

like a
FLOWER
in
BLOOM

SIRI MITCHELL



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For Tony,
who always makes sure I take time
to stop and smell the flowers.

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SEPTEMBER 1852
CHESHIRE, ENGLAND

I shifted, glancing up from the illustration I was coloring to look out the many-mullioned window beside me. Outside, the sea tree mallow tossed its pink scalloped blooms as the goldenrod beside it nodded. Someone who had lived in this house during its hundred-year past had taken a fanciful approach to gardening. At least the sea tree mallow, planted far from its beloved salt spray, thrived upon benign neglect. I was quite happy not to have to coddle or otherwise attend to it. The goldenrod, thick with bees, was a foreign invader, having traveled far from its home in what had once been our American colonies.

The yard beyond, stretching down the lane toward the road, was rife with all manner of plants that had no business taking root in Cheshire. Even I, however, could forgive their impudence when they rewarded our forbearance with such brightly colored flowers. It was enough to make me forget that just the other side of our hill lay the town of Overwich with all its brine pits

and the saltworks and its forest of chimneys, which constantly belched clouds of coal smoke and steam.

The wind, having the habit of blowing from the west, kept the noise, the stench, and the peculiarly sticky grime away. Heaven could be thanked for such small mercies. And since nearly every vantage point in the house looked out upon the fields, which tilted toward the horizon, I could easily ignore all the salt-laden carts that trafficked the roads and pretend that I didn't live near a town at all.

Sighing, I pushed my hair from my face with my wrist. Then I picked up my brush again and— Oh dear! In between the waving mallow and goldenrod, the Admiral's ancient carriage came up the lane, proceeding from one mullion to the next in a jerky, shifting progression. I rushed to the old oak door and struggled to pry it open. It always got stuck on the threshold. As the Admiral came through, he bent briskly to kiss my cheek. "My dear Charlotte." Then he moved on past me into the front hall, as if something of urgent import awaited him there.

When we had moved to the county of Cheshire four years after the death of my mother, it was at my uncle, the Admiral's, urging. He called upon us, advertising the town of Overwich as an ideal situation—much less expensive than the city, bounded by farmland and vast fields. Located in the Cheshire Gap, the area's weather was both clement and temperate. The land was composed of barely rolling hills. As my only surviving maternal relative, and having settled upon a permanent state of bachelorhood, my uncle begged the opportunity to spend the remaining years of his life in the embrace of family.

It was not difficult to decide in his favor. London had nearly crept up to our doorstep, and my father had tired of the city. As his work could be done anywhere, we decided to grant my uncle's wish. I had become almost fond of the Admiral since our

move, or at least less afraid of his imposing mien. If truth be told, however, he was rather a blight upon the family's good name.

My mother's father had been the author of *The Botanical History of England*, and his father, my great-grandfather, had been the author of *A Natural History of Essex*, with his father before him having published the first *Catalogus* of the plants in the royal gardens. But the Admiral had put aside all of the honor and respect the family had earned over the generations and took himself to the high seas. The possibility of his being a foundling had been brought up a time or two, but my mother always said the Admiral clearly had the nose of my grandfather, so the family had simply done their best to distance themselves from him.

My father, for his part, had tried to keep the Admiral's exploits in the Opium War from reaching the ears of *his* family, but with my uncle's name mentioned in the broadsheets almost daily during the war, and with his being knighted by the Queen herself, it was an impossibility.

Now having established ourselves in Overwich, Father and the Admiral seemed to have arrived at a sort of uneasy agreement to be friends, and for better or for worse, my uncle made it his business to call upon us weekly.

I left him waiting in the central white-plastered front hall, hands clasped behind his back, feet firmly planted on the floor, as I went to fetch my father.

Once in the hall, my father spied the mail and took it up. Opening the letter I'd earlier received from the British Association for the Advancement of Science, he began to read it.

I plucked it from his hands in order to save him the trouble. "I submitted a paper on the flora of the subantarctic islands."

"And what did they think?"

"They refused it when I submitted it under my own name

last year, but they did tell me that, if you cared to address the subject, they might reconsider.”

He blinked behind his round, wire spectacles. “But I would never address that subject.”

Which had made the rejection all the worse.

“Why would I write about the distribution of plants when my interests lie in the classification of them?”

“My point exactly. But I took the liberty of resubmitting it under your name this year, and they could not praise it enough. They’ve decided to publish it.”

As I spoke, I approached the Admiral for the purpose of taking his coat. He turned around and lifted his arms so I could pull it from his shoulders. I gave it a good shake and hung it from a hook on the hallstand. “I don’t know why I expected the decision to be made on the merit of the work alone.” Why it was that I kept hoping one day I might be published under my own name.

The Admiral removed his grey top hat and tucked it into the crook of his arm as he stood watching me.

“What point is there in any of this if my sex makes my work unacceptable? Why do I even try?”

Father and the Admiral exchanged a look as I turned and walked from the hall into the parlor, intending to return to my illustration.

The Admiral entered behind me, every wave of his side-parted, steel-colored hair gleaming. Every item of his clothing crisply pressed and his boots shining . . . in great contrast to my father, who was quite the opposite. If anything gleamed on him, it was his spectacles. His hair was an indiscriminate greying brown, his jacket wrinkled, his trousers bagging at the knees. And his boots were off his feet entirely. He was standing before us in stockinged feet.

The Admiral was surveying the green velvet sofa and the table, which were piled, as always, with books and specimens and papers. I'm certain he had not failed to note the dust that covered everything with a grey sort of down, though he seemed to pass no judgment upon us. He merely crossed the thread-worn carpet to the fireplace, grabbed hold of his hat, and waved it in our direction. "It's interesting you should comment on the limitations of your sex, Charlotte. I have been trying to convince your father that it's not right for him to keep you shut up here, nor that you should be so devoted to your collections."

"I wouldn't say that he's shut me—"

"Botany is a pastime that many girls of your generation share." He began to pace in front of the soot-stained hearth from which I really ought to have cleaned the ashes last winter. Seeing, however, that autumn was upon us once more, I reasoned that they might as well stay where they were. "We've been told that it's a virtue to investigate God's creation—though we might be better off, of course, if we begged heaven to save us from the virtues of the virtuous—but even you must have observed that even those who are impassioned of plants and flowers do not fail to find a husband or to partake in God's blessings of children and family. If you want to give yourself to a work better suited to your sex, if you wish to partake in all that life has to offer you, perhaps it is that upon which you should focus."

The Admiral still seemed to suffer from the idea that he could do for me those things that he had failed to do for my mother. He had made the same entreaty every year since we had moved to Overwich, and I found the idea no more attractive now than I had in the past.

I sat down in front of my easel, and he continued, "May I dare to think that you are ready to set aside all of this and take up that role for which you have been created? Marriage. Motherhood."

I looked at my father, who refused to meet my eyes. Why should my answer this year be any different than last year's? Marriage and all it involved had nothing to do with subantarctic islands or the distribution of plants. But if the BAAS was right, I had nothing to do with the islands or distribution either. "If I did marry, as you suggest, then who would undertake father's correspondence and keep up with the bills? Who would illustrate his books? And who would classify his specimens?" In short, who would do everything that I had done for years?

"You cannot keep hiding away here, thinking yourself immune to God's great plan."

"My father's work is very important. So why should I not devote myself to its success? Or to the success of my own?"

Father coughed. "What your uncle is trying to say—what he's finally made me come to see—is that I've neglected you for far too long. We have only your happiness as our goal."

"My . . . *happiness*?" He had never been interested in happiness before. His interests lay in lilies and orchids, petals and leaves.

The Admiral smiled at me as he thumped the top of his hat. "You see? We have only your best interests in mind."

We? So they had become united in this effort? I shook my head, intending to resume my work, but discovered that I needed a pen. Going to my desk in the middle of the room, I opened a drawer in hopes of finding it but discovered a pile of specimens and a pocket glass instead. I took them all out and laid them atop the desk. "What is it that you would have me do?" *Where* had I put my pen?

The Admiral picked up the brush I had abandoned. "What any girl in society does. What *every* girl in society does! Do you not think it is time, my dear, to put away your childish things?"

"*Childish* . . . ?" If he called my pursuits childish, then he

was saying the same of my father's pursuits, for they were one and the same.

"Not childish." My father took the brush from my uncle and returned it to my easel. "Charlotte is doing some very interesting work just now. I can't think why the BAAS won't publish it."

"Because they seem to share the Admiral's point of view." I opened another drawer. There it was! I pulled the pen out.

"I did not mean to offend you, my dear girl. What I meant to say is that you must leave off these pursuits that are not worthy of your . . . well . . . your . . ." He grimaced. "What I meant to say was that the blind pursuit of . . . What is it you're working on, again?"

"*Ranunculus*."

"This blind pursuit of *Ranunculus* is not altogether proper, is it?"

"Proper?" *He* was speaking to *me* of what was proper?

"Not for a girl in your position."

"My position? What position is that?"

"Your age. It's not proper for a girl of your age. I hope you'll think on it, my dear. I can tell you from experience that, if you put off things for too long, sometimes you never actually get around to the doing of them."

Pity that he'd never had a wife or children. If he had, then maybe he would be spending his concern on their behalf instead of mine.

"You're a handsome girl, Charlotte. Sturdy. Sound. Snugly put together. It shouldn't be too difficult to put you to the launch."

Put me to the *launch*?

"And don't worry. I know what it's like to feel a fish out of water. It might take some work to introduce you around and push you out over the surf. But at least all those old lessons I learned in the past will have been good for something. I don't

wish to see you expend your life on . . . this.” He turned a jaundiced eye on the detritus of scientific pursuit that surrounded us. “Think on it. Promise me that.”



My uncle left soon after, and I found myself relaxing. He was a restless sort of man, constantly in motion, and something about him always made me stand up straight and throw my shoulders back.

My father let out a long sigh and then settled himself into a chair. “Your mother would have known what to do about all of this.”

Yes, because “all of this” is exactly what she’d done. She’d assisted my father in his work until the day she died. Quite literally. She’d been transcribing his notes right up until the point that she’d fallen over dead.

He shook his head as if I were some recalcitrant child, looking at me through those sad nut-colored eyes that seemed so often to be swimming in tears. The thought that I needed to prevent those tears from spilling over is what had gotten me through those first few years after Mother had died. Through the seemingly endless book contracts. Through the many consultations with him as he lay in the bed they had once shared, claiming that he simply couldn’t bear the thought of getting up. Through the sorting of Mother’s papers and the editing of Father’s discourses.

My desire to protect my father had, in fact, gotten us both here, to Overwich. And if I couldn’t say that I looked forward to the Admiral’s visits, I was grateful his presence had rallied my father’s spirits. Since our move, my father had put off his nightshirt and decided to dress once more. And two years ago, he had taken up his rambles again, coaxing some of the former color back into his cheeks.

“The Admiral says that you really should be out more.” He blinked once. Twice. “That you should *come out*—I believe that’s how he phrased it. And that you should marry.”

“Whom?”

“*Who* whom?”

“Whom am I to marry?” Had he decided that too?

“I don’t know.” My father’s brow furrowed as if in surprise that I would even ask. “There must be someone suitable. Somewhere. Overwich is not some rustic village.”

“And I’m to leave off my work, and yours, in order to find this person?”

“It’s what nature intended, is it not?” He settled into the chair, as if his words marked the end of our discussion.

Nature intended that flora flourish where the conditions were sufficient to sustain them, but I wasn’t so certain that it intended I should marry at the Admiral’s command. “Why should his opinions be so important? You’ve always told me he threw over a promising start in botany in order to join the navy.”

“He’s been out in society much more than you or I. Courtship and marriage are matters that fall more naturally under his purview. If he says it’s time, then I trust his opinion on the matter.”

“But he himself never married!”

“He’s been around many people who have. And there’s a method to the undertaking that I can’t pretend to understand.”

“But what about you and Mother?”

He opened his mouth, closed it, and then with a squint said, “Actually, I can’t quite say for certain how that all came about. . . .” He cleared his throat and shifted in his chair. “It’s true, Charlotte. As the Admiral said, you don’t have many opportunities here, closeted away, working all day.”

“I’m not closeted away. You and I go out for a ramble together every morning. And we go to church on Sunday as well.” I

trusted our cook, Mrs. Harvey, and Her Majesty's Royal Mail for everything else.

"Be that as it may, your uncle is quite persuasive. And I must admit that I've lost track of time since your mother died. You were fifteen, weren't you?"

"Fourteen."

"And now you're nearly twenty-one."

"I am twenty-two."

"Are you? How astonishing." His brows had arched in surprise. "It's been eight years . . . ? But I always expected you'd marry someday. Surely you must have as well."

I hadn't ever really thought on it. After Mother had died, I seemed barely to manage keeping up with our deadlines. I'd never had the time to imagine a future apart from them. Most of my attentions had been fixed of late on the problem of getting my own work published and paying our bills.

"If you're going to marry, you need to get a start on it, as it were."

"I believe the term he used was launch. I must *launch* myself."

"Yes. Well . . . he is in a position to help you."

"The *Admiral* is?"

"He's quite respected in these parts."

"He is?"

Father's shrug indicated that he was just as puzzled at that news as I was. "He wants to help you. Says he'll manage all the fuss . . ."

There was fuss involved?

"And all the dinners and . . . and . . . other . . . things that it would require. I think that you should do it."

He sounded quite uncharacteristically firm in his opinion, which made me think it was best to nip the idea in the bud. "I haven't the time."

He sat forward, squaring his shoulders as he did so. “You would if you didn’t insist upon helping me.”

Insist upon it? “But if I don’t help you, who will?”

“I’ll manage.”

Manage? He’d manage to let the bills sit until a collector came, and he’d confuse his letters to Mr. Pierce with the letters to Mr. Peece and jumble up his notes, and he wouldn’t get anything done at all. “Are you saying you don’t want my help?”

“I’m simply saying that I don’t need it.”