

MORBIDNESS

XXXI

“DO you know,” said a young girl, slipping up to an older woman at a reception—O the faith of the young girl in the woman a dozen years her senior!—“I feel that I am growing morbid. Were you ever morbid? and whatever is a person to do?”

The woman smiled. “Your ailment is about as exceptional as hunger,” she replied, “or as sleepiness, or the love of holidays.” Then as they moved together towards a tea-table, “Do not coddle your morbidness, my dear.”

Better advice the girl will never get. Nothing responds more promptly to cultivation than a tendency to look upon the dark side of things, to peep and potter about one’s own deficiencies, to brood over what happened

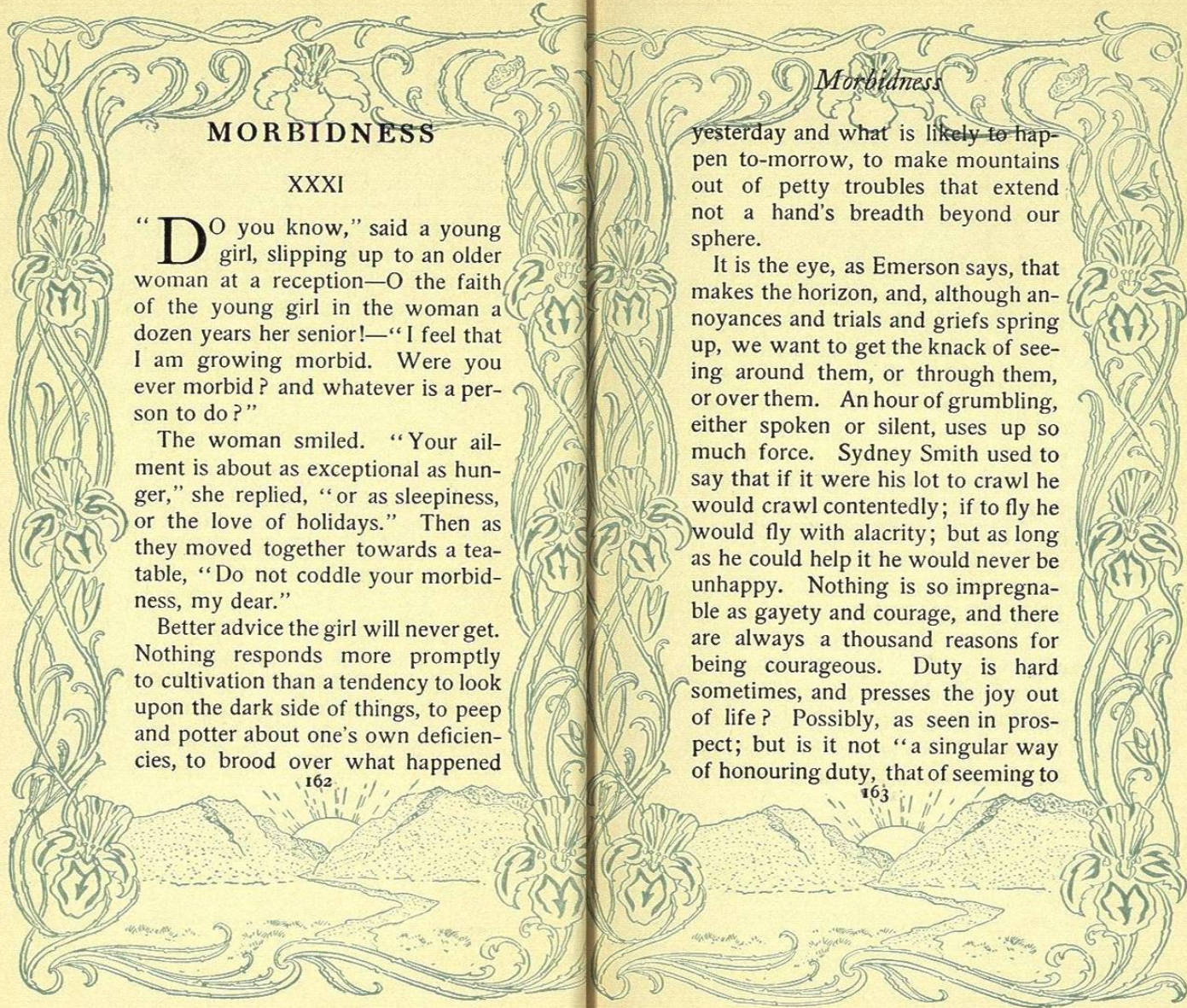
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yesterday and what is likely to happen to-morrow, to make mountains out of petty troubles that extend not a hand’s breadth beyond our sphere.

It is the eye, as Emerson says, that makes the horizon, and, although annoyances and trials and griefs spring up, we want to get the knack of seeing around them, or through them, or over them. An hour of grumbling, either spoken or silent, uses up so much force. Sydney Smith used to say that if it were his lot to crawl he would crawl contentedly; if to fly he would fly with alacrity; but as long as he could help it he would never be unhappy. Nothing is so impregnable as gayety and courage, and there are always a thousand reasons for being courageous. Duty is hard sometimes, and presses the joy out of life? Possibly, as seen in prospect; but is it not “a singular way of honouring duty, that of seeming to

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drag it through life instead of wearing it as a crown"?

Morbidness has not reserved its thrusts for any one alone. Everybody has to exert herself against it, even the persons whom we regard as entirely happy; so when we succumb to it and see others cheerful about us, be sure that we are just so much weaker than they.

How, then, shall we go to work to resist the blue devils which hover around? Eugenie de Guerin answered to that question: "Work, work, work. Keep busy the body which does mischief to the soul. I have been too little occupied to-day, which gives a certain ennui which is in me time to ferment." Emerson declares that to fill the hour, "that is happiness: to fill the hour and leave no crevice for a repentance or an approval"; and Goethe's wise mother told Bettina that it was her habit to dispatch at once whatever she had to do, the most disagreeable always

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first, "gulping down the devil without looking at him." Daniel Deronda's rule of life was "to get more interest in others and more knowledge about the best things."

Proper association is one of the greatest agencies for realizing health and happiness. We should get the capacity for seeing charms in people, and lose no chance of giving pleasure. "I expect to pass through this world but once," the old maxim reads, "if, therefore, there be any kindness I can show or any good I can do, let me do it now, for I shall not pass this way again." To go and sit down by some one whose continual lot it is to suffer pain, to visit the poor and needy, teaches many things by simple comparison. Exercise in the open air and right habits of living, wide views of life, a variety of occupations, a pride that will keep back tears, a willingness to be happy rather than miserable and

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to seek the small joys, the resolve to put on gladness "that majestic atmosphere in which one may live the charmed life," a little more pluck which will scorn to run at the first defeat, prompt decision against coddling one's morbidness, a few more self-conquests, a little more heroism—these will transform a life of dreariness into one of triumph.

Above all, as Emerson wrote to his daughter, "Finish every day and have done with it. For manners and for wise living it is a sin to remember. You have done what you could; some blunders and absurdities no doubt crept in; forget them as soon as you can. To-morrow is a new day; you shall begin it well and serenely, with too high a spirit to be cumbered with your old nonsense. This day for all that is good and fair. It is too dear, with all its hopes and occupations to waste a moment on the rotten yesterdays."

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ONE STEP AT A TIME

XXXII

A MUSEUM having been opened in a provincial town, the doorkeeper was particularly enjoined to let no one pass without first taking charge of his stick or umbrella. Presently in sauntered an individual, his hands stuck in his pockets.

"Sticks and umbrellas to be left here," vociferated Cerebus.

"Cannot you see that I have none?"

"Then you must go out and get one; my orders are positive: I cannot let you in without."

If the doorkeeper had been a woman, the absurd anecdote would have been characteristic of one phase of her disposition. The careless, easy-going sight-seer, unencumbered by an umbrella, and the fortunate

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One Step at a Time

possessor of pockets, would have awakened in her an instinctive desire to drop an obstacle in his way.

"Bridget, Bridget!" she calls at four o'clock Monday morning, "this is wash-day, and to-morrow is ironing-day, and the next day is Wednesday—week half gone and nothing done yet!" and poor Bridget, instead of springing up with the energy born of a new week, drags herself forth oppressed by the three busy days that her mistress has rudely heaped upon her. "Ah," exclaimed poor Sarah Maud, eldest of the nine little Ruggleses in the "Birds' Christmas Carol," "I could mind my own manners, but the manners of nine!"

It is in their own paths, however, that women like best to place incumbrances. The Lord made them patient, so why should they not toil over all the hard places that can be found; the Lord made them self-sacrificing, so why not wear out their

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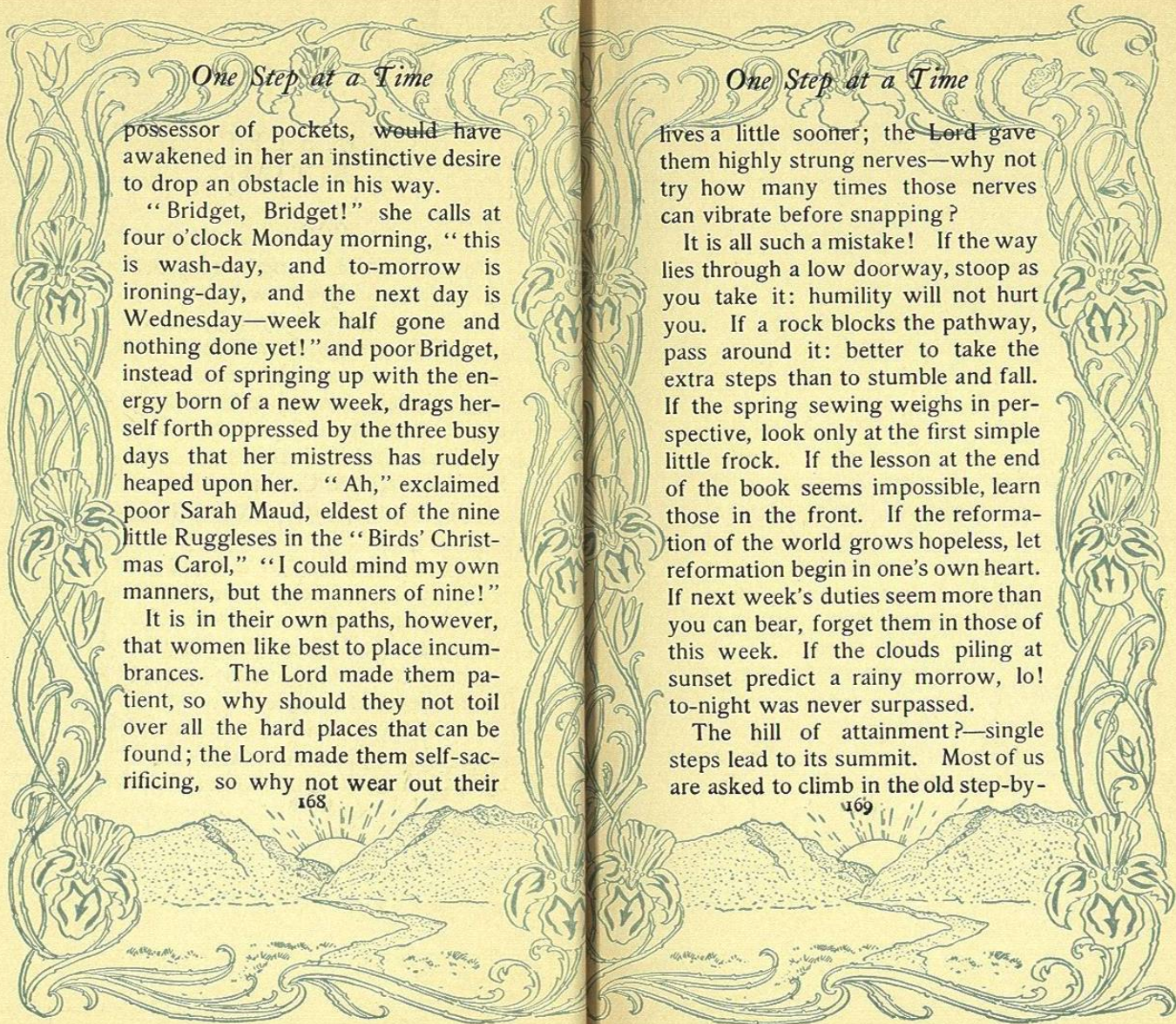
One Step at a Time

lives a little sooner; the Lord gave them highly strung nerves—why not try how many times those nerves can vibrate before snapping?

It is all such a mistake! If the way lies through a low doorway, stoop as you take it: humility will not hurt you. If a rock blocks the pathway, pass around it: better to take the extra steps than to stumble and fall. If the spring sewing weighs in perspective, look only at the first simple little frock. If the lesson at the end of the book seems impossible, learn those in the front. If the reformation of the world grows hopeless, let reformation begin in one's own heart. If next week's duties seem more than you can bear, forget them in those of this week. If the clouds piling at sunset predict a rainy morrow, lo! to-night was never surpassed.

The hill of attainment?—single steps lead to its summit. Most of us are asked to climb in the old step-by-

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One Step at a Time

step way which even a child understands; and for the few whom He bids fly to the top, "the Lord will provide the wings."

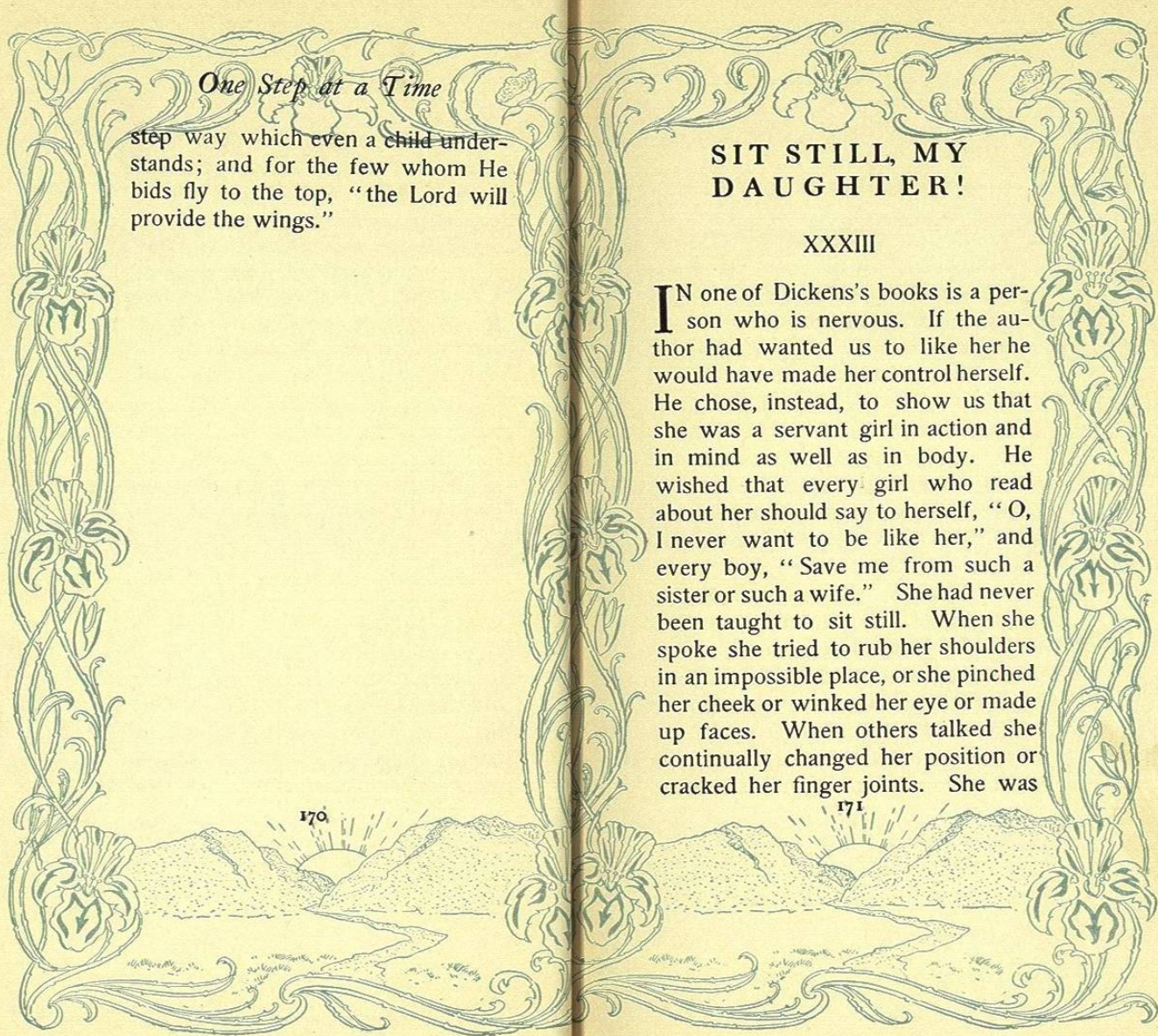
**SIT STILL, MY
DAUGHTER!**

XXXIII

IN one of Dickens's books is a person who is nervous. If the author had wanted us to like her he would have made her control herself. He chose, instead, to show us that she was a servant girl in action and in mind as well as in body. He wished that every girl who read about her should say to herself, "O, I never want to be like her," and every boy, "Save me from such a sister or such a wife." She had never been taught to sit still. When she spoke she tried to rub her shoulders in an impossible place, or she pinched her cheek or winked her eye or made up faces. When others talked she continually changed her position or cracked her finger joints. She was

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Sit Still, My Daughter!

a very distressing person to have about.

Many real girls, alas, are like her. If they sit in rocking-chairs they rock until every one else is fairly dizzy. In armchairs they make a continual tattoo with their finger nails. They search for imaginary knots in the cushions, they tap their feet against the floor, they turn suddenly to stare out of a window behind them. With their fingers they trace letters upon their dresses. They sit on one foot for a while and then sit on the other. They run their fingers through their hair, they get the fidgets in their arms.

It is curious to watch the mouths of persons riding in the street cars. Scarcely a single one is in repose. Tongues are moistening lips, and fingers picking at them. Lips are sucked in, pouted, bitten or puckered. Teeth are engaged with tobacco, gum or candy. Jaws are moving aimlessly.

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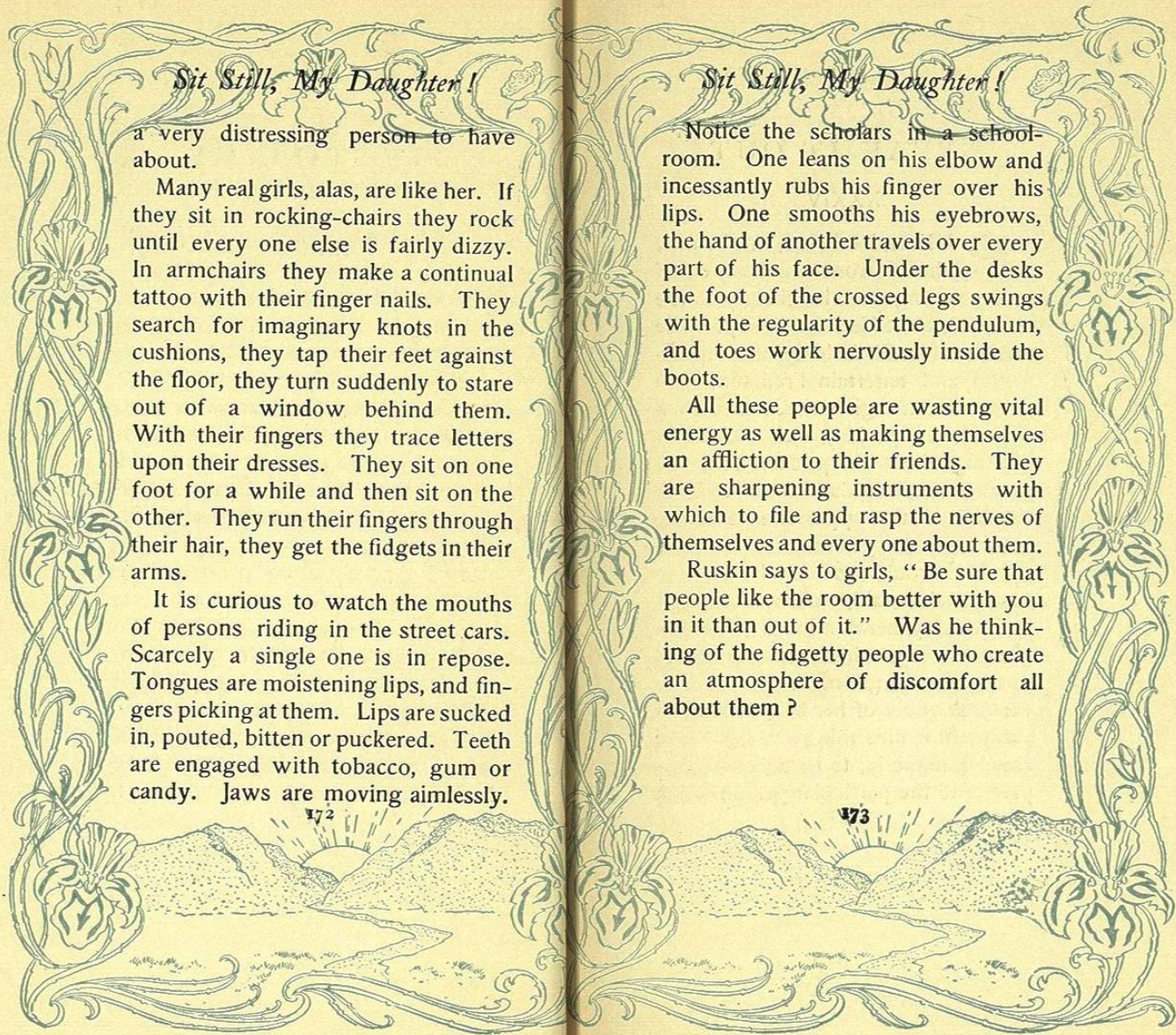
Sit Still, My Daughter!

Notice the scholars in a school-room. One leans on his elbow and incessantly rubs his finger over his lips. One smooths his eyebrows, the hand of another travels over every part of his face. Under the desks the foot of the crossed legs swings with the regularity of the pendulum, and toes work nervously inside the boots.

All these people are wasting vital energy as well as making themselves an affliction to their friends. They are sharpening instruments with which to file and rasp the nerves of themselves and every one about them.

Ruskin says to girls, "Be sure that people like the room better with you in it than out of it." Was he thinking of the fidgety people who create an atmosphere of discomfort all about them?

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SPEAK IT OUT

XXXIV

RUN and tell her, or she may hear it from somebody else," said a young man laughingly to the pretty sister at his side. "There she stands. I will hold your impedimenta and entertain Fred until you return." The girl tried to frown upon the speaker, but ended by handing him a bouquet and fan, and moving off towards a severe-looking woman on the opposite side of the room.

"She would not condescend to gossip," he said, as both youths looked after her admiringly, and one questioningly, "but she dearly loves to retail a compliment. I believe in every chamber of her brain is stowed away some nice thing she has heard about somebody, to be delicately imparted to the particular person when

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Speak It Out

he or she appears. It was your remark about that lady's classic profile which has just taken my sister away. She does not do it for effect either. She says it is stark selfishness: she likes to see the pleasure on people's faces."

"That is the reason, then, that I seem to grow an inch taller whenever I talk with her," Fred replied. "It is like 'Alice in Wonderland.' When I have to swallow warnings about my faults, jokes about my blushing, and so-called frankness in general, I wither all up. Your sister makes a shy fellow think he amounts to something."

No wonder she is a popular girl, and that all kinds of persons make opportunities to meet her. She never thinks it her duty to tell people unpleasant truths, or to declare her whole opinion of them, or to carry unkind intelligence. Metaphorically speaking, she never treads on one's

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Speak It Out

foes. She never croaks. She never gives social stabs. She prefers the oil and wine treatment of wounds. She sees no virtue in making enemies. She agrees with Oliver Wendell Holmes in thinking that friendship does not authorize one to say disagreeable things. She openly declares that she would rather be loved than hated.

"See, now," exclaimed Fred, who had been watching the girl while he was thinking this; "that stern profile is transformed. It does pay to speak out the nice little things one thinks."

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RIDING THE WHITE HORSE

XXXV

A BOY of seven years, delighting in an array of birthday presents, was dared by his sister to throw his gifts into the garden well. He did it before a number of admiring little girls, and thought himself a great hero. His uncle, who had been a celebrated general in the Civil War, found him later in the day crying over his loss. "My dear, you must beware of riding white horses," was his reply to the wondering child.

The little sister who had dared him jumped up in a rowboat one day, crying, "Who is afraid!" She came to grief, naturally, and inflicted a ducking on her innocent friends in the boat with her. "So it is you," her uncle said at the dinner-table, "you who like to ride on white horses!"

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Riding the White Horse

An older brother, just back from Europe, in relating his adventures in the Alps, told of a young woman who climbed with his party to the top of Mont Blanc. On reaching the summit she asked the guide to lift her on his back, in order that she might be able to say that she had climbed higher than any one else in the world.

"She rode up, so to speak," commented the general, whimsically, "on one of our white horses."

"What is it you mean, uncle?" asked the young people. "Our horses are brown, and we never ride them. Tell us, please."

So, as they gathered around him, he told them how in battle the soldiers and officers who rode white horses were at once ranked in the minds of the others as foolhardy and eager to court attention. The rider of a white horse was as inviting a mark to the enemy's sharp-shooters

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Riding the White Horse

as the bull's-eye of a target to a marksman. He seemed to say to the enemy, "Shoot me, if you dare." He endangered not only his own life, so valuable to his country, but the lives of his innocent comrades who were stationed near him.

Riding the white horse is a common trait of the age—the desire to be conspicuous, if only by a badge, a bit of ribbon. The riders are apt to dress in brighter colours than are elsewhere worn, to affect longer coats or larger sleeves or wider skirts or tinier hats than their associates. The girl who saunters up and down the principal streets of the town; who indulges in loud conversation or laughter or in startling expressions that savour of slang; the girl who smokes cigarettes and tipples a little at a so-called soda fountain rides a white horse that is sure, sooner or later to draw shots from the ranks of good society.

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