have just been wondering if you couldn't come back into high school next year, not for the principalship but just for the English work. You see, I'd rather you'd teach my girl what good literature is than anybody else I know. We thought maybe you'd consider it, seeing you seem so much better than when you went away."

"Why, yes, Red," — Miss Miller flushed with the joy of it — "I could. I feel fine. I feel as well as I ever did."

Then they left, group by group. Miss Miller had a dozen dinner dates. Not that old indefinite, "Come to see me some time, Miss Miller," but "To--morrow night at six" and "Next Friday, on the baby's birthday."

Every group put the same question, "Are you ready now? We'll take you home?" And as many times she answered, "Thank you. I'm not just ready."

Even when the last group asked her, the answer was the same. It was a woman who intuitively sensed it. "Come on;" she whispered. "Can't you see? She wants to be left behind."

Down in the lower hall Miss Miller waited. Erect and smiling, she bade them all good night. Like a mother she stood, watching the last child break the tie which held it to home. Then she stepped back and climbed the stairs to the study hall.

Through the moonlit room she walked quickly, definitely, like one with a duty before her. Behind the desk she stepped as though having a sacred rite to perform. She picked up a piece of chalk, and on the blackboard, which to--morrow and other morrows would no longer be there, she wrote:

For life is the mirror of king and slave,  
'Tis just what we are and do;  
Then give to the world the best you have  
And the best will come back to you.

Then Miss Miller walked firmly down to the lower hall, passed out of the big worn door and turned the key under the latch that had clicked to a thousand youthful hands.