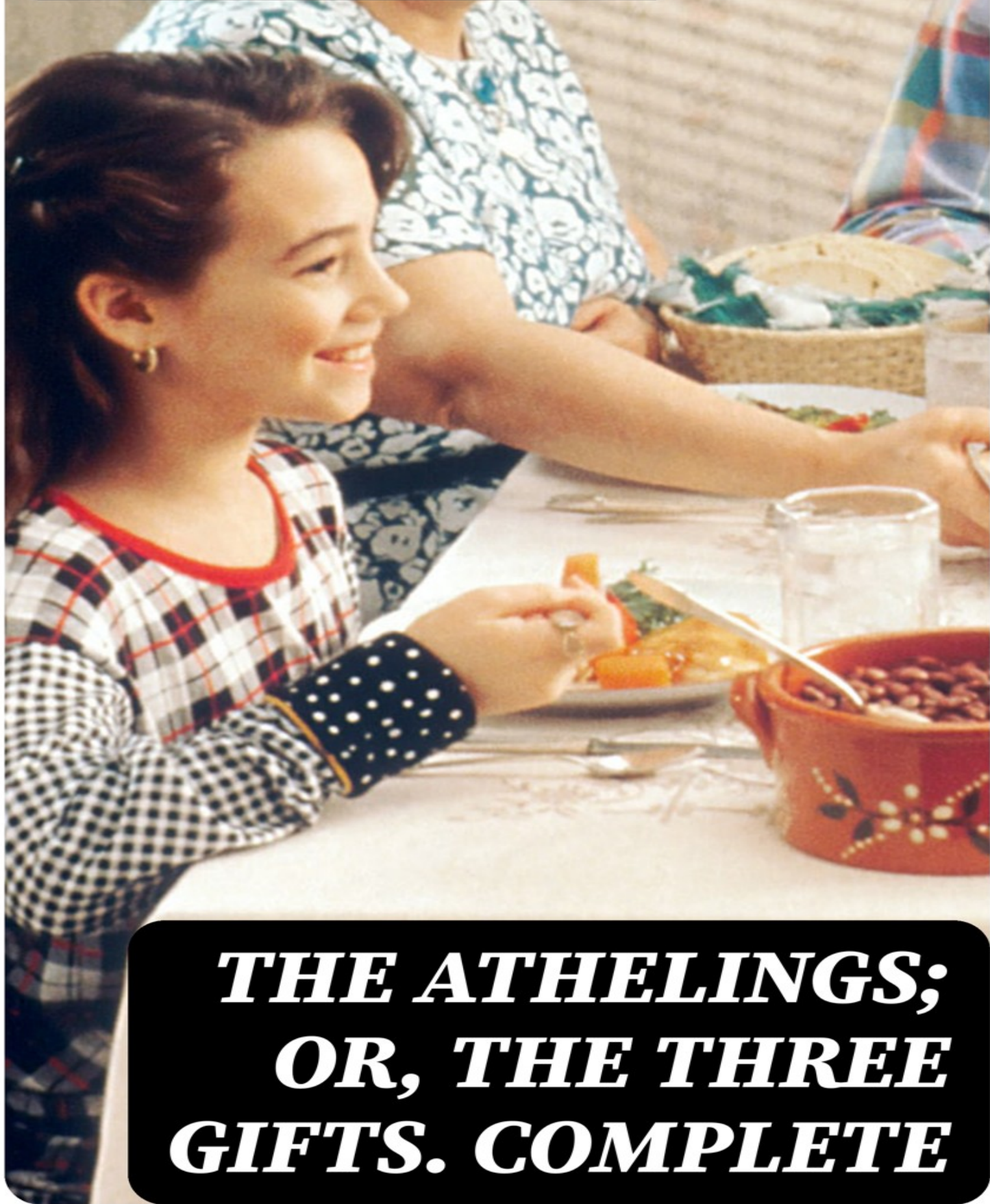


MRS. OLIPHANT



***THE ATHELINGS;
OR, THE THREE
GIFTS. COMPLETE***

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Mrs. Oliphant

The Athelings; or, the Three Gifts. Complete

EAN 8596547039006

DigiCat, 2022

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CHAPTER II.

HOME.

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THE house is old for this locality—larger than this family could have afforded, had it been in better condition,—a cheap house out of repair. It is impossible to see what is the condition of the little garden before the door; but the bushes are somewhat straggling, and wave their long arms about in the rising wind. There is a window on either side of the door, and the house is but two stories high: it is the most commonplace of houses, perfectly comfortable and uninteresting, so far as one may judge from without. Inside, the little hall is merely a passage, with a door on either side, a long row of pegs fastened against the wall, and a strip of brightly-painted oil-cloth on the floor. The parlour door is open—there are but two candles, yet the place is bright; and in it is the lighted window which shines so cheerily into the silent street. The father sits by the fire in the only easy-chair which this apartment boasts; the mother moves about on sundry nameless errands, of which she herself could scarcely give a just explanation; yet somehow that comfortable figure passing in and out through light and shadow adds an additional charm to the warmth and comfort of the place. Two little children are playing on the rug before the fire—very little children, twins scarcely two years old—one of them caressing the slippered foot of Mr Atheling, the other seated upon a great paper book full of little pictures, which serves at once as amusement for the

little mind, and repose for the chubby little frame. They are rosy, ruddy, merry imps, as ever brightened a fireside; and it is hard to believe they are of the same family as Charlie and Agnes and Marian. For there is a woeful gap between the elder and the younger children of this house—an interval of heavy, tardy, melancholy years, the records of which are written, many names, upon one gravestone, and upon the hearts of these two cheerful people, among their children at their own hearth. They have lived through their day of visitation, and come again into the light beyond; but it is easy to understand the peculiar tenderness with which father and mother bend over these last little children—angels of consolation—and how everything in the house yields to the pretty childish caprice of little Bell and little Beau.

Yes, of course, you have found it out: everybody finds it out at the first glance; everybody returns to it with unfailing criticism. To tell the truth, the house is a very cheap house, being so large a one. Had it been in good order, the Athelings could never have pretended to such a “desirable family residence” as this house in Bellevue; and so you perceive this room has been papered by Charlie and the girls and Mrs Atheling. It is a very pretty paper, and was a great bargain; but unfortunately it is not matched—one-half of the pattern, in two or three places, is hopelessly divorced from the other half. They were very zealous, these amateur workpeople, but they were not born paperhangers, and, with the best intentions in the world, have drawn the walls awry. At the time Mrs Atheling was extremely mortified, and Agnes overcome with humiliation; but Charlie and Marian

thought it very good fun; Papa burst into shouts of laughter; Bell and Beau chorused lustily, and at length even the unfortunate managers of the work forgave themselves. It never was altered, because a new paper is an important consideration where so many new frocks, coats, and bonnets are perpetually wanting: everybody became accustomed to it; it was an unfailing source of family witticism; and Mrs Atheling came to find so much relaxation from her other cares in the constant mental effort to piece together the disjointed pattern, that even to her there was consolation in this dire and lamentable failure. Few strangers came into the family-room, but every visitor who by chance entered it, with true human perversity turned his eyes from the comfort and neatness of the apartment, and from the bright faces of its occupants, to note the flowers and arabesques of the pretty paper, wandering all astray over this unfortunate wall.

Yet it was a pretty scene—with Marian's beautiful face at one side of the table, and the bright intelligence of Agnes at the other—the rosy children on the rug, the father reposing from his day's labour, the mother busy with her sweet familiar never-ending cares; even Charlie, ugly and characteristic, added to the family completeness. The head of the house was only a clerk in a merchant's office, with a modest stipend of two hundred pounds a-year. All the necessities of the family, young and old, had to be supplied out of this humble income. You may suppose there was not much over, and that the household chancellor of the exchequer had enough to do, even when assisted by that standing committee with which she consulted solemnly over

every little outlay. The committee was prudent, but it was not infallible. Agnes, the leading member, had extravagant notions. Marian, more careful, had still a weakness for ribbons and household embellishments, bright and clean and new. Sometimes the committee *en permanence* was abruptly dismissed by its indignant president, charged with revolutionary sentiments, and a total ignorance of sound financial principles. Now and then there occurred a monetary crisis. On the whole, however, the domestic kingdom was wisely governed, and the seven Athelings, parents and children, lived and prospered, found it possible to have even holiday dresses, and books from the circulating library, ribbons for the girls, and toys for the babies, out of their two hundred pounds a-year.

Tea was on the table; yet the first thing to be done was to open out the little paper parcels, which proved to contain enclosures no less important than those very ribbons, which the finance committee had this morning decided upon as indispensable. Mrs Atheling unrolled them carefully, and held them out to the light. She shook her head; they had undertaken this serious responsibility all by themselves, these rash imprudent girls.

"Now, mamma, what do you think? I told you we could choose them; and the man said they were half as dear again six months ago," cried the triumphant Marian.

Again Mrs Atheling shook her head. "My dears," said the careful mother, "how do you think such a colour as this can last till June?"

This solemn question somewhat appalled the youthful purchasers. "It is a very pretty colour, mamma," said Agnes,

doubtfully.

“So it is,” said the candid critic; “but you know it will fade directly. I always told you so. It is only fit for people who have a dozen bonnets, and can afford to change them. I am quite surprised at you, girls; you ought to have known a great deal better. Of course the colour will fly directly: the first sunny day will make an end of that. But I cannot help it, you know; and, faded or not faded, it must do till June.”

The girls exchanged glances of discomfiture. “Till June!” said Agnes; “and it is only March now. Well, one never knows what may happen before June.”

This was but indifferent consolation, but it brought Charlie to the table to twist the unfortunate ribbon, and let loose his opinion. “They ought to wear wide-awakes. That’s what they ought to have,” said Charlie. “Who cares for all that trumpery? not old Foggo, I’m sure, nor Miss Willsie; and they are all the people we ever see.”

“Hold your peace, Charlie,” said Mrs Atheling, “and don’t say old Foggo, you rude boy. He is the best friend you have, and a real gentleman; and what would your papa do with such a set of children about him, if Mr Foggo did not drop in now and then for some sensible conversation. It will be a long time before you try to make yourself company for papa.”

“Foggo is not so philanthropical, Mary,” said Papa, for the first time interposing; “he has an eye to something else than sensible conversation. However, be quiet and sit down, you set of children, and let us have some tea.”

The ribbons accordingly were lifted away, and placed in a heap upon a much-used work-table which stood in the

window. The kettle sang by the fire. The tea was made. Into two small chairs of wickerwork, raised upon high stilts to reach the table, were hoisted Bell and Beau. The talk of these small interlocutors had all this time been incessant, but untranslatable. It was the unanimous opinion of the family Atheling that you could “make out every word” spoken by these little personages, and that they were quite remarkable in their intelligibility; yet there were difficulties in the way, and everybody had not leisure for the close study of this peculiar language, nor the abstract attention necessary for a proper comprehension of all its happy sayings. So Bell and Beau, to the general public, were but a merry little chorus to the family drama, interrupting nothing, and being interrupted by nobody. Like crickets and singing-birds, and all musical creatures, their happy din grew louder as the conversation rose; but there was not one member of this loving circle who objected to have his voice drowned in the jubilant uproar of those sweet small voices, the unceasing music of this happy house.

After tea, it was Marian’s “turn,” as it appeared, to put the little orchestra to bed. It was well for the little cheeks that they were made of a more elastic material than those saintly shrines and reliquaries which pious pilgrims wore away with kissing; and Charlie, mounting one upon each shoulder, carried the small couple up-stairs. It was touching to see the universal submission to these infants: the house had been very sad before they came, and these twin blossoms had ushered into a second summer the bereaved and heavy household life.

When Bell and Beau were satisfactorily asleep and disposed of, Mrs Atheling sat down to her sewing, as is the wont of exemplary mothers. Papa found his occupation in a newspaper, from which now and then he read a scrap of news aloud. Charlie, busy about some solitary study, built himself round with books at a side-table. Agnes and Marian, with great zeal and some excitement, laid their heads together over the trimming of their bonnets. The ribbon was very pretty, though it was unprofitable; perhaps in their secret hearts these girls liked it the better for its unthrifty delicacy, but they were too "well brought up" to own to any such perverse feeling. At any rate, they were very much concerned about their pretty occupation, and tried a hundred different fashions before they decided upon the plainest and oldest fashion of all. They had taste enough to make their plain little straw-bonnets very pretty to look at, but were no more skilled in millinery than in paperhanging, and timid of venturing upon anything new. The night flew on to all of them in these quiet businesses; and Time went more heavily through many a festive and courtly place than he did through this little parlour, where there was no attempt at pleasure-making. When the bonnets were finished, it had grown late. Mr Foggo had not come this night for any sensible conversation; neither had Agnes been tempted to join Charlie at the side-table, where lay a miscellaneous collection of papers, packed within an overflowing blotting-book, her indisputable property. Agnes had other ambition than concerned the trimming of bonnets, and had spoiled more paper in her day than the paper of this parlour wall; but we pause till the morning to

exhibit the gift of Agnes Atheling, how it was regarded, and what it was.

CHAPTER III.

AGNES.

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DEAREST friend! most courteous reader! suspend your judgment. It was not her fault. This poor child had no more blame in the matter than Marian had for her beauty, which was equally involuntary. Agnes Atheling was not wise; she had no particular gift for conversation, and none whatever for logic; no accomplishments, and not a very great deal of information. To tell the truth, while it was easy enough to discover what she had not, it was somewhat difficult to make out precisely what she had to distinguish her from other people. She was a good girl, but by no means a model one; full of impatiences, resentments, and despairs now and then, as well as of hopes, jubilant and glorious, and a vague but grand ambition. She herself knew herself quite as little as anybody else did; for consciousness of power and prescience of fame, if these are signs of genius, did not belong to Agnes. Yet genius, in some kind and degree, certainly did belong to her, for the girl had that strange faculty of expression which is as independent of education, knowledge, or culture as any wandering angel. When she had anything to say (upon paper), she said it with so much grace and beauty of language, that Mr Atheling's old correspondents puzzled and shook their grey heads over it, charmed and astonished without knowing why, and afterwards declared to each other that Atheling must be a clever fellow, though they had never discovered it before;

and a clever fellow he must have been indeed, could he have clothed these plain sober sentiments of his in such a radiant investiture of fancy and youth. For Agnes was the letter-writer of the household, and in her young sincerity, and with her visionary delight in all things beautiful, was not content to make a dutiful inquiry, on her mother's part, for an old ailing country aunt, or to convey a bit of city gossip to some clerkish contemporary of her father's, without inducing the humdrum subject with such a glow and glory of expression that the original proprietors of the sentiment scarcely knew it in its dazzling gear. She had been letting her pearls and her diamonds drop from her lips after this fashion, with the prodigality of a young spendthrift—only astonishing the respectable people who were on letter-writing terms with Mr and Mrs Atheling—for two or three years past. But time only strengthened the natural bent of this young creature, to whom Providence had given, almost her sole dower, that gift of speech which is so often withheld from those who have the fullest and highest opportunity for its exercise. Agnes, poor girl! young, inexperienced, and uninstructed, had not much wisdom to communicate to the world—not much of anything, indeed, save the vague and splendid dreams—the variable, impossible, and inconsistent speculations of youth; but she had the gift, and with the gift she had the sweet spontaneous impulse which made it a delight. They were proud of her at home. Mr and Mrs Atheling, with the tenderest exultation, rejoiced over Marian, who was pretty, and Agnes, who was clever; yet, loving these two still more than they admired them, they by no means realised the fact that the one had beauty and the

other genius of a rare and unusual kind. We are even obliged to confess that at times their mother had compunctions, and doubted whether Agnes, a poor man's daughter, and like to be a poor man's wife, ought to be permitted so much time over that overflowing blotting-book. Mrs Atheling, when her own ambition and pride in her child did not move her otherwise, pondered much whether it would not be wiser to teach the girls dress-making or some other practical occupation, "for they may not marry; and if anything should happen to William or me!—as of course we are growing old, and will not live for ever," she said to herself in her tender and anxious heart. But the girls had not yet learned dress-making, in spite of Mrs Atheling's fears; and though Marian could "cut out" as well as her mother, and Agnes, more humble, worked with her needle to the universal admiration, no speculations as to "setting them up in business" had entered the parental brain. So Agnes continued at the side-table, sometimes writing very rapidly and badly, sometimes copying out with the most elaborate care and delicacy—copying out even a second time, if by accident or misfortune a single blot came upon the well-beloved page. This occupation alternated with all manner of domestic occupations. The young writer was as far from being an abstracted personage as it is possible to conceive; and from the momentous matter of the household finances to the dressing of the doll, and the childish play of Bell and Beau, nothing came amiss to the incipient author. With this sweet stream of common life around her, you may be sure her genius did her very little harm.

And when all the domestic affairs were over—when Mr Atheling had finished his newspaper, and Mrs Atheling put aside her work-basket, and Mr Foggo was out of the way—then Papa was wont to look over his shoulder to his eldest child. “You may read some of your nonsense, if you like, Agnes,” said the household head; and it was Agnes’s custom upon this invitation, though not without a due degree of coyness, to gather up her papers, draw her chair into the corner, and read what she had written. Before Agnes began, Mrs Atheling invariably stretched out her hand for her work-basket, and was invariably rebuked by her husband; but Marian’s white hands rustled on unreprieved, and Charlie sat still at his grammar. It was popularly reported in the family that Charlie kept on steadily learning his verbs even while he listened to Agnes’s story. He said so himself, who was the best authority; but we by no means pledge ourselves to the truth of the statement.

And so the young romance was read: there was some criticism, but more approval; and in reality none of them knew what to think of it, any more than the youthful author did. They were too closely concerned to be cool judges, and, full of interest and admiration as they were, could not quite overcome the oddness and novelty of the idea that “our Agnes” might possibly one day be famous, and write for the world. Mr Atheling himself, who was most inclined to be critical, had the strangest confusion of feelings upon this subject, marvelling much within himself whether “the child” really had this singular endowment, or if it was only their own partial judgment which magnified her powers. The family father could come to no satisfactory conclusion upon

the subject, but still smiled at himself, and wondered, when his daughter's story brought tears to his eyes, or sympathy or indignation to his heart. It moved *him* without dispute,—it moved Mamma there, hastily rubbing out the moisture from the corner of her eyes. Even Charlie was disturbed over his grammar. “Yes,” said Mr Atheling, “but then you see she belongs to us; and though all this certainly never could have come into *my* head, yet it is natural I should sympathise with it; but it is a very different thing when you think of the world.”

So it was, as different a thing as possible; for the world had no anxious love to sharpen *its* criticism—did not care a straw whether the young writer was eloquent or nonsensical; and just in proportion to its indifference was like to be the leniency of its judgment. These good people did not think of that; they made wonderful account of their own partiality, but never reckoned upon that hypercritical eye of love which will not be content with a questionable excellence; and so they pondered and marvelled with an excitement half amusing and half solemn. What would other people think?—what would be the judgment of the world?

As for Agnes, she was as much amused as the rest at the thought of being “an author,” and laughed, with her bright eyes running over, at this grand anticipation; for she was too young and too inexperienced to see more than a delightful novelty and unusualness in her possible fame. In the mean time she was more interested in what she was about than in the result of it, and pleased herself with the turn of her pretty sentences, and the admirable orderliness of her manuscript; for she was only a girl.

CHAPTER IV.

MARIAN.

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MARIAN ATHELING had as little choice in respect to her particular endowment as her sister had; less, indeed, for it cost her nothing—not an hour's thought or a moment's exertion. She could not help shining forth so fair and sweet upon the sober background of this family life; she could not help charming every stranger who looked into her sweet eyes. She was of no particular "style" of beauty, so far as we are aware; she was even of no distinct complexion of loveliness, but wavered with the sweetest shade of uncertainty between dark and fair, tall and little. For hers was not the beauty of genius—it was not exalted and heroic expression—it was not tragic force or eloquence of features; it was something less distinct and more subtle even than these. Hair that caught the sunshine, and brightened under its glow; eyes which laughed a sweet response of light before the fair eyelids fell over them in that sweet inconsistent mingling of frankness and shyness which is the very charm of girlhood; cheeks as soft and bloomy and fragrant as any flower,—these seemed but the appropriate language in which alone this innocent, radiant, beautiful youth could find fit expression. For beauty of expression belonged to Marian as well as more obvious beauties; there was an entire sweet harmony between the language and the sentiment of nature upon this occasion. The face would have been beautiful still, had its possessor

been a fool or discontented; as it was, being only the lovely exponent of a heart as pure, happy, and serene as heart could be, the face was perfect. Criticism had nothing to do with an effect so sudden and magical: this young face shone and brightened like a sunbeam, touching the hearts of those it beamed upon. Mere admiration was scarcely the sentiment with which people looked at her; it was pure tenderness, pleasure, unexpected delight, which made the chance passengers in the street smile as they passed her by. Their hearts warmed to this fair thing of God's making—they "blessed her unaware." Eighteen years old, and possessed of this rare gift, Marian still did not know what rude admiration was, though she went out day by day alone and undefended, and would not have faltered at going anywhere, if her mother bade or necessity called. *She* knew nothing of those stares and impertinent annoyances which fastidious ladies sometimes complained of, and of which she had read in books. Marian asserted roundly, and with unhesitating confidence, that "it was complete nonsense"—"it was not true;" and went upon her mother's errands through all the Islingtonian streets as safely as any heroine ever went through ambuscades and prisons. She believed in lovers and knights of romance vaguely, but fervently,—believed even, we confess, in the melodramatic men who carry off fair ladies, and also in disguised princes and Lords of Burleigh; but knew nothing whatever, in her own most innocent and limited experience, of any love but the love of home. And Marian had heard of bad men and bad women,—nay, *knew*, in Agnes's story, the most impossible and short-sighted of villains—a true rascal of

romance, whose snares were made on purpose for discovery,—but had no more fear of such than she had of lions or tigers, the Gunpowder Plot, or the Spanish Inquisition. Safe as among her lawful vassals, this young girl went and came—safe as in a citadel, dwelt in her father's house, untempted, untroubled, in the most complete and thorough security. So far as she had come upon the sunny and flowery way of her young life, her beauty had been no gift of peril to Marian, and she had no fear of what was to come.

And no one is to suppose that Mrs Atheling's small means were strained to do honour to, or "set off," her pretty daughter. These good people, though they loved much to see their children happy and well esteemed, had no idea of any such unnecessary efforts; and Marian shone out of her brown merino frock, and her little pink rosebuds, as sweetly as ever shone a princess in the purple and pall of her high estate. Mrs Atheling thought Marian "would look well in anything," in the pride of her heart, as she pinched the bit of white lace round Marian's neck when Mr Foggo and Miss Willsie were coming to tea. It was indeed the general opinion of the household, and that other people shared it was sufficiently proved by the fact that Miss Willsie herself begged for a pattern of that very little collar, which was so becoming. Marian gave the pattern with the greatest alacrity, yet protested that Miss Willsie had many collars a great deal prettier—which indeed was very true.

And Marian was her mother's zealous assistant in all household occupations—not more willing, but with more execution and practical power than Agnes, who, by dint of a

hasty anxiety for perfection, made an intolerable amount of blunders. Marian was more matter-of-fact, and knew better what she could do; she was constantly busy, morning and night, keeping always in hand some morsel of fancy-work, with which to occupy herself at irregular times after the ordinary work was over. Agnes also had bits of fancy-work in hand; but the difference herein between the two sisters was this, that Marian finished *her* pretty things, while Agnes's uncompleted enterprises were always turning up in some old drawer or work-table, and were never brought to a conclusion. Marian made collars for her mother, frills for Bell and Beau, and a very fine purse for Charlie; which Charlie, having nothing to put in the same, rejected disdainfully: but it was a very rare thing indeed for Agnes to come to an end of any such labour. With Marian, too, lay the honour of far superior accuracy and precision in the important particular of "cutting out." These differences furthered the appropriate division of labour, and the household work made happy progress under their united hands.

To this we have only to add, that Marian Atheling was merry without being witty, and intelligent without being clever. She, too, was a good girl; but she also had her faults: she was sometimes saucy, very often self-willed, yet had fortunately thus far shown a sensible perception of cases which were beyond her own power of settling. She had the greatest interest in Agnes's story-telling, but was extremely impatient to know the end before the beginning, which the hapless young author was not always in circumstances to tell; and Marian made countless suggestions, interfering arbitrarily and vexatiously with the providence of fiction,

and desiring all sorts of impossible rewards and punishments. But Marian's was no quiet or superficial criticism: how she burned with indignation at that poor unbelievable villain!—how she triumphed when all the good people put him down!—with what entire and fervid interest she entered into everybody's fortune! It was worth while being present at one of these family readings, if only to see the flutter and tumult of sympathies which greeted the tale.

And we will not deny that Marian had possibly a far-off idea that she was pretty—an idea just so indistinct and distant as to cause a momentary blush and sparkle—a momentary flutter, half of pleasure and half of shame, when it chanced to glide across her young unburdened heart; but of her beauty and its influence this innocent girl had honestly no conception. Everybody smiled upon her everywhere. Even Mr Foggo's grave and saturnine countenance slowly brightened when her sweet face shone upon him. Marian did not suppose that these smiles had anything to do with her; she went upon her way with a joyous young belief in the goodness of everybody, except the aforesaid impossible people, who were unspeakably black, beyond anything that ever was painted, to the simple imagination of Marian. She had no great principle of abstract benevolence to make her charitable; she was strongly in favour of the instant and overwhelming punishment of all these imaginary criminals; but for the rest of the world, Marian looked them all in the face, frank and shy and sweet, with her beautiful eyes. She was content to offer that small right hand of kindest fellowship, guileless and unsuspecting, to them all.

CHAPTER V.

CHARLIE.

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THIS big boy was about as far from being handsome as any ordinary imagination could conceive: his large loose limbs, his big features, his swarthy complexion, though they were rather uglier in their present development than they were likely to be when their possessor was full-grown and a man, could never, by any chance, gain him the moderate credit of good looks. He was not handsome emphatically, and yet there never was a more expressive face: that great furrowed brow of his went up in ripples and waves of laughter when the young gentleman was so minded, and descended in rolls of cloud when there was occasion for such a change. His mouth was not a pretty mouth: the soft curve of Cupid's bow, the proud Napoleonic curl, were as different as you could suppose from the indomitable and graceless upper-lip of Charlie Atheling. Yet when that obstinate feature came down in fixed and steady impenetrability, a more emphatic expression never sat on the haughtiest curve of Greece. He was a tolerably good boy, but he had his foible. Charlie, we are grieved to say, was obstinate—marvellously obstinate, unpersuadable, and beyond the reach of reasoning. If anything could have made this propensity justifiable—as nothing could possibly make it more provoking—it was, that the big boy was very often in the right. Time after time, by force of circumstances, everybody else was driven to give in to him: whether it

really was by means of astute and secret calculation of all the chances of the question, nobody could tell; but every one knew how often Charlie's opinion was confirmed by the course of events, and how very seldom his odd penetration was deceived. This, as a natural consequence, made everybody very hot and very resentful who happened to disagree with Charlie, and caused a great amount of jubilation and triumph in the house on those occasions, unfrequent as they were, when his boyish infallibility was proved in the wrong.

Yet Charlie was not clever. The household could come to no satisfactory conclusion upon this subject. He did not get on with his moderate studies either quicker or better than any ordinary boy of his years. He had no special turn for literature either, though he did not disdain *Peter Simple* and *Midshipman Easy*. These renowned productions of genius held the highest place at present in that remote corner of Charlie's interest which was reserved for the fine arts; but we are obliged to confess that this big boy had wonderfully bad taste in general, and could not at all appreciate the higher excellences of art. Besides all this, no inducement whatever could tempt Charlie to the writing of the briefest letter, or to any exercise of his powers of composition, if any such powers belonged to him. No, he could not be clever—and yet——

They did not quite like to give up the question, the mother and sisters. They indulged in the loftiest flights of ambition for him, as heaven-aspiring, and built on as slender a foundation, as any bean-stalk of romance. They endeavoured greatly, with much anxiety and care, to make

him clever, and to make him ambitious, after their own model; but this obstinate and self-willed individual was not to be coerced. So far as this matter went, Charlie had a certain affectionate contempt for them all, with their feminine fancies and imaginations. He said only "Stuff!" when he listened to the grand projects of the girls, and to Agnes's flush of enthusiastic confidence touching that whole unconquered world which was open to "a man!" Charlie hitched his great shoulders, frowned down upon her with all the furrows of his brow, laughed aloud, and went off to his grammar. This same grammar he worked at with his usual obstinate steadiness. He had not a morsel of liking for "his studies;" but he "went in" at them doggedly, just as he might have broken stones or hewed wood, had that been a needful process. Nobody ever does know the secret of anybody else's character till life and time have evolved the same; so it is not wonderful that these good people were a little puzzled about Charlie, and did not quite know how to dispose of their obstinate big boy.

Charlie himself, however, we are glad to say, was sometimes moved to take his sisters into his confidence. *They* knew that some ambition did stir within that Titanic boyish frame. They were in the secret of the great discussion which was at present going on in the breast of Charlie, whose whole thoughts, to tell the truth, were employed about the momentous question—What he was to be? There was not a very wide choice in his power. He was not seduced by the red coat and the black coat, like the ass of the problem. The syrens of wealth and fame did not sing in his ears, to tempt him to one course or another. He had

two homely possibilities before him—a this, and a that. He had a stout intention to be *something*, and no such ignoble sentiment as content found place in Charlie's heart; wherefore long, animated, and doubtful was the self-controversy. Do not smile, good youth, at Charlie's two chances—they are small in comparison of yours, but they were the only chances visible to him; the one was the merchant's office over which Mr Atheling presided—head clerk, with his two hundred pounds a-year; the other was, grandiloquently—by the girls, not by Charlie—called the law; meaning thereby, however, only the solicitor's office, the lawful empire and domain of Mr Foggo. Between these two legitimate and likely regions for making a fortune, the lad wavered with a most doubtful and inquiring mind. His introduction to each was equally good; for Mr Atheling was confidential and trusted, and Mr Foggo, as a mysterious rumour went, was not only most entirely trusted and confidential, but even in secret a partner in the concern. Wherefore long and painful were the ruminations of Charlie, and marvellous the balance which he made of precedent and example. Let nobody suppose, however, that this question was discussed in idleness. Charlie all this time was actually in the office of Messrs Cash, Ledger, and Co., his father's employers. He was there on a probationary and experimental footing, but he was very far from making up his mind to remain. It was an extremely difficult argument, although carried on solely in the deep invisible caverns of the young aspirant's mind.

The same question, however, was also current in the family, and remained undecided by the household

parliament. With much less intense and personal earnestness, “everybody” went over the for and against, and contrasted the different chances. Charlie listened, but made no sign. When he had made up his own mind, the young gentleman proposed to himself to signify his decision publicly, and win over this committee of the whole house to his view of the question. In the mean time he reserved what he had to say; but so far, it is certain that Mr Foggo appeared more tempting than Mr Atheling. The family father had been twenty or thirty years at this business of his, and his income was two hundred pounds—“that would not do for me,” said Charlie; whereas Mr Foggo’s income, position, and circumstances were alike a mystery, and might be anything. This had considerable influence in the argument, but was not conclusive; for successful merchants were indisputably more numerous than successful lawyers, and Charlie was not aware how high a lawyer who was only an attorney could reach, and had his doubts upon the subject. In the mean time, however, pending the settlement of this momentous question, Charlie worked at two grammars instead of one, and put all his force to his study. Force was the only word which could express the characteristic power of this boy, if even *that* can give a sufficient idea of it. He had no love for his French or for his Latin, yet learned his verbs with a manful obstinacy worthy all honour; and it is not easy to define what was the special gift of Charlie. It was not a describable thing, separate from his character, like beauty or like genius—it *was* his character, intimate and not to be distinguished from himself.