

The Casting Away of Mrs. Leeks and Mrs. Aleshine Short Guide

The Casting Away of Mrs. Leeks and Mrs. Aleshine by Frank R. Stockton

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Overview

The Casting Away of Mrs. Leeks and Mrs. Aleshine is an adventure about the two widows, Mrs. Leeks and Mrs. Aleshine who, after a lifetime of hard work on their farms, set out on what is supposed to be a relaxing retirement cruise to Japan. In mid-ocean, however, they are shipwrecked by a collision and cast ashore on a deserted island, like Daniel Defoe's Robinson Crusoe (1719).

The characters are unflappable in the face of disaster and deprivation. They respond to the demands of their island sojourn with a renewed determination to maintain proper moral conduct. They apply lifelong habits of diligence and ingenuity to each new situation and solve the most outrageous crises with everyday skills and common sense.

At first their travelling companion and fellow survivor, suave young Mr. Craig, is amused at what he feels is their inappropriate response to situations, but gradually, Mr. Craig comes to admire their pluck and persistence.

Together with another small group of survivors, the castaways re-create on the island a replica of late nineteenth century America. They emerge buoyant with optimism, confident in their accomplishments, and secure in their sense of the triumph of morality and proper behavior over untamed nature.

About the Author

Francis Richard Stockton was born on April 5, 1834, in Philadelphia, Pennsylvania. A slight boy with a limp, he was a good student and won prizes in school for the quality of his writing. At age eighteen, he graduated from Philadelphia's Central High School and set out to learn the art of wood engraving. He first worked with his brother in Philadelphia, and later moved to New York, where he became involved with periodical publishing, a flourishing business during the second half of the nineteenth century.

He began his literary career by writing stories that he himself called imitations of adventure tales, such as Alexandre Dumas's *The Three Musketeers* (1844).

During the 1850s and 1860s, Stockton contributed children's stories to the *Riverside Magazine for Young People*, and worked as an assistant editor for *Hearth and Home* and in 1873 for *St. Nicholas*, two popular magazines of the time.

Under his own name and two pen names (Paul Fort and John Lewees), he published stories and articles for both children and adults. In 1878 he left editing to write full time, primarily for adults. Troubled by painful eye strain from 1876, he dictated his writing to his wife or to a secretary.

Stockton was much in demand as a contributor to various periodicals of his day, especially after the appearance of his most famous story, "The Lady or the Tiger?" (1882), for which he was paid only fifty dollars. One of the most popular humorists of the period, his contemporaries judged him among the ranks of writers like Mark Twain and Henry James.

Stockton believed that the domestic hearth was the center of society, and he extolled everyday virtues such as love, marriage, and family in his writing. He excelled at depicting ordinary characters who act with matter-of-fact composure when confronted with bizarre or absurd situations. Although he often employed mild irony, Stockton refused to moralize, claiming that readers should be able to develop the moral for themselves.

He died on April 20, 1902, in Washington, D.C.



Setting

The story opens as an ocean liner makes its stately way from San Francisco to Yokohama. Mr. Craig, the sophisticated and widely travelled narrator of the story, amuses himself by watching two seemingly naive passengers, who spend their time sitting, knitting, and watching the social whirl of shipboard routine. A collision at sea sinks the ship, and the narrator finds himself adrift with these two widows, who begin to astonish him with the range of useful objects they have prudently brought along.

When they land on the deserted island, the castaways discover a vacant house.

This mysterious dwelling provides an appropriate setting for their talents; the kitchen offers scope for their considerable culinary skills, and the garden only needs tending to be productive. As the women set about making a life for themselves, the tolerant superiority which Mr. Craig has manifested towards the women begins to give way to admiration as he realizes how effectively they are coping with their circumstance.



Social Sensitivity

Much of the middle-class literature of the Victorian era was concerned with the moral improvement of its readers, and Stockton holds up for admiration the practical and moral virtues of his characters. In his fiction, Stockton created many portraits of strong women who, like Mrs. Leeks and Mrs. Aleshine, are able to cope with the problems of life with assurance, common sense, and humor.

Writing at a time of optimism about the future of America and the glories of technological progress, Stockton reflected the genteel tradition with its emphasis on self-confidence, hard work, good manners, and a good heart. These middle-class values sometimes made him insensitive to both the upper and lower classes, and to minorities. The most extreme example of this occurs after the ship has sunk and the widows are treading water. Mrs. Leeks comments that at least they do not have to worry about sharks—having heard that "sharks never bite colored people," they had both pulled on black stockings before leaving the sinking ship. Since part of the humor of the characters is their general ignorance of everything outside their small domestic sphere, this comment is instantly perceived for what it is—a blatant misperception.

Literary Qualities

Stockton fills out a conventional "Robinson Crusoe" plot with humor derived from action, characters, and language. For example, Mr. Craig and Mrs. Leeks are shown tugging on the reluctant Mrs. Aleshine as she hangs over the lifeboat, afraid to let go of the ropes that tie her to the ship. In another scene, the three castaways stand solemnly in their sinking skiff until the water level is high enough for them to float free. The story's humor is accentuated by the author's deliberately understated description of absurd situations, and his use of a mock heroic style that overstates the importance of even the most trivial subjects, such as the widows' lengthy calculations of the precise amount of rent due the absent house owners.

At the beginning of the novel, the reader shares the perceptions of the narrator, Mr. Craig, who struggles to hide his amusement at these two obviously uneducated women who question him about "nautical matters, foreign countries," and his own affairs. But once the story moves from the widows' unfamiliar world of the sea to the island, where their domestic skills bring order to their lives, it is Mr. Craig who is reduced to onlooker. Later in the story, when the widows decide that Mr. Craig should marry Ruth Enderton, they inform him that the ceremony is to be performed immediately. Thunderstruck, he protests loudly. But Mrs. Leeks "with an expression in which there was something of virtuous indignation and something of pity," says "if there ever was anybody that wanted a gardeen, it's you." At this point, the urbane world traveler and guardian of the two women is reduced to a not-very-bright child who will make out best if he just does as he is told. By the end of the book, the reader has come to identify with the widows in their triumphant control of both the narrator and the events of the story. The way in which these three unlikely castaways learn to care for one other lends a gentle charm to the story.

In addition to understatement and mock heroic style (treating the most trivial subject with overstated importance), Stockton effectively uses two other literary devices: (1) a point of view in which the reader at first identifies with the narrator, then with the widows as they take control of the situation, and (2) a balanced pair of characters who are practical, kind, self-reliant, and absolutely confident of their beliefs and abilities.



Themes and Characters

The title, *The Casting Away of Mrs. Leeks and Mrs. Aleshine*, is an ironic comment on the plot of the novel. The two widows are indeed casting off on a pleasure journey after a lifetime of hard work, but they certainly do not cast away their essential natures.

For this cruise to exotic Japan, Mrs. Leeks and Mrs. Aleshine have made up their minds not to be surprised by anything. They placidly accept the wonders of their journey and, when shipwrecked, react as though this were simply an unusual part of the cruise. No matter what happens, they are only momentarily at a loss. For example, when their lifeboat proves unseaworthy, chubby "Barb'ry" Aleshine, who cannot swim and who rides absurdly high in the water thanks to her size and life jacket, seizes a floating oar. With great aplomb, she wields it as though it were a broom and indicates that Mrs. Leeks should follow suit. This behavior promptly saves the situation.

When they discover the empty house on the deserted island, the widows immediately begin to exercise their organizational skills. They overcome their moral scruples about using a stranger's home by determining to deposit a carefully calculated weekly rent in a ginger jar. From this amount, however, they shrewdly subtract what is due them for their housekeeping chores. Next they must decide whether dinner should be served at mid-day or in the evening, which is their attempt to establish a civilized society. As with the mealtime ritual, they take great pains to bring order to their island world.

When another group of castaways is thrown up on their doorstep, the indomitable widows have the opportunity to extend the range of their management. The forgetful and meddlesome Reverend Enderton tries their patience until they devise a way to manage his irritating behavior. They make his life progressively more miserable by subtly altering the routines on which he has come to depend.

The educated, experienced, and reserved Mr. Craig is an effective foil for the two widows. At the beginning of the cruise, the widows look up to him because he seems so worldly. As the story progresses, however, his air of tolerant superiority gives way to a realization that it is the widows who are firmly in command of the situation, not him. To his dismay, Mr. Craig learns that they have decided he should marry Ruth Enderton, the minister's daughter.

Despite his vehement protests against such an improbable scheme, Mr. Craig is drawn inexorably toward the preordained match, and as the group prepares to leave the island, he finds himself happily married to Ruth. The sophisticated narrator is charmed, cajoled, and manipulated into doing what is best for him, what the social order demands, and what Mrs. Leeks and Mrs. Aleshine, in their domestic wisdom, have intended all along.

The characters of Mrs. Leeks and Mrs. Aleshine were based, according to Stockton, on two New England women he knew. Mrs. Leeks is the older and taller of the two, "large-boned and muscular " with "a well-browned countenance" and an air of confident



superiority. She is abrupt, acerbic, and outspoken. Mrs. Aleshine, on the other hand, is younger, jollier, fatter, and, although also sure of her own worth, more genial and more tolerant of the aberrations of others. She also proves to be the more imaginative and sentimental of the two. But one without the other would not be complete. Their longstanding friendship, their perfectly matched teamwork in the household chores, and their unshakable faith in their ability to make do under the most trying of circumstances make them a formidable pair.

In the best tradition of genteel literature, the two widows prove themselves equal to the challenge of establishing hearth and home in a far corner of the globe. Hard work, common sense, moral values, and good manners win the day.

Topics for Discussion

1. What qualities do Mrs. Leeks and Mrs. Aleshine share?
2. Why are the two widows determined to maintain their values, attitudes, and proper conduct even on a desert island?
3. Why are the sailors attracted to Barb'ry Aleshine rather than to Mrs. Leeks?
4. Stockton uses both physical and psychological humor in depicting his characters. What scenes reflect broad physical humor?
5. A plot is based on conflict of some kind. With what and whom are Mrs. Leeks and Mrs. Aleshine in conflict?
6. Life on the island goes smoothly until the arrival of the second group of castaways. Complications arise because the values of the Reverend Enderton differ from those of Mrs. Leeks and Mrs. Aleshine. What are these differences?
7. Does the author expect the reader to take seriously the concern that the two widows have about leaving money for the use of the house, or is this only a humorous exaggeration?



Ideas for Reports and Papers

1. Humor in nineteenth-century American literature is often based on the character of the shrewd Yankee, who typically lacks formal education and lives by his or her wits. Compare Stockton's novel with Mark Twain's *A Connecticut Yankee in King Arthur's Court*. How do these novels compare in their use of the "Yankee" character?

2. Stockton has been accused by critics of creating narrators who are too detached from the action of his stories.

Can this be said of Mr. Craig? How does his detached perspective add to or detract from the plot of the story?

3. Critics argue that one of the effects of novels of travel and adventure is to reinforce the value and appreciation of home. Is this Stockton's position? How does Stockton comment on the values of home by removing his characters to an uncivilized island?

4. Much of the appeal of Stockton's humor depends on incongruity—that is, attitudes, characters, and situations that are unsuitably matched. How is incongruity used in this novel?

5. In humorous fiction the reader may laugh at the characters or with the characters. Analyze Stockton's techniques for generating these responses in the reader.



For Further Reference

Golemba, Henry L. Frank R. Stockton.

Boston: Twayne, 1981. This work includes biographical and critical information. Golemba explores issues of feminism, the genteel tradition, and popular culture.

Griffin, Martin I. J. Frank R. Stockton: A Critical Biography. 1939. Reprint. Port Washington, NY: Kennikat Press, 1965. This detailed biography provides plot summaries of most of Stockton's works.

Phelps, William Lyon. The Advance of the English Novel. New York: Dodd, Mead, 1916. This work analyzes *The Casting Away of Mrs. Leeks* and *Mrs. Aleshine* and another of Stockton's novels, *Captain Horn*.

Quiller-Couch, Arthur Thomas. *Adventures in Criticism*. New York: Putnam's, 1925. This classic American critic praises Stockton and raises questions about his lack of popularity.

Related Titles

Stockton published a sequel to *The Casting Away of Mrs. Leeks and Mrs. Aleshine*. This book, titled *The Dusantes*, is about the family who owned the house on the island. The Dusantes are determined to return the money that the castaways left in the ginger jar, and eventually the two groups meet after being stranded by a blizzard in the Rocky Mountains. The sequel is less successful than the original because it repeats many similar incidents, with predictable results.



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