Warner Susan

A Red Wallflower

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Содержание

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CHAPTER I
AFTER DANDELIONS

It is now a good many years ago that an English family came over from the old country and established itself in one of the small villages that are scattered along the shore of Connecticut. Why they came was not clearly understood, neither was it at all to be gathered from their way of life or business. Business properly they had none; and their way of life seemed one of placid contentment and unenterprising domestic pleasure. The head of the family was a retired army officer, now past the prime of his years; tall, thin, grey, and grave; but a gentleman through and through. Everybody liked Colonel Gainsborough, although nobody could account for a man of his age leading what seemed such a profitless life. He was doing really nothing; staying at home with his wife and his books. Why had he come to Connecticut at all? If he lived for pleasure, surely his own country would have been a better place to seek it. Nobody could solve this riddle. That Colonel Gainsborough had anything to be ashamed of, or anything to be afraid of, entered nobody's head

for a moment. Fear or shame were unknown to that grave, calm, refined face. The whisper got about, how, it is impossible to say, that his leaving home had been occasioned by a disagreement with his relations. It might be so. No one could ask him, and the colonel never volunteered to still curiosity on the subject.

The family was small. Only a wife and one little girl came with the colonel to America; and they were attended by only two old retainers, a man and a woman. They hired no other servants after their arrival, which, however, struck nobody as an admission of scantness of means. According to the views and habits of the countryside, two people were quite enough to look after three; the man outside and the woman inside the house. Christopher Bounder took care of the garden and the cow, and cut and made the hay from one or two little fields. And Mrs. Barker, his sister, was a very capable woman indeed, and quite equal to the combined duties of housekeeper, cook, lady's maid, and housemaid, which she fulfilled to everybody's satisfaction, including her own. However, after two or three years in Seaforth these duties were somewhat lessened; the duties of Mrs. Barker's hands, that is, for her head had more to do. Mrs. Gainsborough, who had been delicate and failing for some time, at last died, leaving an almost inconsolable husband and daughter behind her. I might with truth say quite inconsolable; for at the time I speak of, a year later than Mrs. Gainsborough's death, certainly comfort had come to neither father nor daughter.

It was one morning in spring-time. Mrs. Barker stood at

the door of her kitchen, and called to her brother to come in to breakfast. Christopher slowly obeyed the summons, leaving his spade stuck upright in the bed he was digging, and casting loving looks as he came at the budding gooseberry bushes. He was a typical Englishman; ruddy, fair-skinned, blue-eyed, of very solid build, and showing the national tendency to flesh. He was a handsome man, and not without a sufficiency of self-consciousness, both as regarding that and other things. Mrs. Barker was a contrast; for she was very plain, some years older than her brother, and of rather spare habit though large frame. Both faces showed sense, and the manner of both indicated that they knew their own minds.

'Season's late,' observed Mrs. Barker, as she stepped back from the door and lifted her coffee-pot on the table.

'Uncommon late,' answered her brother. 'Buds on them gooseberry bushes only just showin' green. Now everything will be coming all together in a heap in two weeks more. That's the way o' this blessed climate! And then when everything's started, maybe a frost will come and slap down on us.'

'Peas in?'

'Peas in a fortnight ago. They'll be showin' their heads just now.'

'Christopher, can you get me some greens to day?'

'Greens for what?'

'Why, for dinner. Master likes a bit o' boiled beef now and again, which he used to, anyway; and I thought greens is kind o'

seasonable at this time o' year, and I'd try him with 'em. But la! he don't care no more what he eats.'

'How is the old gentleman?'

'Doin' his best to kill hisself, I should say.'

'Looks like it,' said Christopher, going on with a good breakfast the while in a business manner. 'When a man don't care no more what he eats, the next thing'll be that he'll stop it; and then there's only one thing more he will do.'

'What's that?'

'Die, to be sure!'

'He ain't dyin' yet,' said Mrs. Barker thoughtfully, 'but he ain't doin' the best he can wi's life, for certain. Can ye get me some greens, Christopher?'

'Nothing in *my* department. I can take a knife and a basket and find you some dandelions.'

'Will ye go fur to find 'em?'

'No furder'n I can help, you may make your affidavit, with all there is to do in the garden yet. What's about it?'

'If you're goin' a walk, I'd let Missie go along. She don't get no chance for no diversion whatsomever when young Mr. Dallas don't come along. She just mopes, she do; and it's on my mind, and master he don't see it. I wish he would.'

'The little one does wear an uncommon solemn countenance,' said the gardener, who was in his way quite an educated man, and used language above his station.

'It do vex me,' repeated the housekeeper.

'But young Mr. Dallas comes along pretty often. If Miss Esther was a little older, now, we should see no more of her solemnity. What 'ud master say to that?'

'It's good things is as they be, and we've no need to ask. I don't want no more complications, for my part. It's hard enough to manage as it is.'

'But things won't stay as they be,' said the gardener, with a twinkle of his shrewd blue eye as he looked at his sister. 'Do you expect they will, Sarah? Miss Esther's growin' up fast, and she'll be an uncommon handsome girl too. Do you know that?'

'I shouldn't say she was what you'd go fur to call handsome,' returned the housekeeper.

'I doubt you haven't an eye for beauty. Perhaps one ought to have a bit of it oneself to be able to see it in others.'

'Well I haven't it,' said Mrs. Barker; 'and I never set up to have it. And I allays thought rosy cheeks went with beauty; and Missie has no more colour in her cheeks, poor child, than well – than I have myself.'

'She's got two eyes, though.'

'Who hasn't got two eyes?' said the other scornfully.

'Just the folks that haven't an eye,' said the gardener, with another twinkle of his own. 'But I tell you, there ain't two such eyes as Miss Esther's between here and Boston. Look out; other folk will find it out soon if you don't. There ain't but three years between twelve and fifteen; and then it don't take but two more to make seventeen.'

'Three and two's five, though,' said Mrs. Barker; 'and five years is a long time. And Miss Esther ain't twelve yet, neither. Then when'll ye be goin' after the greens, Christopher?'

'It'll be a bit yet. I'll let you know.'

The fair spring morning was an hour or two farther on its way, accordingly, when the gardener and the little girl set out on their quest after greens. Yet it was still early, for the kitchen breakfast was had betimes. The gardener carried a basket, and Esther too did the like; in hers there was a small trowel, for 'she might find something,' she said. Esther always said that, although hitherto her 'findings' had amounted to nothing of any account; unless, indeed, I correct that, and say, in any eyes but her own. For in Esther's eyes every insignificant growth of the woods or the fields had a value and a charm inexpressible. Nothing was 'common' to her, and hardly anything that grew was relegated to the despised community of 'weeds.'

'What are you going for now, Christopher?' she asked as they trudged on together.

'Well, miss, my old woman there has sent me for some greens. She has a wild tooth for greens, she has,' he added, half to himself.

'What sort of greens can you get?'

'There's various sorts to be had, Miss Esther; a great variety of the herbs of the field are good for eating, at the different times o' the year; even here in this country; and I do suppose there ain't a poorer on the face o' the earth!'

'Than *this* country? than Seaforth? O Christopher!'

'Well, m'm, it beats all *I* ever knew for poorness. You should see England once, Miss Esther! That's the place for gardens; and the fields is allays green; and the flowers do be beautiful; and when the sun*shines*, it shines; here it burns.'

'Not to-day,' said Esther gleefully. 'How nice it is!'

She might say so, for if the spring is rough in New England, and there is no denying it, there do nevertheless come days of bewitching, entrancing, delicious beauty, in the midst of the rest. Days when the air and sky and sunlight are in a kind of poise of delight, and earth beneath them, is, as it were, still with pleasure. I suppose the spring may be more glorious in other lands, – more positively glorious; whether relatively, I do not know. With such contrasts before and behind them, – contrasts of raw, chill air, and rough, cutting winds, with skies of grey and gloom, – one of these perfect days of a lost Paradise stands in a singular setting. It was such a day when Esther and Christopher went after dandelions. Still, balmy air, a tender sky slightly veiled with spring mistiness, light and warmth so gentle that they were a blessing to a weary brain, yet so abundant that every bud and leaf and plant and flower was unfolding and out-springing and stretching upward and dispensing abroad all it had of sweetness. The air was filled with sweetness; not the heavy odours of the blossoms of summer, or the South, but a more delicate and searching fragrance from resinous buds and freshly-opened tree flowers and the young green of the shooting leaf. I don't know

where spring gets it all, but she does fling abroad her handfuls of perfume such as summer has no skill to concoct, or perhaps she lacks the material. Esther drew in deep breaths for the mere pleasure of breathing, and looked on all the world of nature before her with an eye of quiet but intense content.

Christopher had been quite right in his hint about Esther's eyes. They were of uncommon character. Thoughtful, grave, beautiful eyes; large, and fine in contour and colour; too grave for the girl's years. But Esther had lived all her life so far almost exclusively with grown people, and very sober grown people too; for her mother's last years had been dulled with sickness, and her father's with care, even if he had not been – which he was – of a taciturn and sombre deportment in the best of times. And this last year past had been one heavy with mourning. So it was no wonder if the little girl's face showed undue thoughtfulness, and a shade of melancholy all premature. And Christopher was honestly glad to see the melancholy at least vanish under the influence of the open earth and sky. The thoughtfulness, he hoped, would go too some day.

The walk in itself offered nothing remarkable. Fields where the grass was very green and fast growing; other fields that were rocky and broken, and good for little except the sheep, and sometimes rose into bare ridges and heights where spare savins were mingled with a variety of deciduous trees; such was the ground the two went over this morning. This morning, however, glorified everything; the fields looked soft, the moss and lichens

on the rocks were moist and fresh coloured, grey and green and brown; the buds and young leafage of the trees were of every lovely hue and shade that young vegetation can take; and here and there Esther found a wild flower. When she found one, it was very apt to be taken up by the roots with her little trowel, and bestowed in her basket for careful transport home; and on the so endangered beauties in her basket Esther looked down from time to time with fond and delighted eyes.

'Are you going for cresses, Christopher?'

'No, Miss Esther, not at this time. Sarah has set her mind that she must have boiled greens for dinner; and her will must be done. And here is the article – not boiled yet, however.'

He stopped and stooped, and with a sharp knife cut a bunch of stout-looking leaves growing in the grass; then made a step to another bunch, a yard off, and then to another.

'What are they, Christopher?'

'Just dandelions, Miss Esther. *Leontodon taraxacum*.'

'Dandelions! But the flowers are not out yet.'

'No, Miss Esther. If they was out, Sarah might whistle for her greens.'

'Why? You could tell better where they are.'

'They wouldn't be worth the finding, though.'

Christopher went on busily cutting. He did not seem to need the yellow blossoms to guide him.

'How can you be sure, Christopher, that you are always getting the right ones?'

'Know the look o' their faces, Miss Esther.'

'The *flowers* are their faces,' said the little girl.

Christopher laughed a little. 'Then what are the leaves?' said he.

'I don't know. The whole of them together show the *form* of the plant.'

'Well, Miss Esther, wouldn't you know your father, the colonel, as far off as you could see him, just by his figger?'

'But I know papa so well.'

'Not better than I know the *Leontodon*. See, Miss Esther, look at these runcinate leaves.'

'Runcinate?'

'Toothed-pinnatifid. That's what it gets its name from; lion's tooth.*Leontodon* comes from two Greek words which mean a lion and a tooth. See – there ain't another leaf like that in the hull meadow.'

'There are a great many kinds of leaves!' said Esther musingly.

'Like men's human figgers,' said the gardener sagely. 'Ain't no two on 'em just alike.'

Talking and cutting, they had crossed the meadow and came to a rocky height which rose at one side of it; such as one is never very far from in New England. Here there were no dandelions, but Esther eagerly sought for something more ornamental. And she found it. With exclamations of deep delight she endeavoured to dig up a root of bloodroot which lifted its most delicate and dainty blossom a few inches above the dead leaves and moss

with which the ground under the trees was thickly covered. Christopher came to her help.

'What are you goin' to do with this now, Miss Esther?'

'I want to plant it out in my garden. Won't it grow?'

Christopher answered evasively. 'These here purty little things is freaky,' said he. 'They has notions. Now the *Sanguinaria* likes just what it has got here; a little bit of rich soil, under shade of woods, and with covering of wet dead leaves for its roots. It's as dainty as a lady.'

'*Sanguinaria?*' said Esther. 'I call it bloodroot.'

'*Sanguinaria canadensis*. That's its name, Miss Esther.'

'Why isn't the other its name?'

'That's its nickname, you may say. Look here, Miss Esther, – here's the*Hepatica* for you.'

Esther sprang forward to where Christopher was softly pushing dead leaves and sticks from a little low bunch of purple flowers. She stretched out her hand with the trowel, then checked herself.

'Won't that grow either, Christopher?'

'It'll grow *here*, Miss Esther. See, – ain't that nice?' he said, as he bared the whole little tuft.

Esther's sigh came from the depths of her breast, as she looked at it lovingly.

'This is *Hepatica acutiloba*. I dare say we'd find the other, if we had time to go all over the other side of the hill.'

'What other?'

'The *americana*, Miss Esther. But I'm thinking, them greens must go in the pot.'

'But what *is* this lovely little thing? What's its name, I mean?'

'It's the *Hepatica*, Miss Esther; folks call it liverleaf. We ought to find the *Aquilegia* by this time; but I don't see it.'

'Have you got dandelions enough?'

'All I'll try for. Here's something for you, though,' said he, reaching up to the branches of a young tree, the red blossoms of which were not quite out of reach; 'here's something pretty for you; here's *Acer rubrum*.'

'And what is *Acer rubrum?*'

'Just soft maple, Miss Esther.'

'Oh, that is beautiful! Do you know everything that grows, Christopher?'

'No, Miss Esther; there's no man living that does that. They say it would take all one man's life to know just the orchids of South

America; without mentioning all that grows in the rest of the world.

There's an uncommon great number of plants on the earth, to be sure!'

'And trees.'

'Ain't trees plants, mum?'

'Are they? Christopher, are those dandelions *weeds?*'

'No, Miss Esther; they're more respectable.'

'How do you know they're not weeds?'

Christopher laughed a little, partly at his questioner, partly at the question; nevertheless the answer was not so ready as usual.

'They ain't weeds, however, Miss Esther; that's all I can tell you.'

'What are weeds, then?'

'I don't know, mum,' said Christopher grimly. 'They're plants that has no manners.'

'But some good plants have no manners,' said Esther, amused. 'I know I've heard you say, they ran over everything, and wouldn't stay in their places. You said it of moss pink, and lily of the valley. Don't you remember?'

'Yes mum, I've cause to remember; by the same token I've been trimming the box. That thing grows whenever my back is turned!'

'But it isn't a weed?'

'No mum! No mum! The *Buxus* is a very distinguished family indeed, and holds a high rank, it does.'

'Then I don't see what *is* a weed, Christopher.'

CHAPTER II
AT HOME

Upon reaching home Esther sought to place her bloodroot in safety, giving it a soft and well-dug corner in her little plot of garden ground. She planted it with all care in the shadow of a rose-bush; and then went in to put her other flowers in water.

The sitting-room, whither she went, was a large, low, pleasant place; very simply furnished, yet having a cheerful, cosy look, as places do where people live who know how to live. The room, and the house, no doubt, owed its character to the rule and influence of Mrs. Gainsborough, who was there no longer, and to a family life that had passed away. The traces abode still. The chintz hangings and the carpet were of soft colours and in good harmony; chairs and lounges were comfortable; a great many books lined the walls, so many indeed that the room might have been styled the library. A portfolio with engravings was in one place; Mrs. Gainsborough's work-table in another; some excellent bronzes on the bookcases; one or two family portraits, by good hands; and an embroidery frame. A fine English mastiff was sleeping on the rug before the fire; for the weather was still cold enough within doors to make a fire pleasant, and Colonel Gainsborough was a chilly man.

He lay on the couch when Esther came in with her flowers;

a book in his hand, but not held before his eyes. He was a handsome man, of a severe, grave type; though less well-looking at this time because of the spiritless, weary, depressed air which had become his habit; there was a want of spring and life and hope in the features and in the manner also of the occupant of the sofa. He looked at Esther languidly, as she came in and busied herself with arranging her maple blossoms, her Hepatica and one or two delicate stems of the bloodroot in a little vase. Her father looked at the flowers and at her, in silence.

'Papa, aren't those *beautiful?*' she asked with emphasis, bringing the vase, when she had finished, to his side.

'What have you got there, Esther?'

'Just some anemones, and liverleaf, and bloodroot, and maple blossoms, papa; but Christopher calls them all sorts of big names.'

'They are very fragile blossoms,' the colonel remarked.

'Are they? They won't do in the garden, Christopher says, but they grow nicely out there in the wood. Papa, what is the difference between a weed and a flower?'

'I should think you were old enough to know.'

'I know them by sight – sometimes. But what is the *difference?*'

'Your eyes tell you, do they not?'

'No, papa. They tell me, sometimes, which is which; but I mean, why isn't a flower a weed? I asked Christopher, but he couldn't tell me.'

'I do not understand the question. It seems to me you are

talking nonsense.'

The colonel raised his book again, and Esther took the hint, and went back to the table with her flowers. She sat down and looked at them. Fair they were, and fresh, and pure; and they bore spring's messages, to all that could hear the message. If Esther could, it was in a half-unconscious way, that somehow awakened by degrees almost as much pain as pleasure. Or else, it was simply that the glow and stir of her walk was fading away, and allowing the old wonted train of thought to come in again. The bright expression passed from her face; the features settled into a melancholy dulness, most unfit for a child and painful to see; there was a droop of the corners of the mouth, and a lax fall of the eyelids, and a settled gloom in the face, that covered it and changed it like a mask. The very features seemed to grow heavy, in the utter heaviness of the spirit.

She sat so for a while, musing, no longer busy with such pleasant things as flowers and weeds; then roused herself. The weariness of inaction was becoming intolerable. She went to a corner of the room, where a large mahogany box was half-concealed beneath a table covered with a cloth; with a good deal of effort she lugged the box forth. It was locked, and she went to the sofa.

'Papa, may I look at the casts?'

'Yes.'

'You have got the key, papa.'

The key was fished out of the colonel's waistcoat pocket, and

Esther sat down on the floor and unlocked the box. It was filled with casts in plaster of Paris, of old medals and bas-reliefs; and it had long been a great amusement of Esther's to take them all out and look at them, and then carefully pack them all away again between their layers of soft paper and cotton batting. In the nature of the case, this was an amusement that would pall if too often repeated; so it rarely happened that Esther got them out more than three or four times a year. This time she had hardly begun to take them out and place them carefully on the table, when Mrs. Barker came in to lay the cloth for dinner. Esther must put the casts back, and defer her amusement till another time in the day.

Meals were served now for the colonel and his daughter in this same room, which served for sitting-room and library. The dining-room was disused. Things had come by degrees to this irregularity, Mrs. Barker finding that it made her less work, and the colonel in his sorrowful abstraction hardly knowing and not at all caring where he took his dinner. The dinner was carefully served, however, and delicately prepared; for there Barker's pride came in to her help; and besides, little as Colonel Gainsborough attended now to the food he ate, it is quite possible that he would have rebelled against any disorder in that department of the household economy.

The meal times were sorrowful occasions to both the solitary personages who now sat down to the table. Neither of them had become accustomed yet to the empty place at the board.

The colonel ate little and talked none at all; and only Esther's honest childish appetite saved these times from being seasons of intolerable gloom. Even so, she was always glad when dinner was done.

By the time that it was over to-day, and the table cleared, Esther's mood had changed; and she no longer found the box of casts attractive. She had seen what was in it so often before, and she knew just what she should find. At the same time she was in desperate want of something to amuse her, or at least to pass away the time, which went so slowly if unaided. She bethought her of trying another box, or series of boxes, over which she had seen her father and mother spend hours together; but the contents hitherto had not seemed to her interesting. The key was on the same chain with the key of the casts; Esther sat down on the floor by one of the windows, having shoved one of the boxes into that neighbourhood, turned the key, and opened the cover. Her father was lying on the couch again and gave her no attention, and Esther made no call upon him for help.

An hour or two had passed. Esther had not changed her place, and the box, which contained a quantity of coins, was still open; but the child's hands lay idly in her lap, and her eyes were gazing into vacancy. Looking back, perhaps, at the images of former days; smiling images of light and love, in scenes where her mother's figure filled all the foreground. Colonel Gainsborough did not see how the child sat there, nor what an expression of dull, hopeless sorrow lay upon her features. All the life and variety

of which her face was abundantly capable had disappeared; the corners of the mouth drawn down, the brow rigid, the eyes rayless, she sat an image of childish desolation. She looked even stupid, if that were possible to Esther's features and character.

What the father did not see was revealed to another person, who came in noiselessly at the open door. This new-comer was a young man, hardly yet arrived at the dignity of young manhood; he might have been eighteen, but he was really older than his years. His figure was well developed, with broad shoulders and slim hips, showing great muscular power and the symmetry of beauty as well. The face matched the figure; it was strong and fine, full of intelligence and life, and bearing no trace of boyish wilfulness. If wilfulness was there, which I think, it was rather the considered and consistent wilfulness of a man. As he came in at the open door, Esther's position and look struck him; he paused half a minute. Then he came forward, came to the colonel's sofa, and standing there bowed respectfully.

The colonel's book went down. 'Ah, William,' said he, in a tone of indifferent recognition.

'How do you do, sir, to-day?'

'Not very well! my strength seems to be giving way, I think, by degrees.'

'We shall have warm weather for you soon again, sir; that will do you good.'

'I don't know,' said the colonel. 'I doubt it; I doubt it. Unless it could give me the power of eating, which it cannot.

'You have no appetite?'

'That does not express it.'

There was an almost imperceptible flash in the eyes that were looking down at him, the features, however, retaining their composed gravity.

'Perhaps shad will tempt you. We shall have them very soon now. Can't you eat shad?'

'Shad,' repeated the colonel. 'That's your New England piscatory dainty? I have never found out why it is so reckoned.'

'You cannot have eaten them, sir; that's all. That is, not cooked properly. Take one broiled over a fire of corn cobs.'

'A fire of corn cobs!'

'Yes, sir; over the coals of such a fire, of course, I mean.'

'Ah! What's the supposed advantage?'

'Flavour, sir; gusto; a spicy delicacy, which from being the spirit of the fire comes to be the spirit of the fish. It is difficult to put anything so ethereal into words.' This was spoken with the utmost seriousness.

'Ah!' said the colonel. 'Possibly. Barker manages those things.'

'You do not feel well enough to read to-day, sir?'

'Yes,' said the colonel, 'yes. One must do something. As long as one lives, one must try to do something. Bring your book here, William, if you please. I can listen, lying here.'

The hour that followed was an hour of steady work. The colonel liked his young neighbour, who belonged to a family also of English extraction, though not quite so recently moved over as

the colonel's own. Still, to all intents and purposes, the Dallases were English; had English connections and English sympathies; and had not so long mingled their blood with American that the colour of it was materially altered. It was natural that the two families should have drawn near together in social and friendly relations; which relations, however, would have been closer if in church matters there had not been a diverging power, which kept them from any extravagance of neighbourliness. This young fellow, however, whom the colonel called 'William,' showed a carelessness as to church matters which gave him some of the advantages of a neutral ground; and latterly, since his wife's death, Colonel Gainsborough had taken earnestly to the fine, spirited young man; welcomed his presence when he came; and at last, partly out of sympathy, partly out of sheer loneliness and emptiness of life, he had offered to read the classics with him, in preparation for college. And this for several months now they had been doing; so that William was a daily visitor in the colonel's house.

CHAPTER III
THE BOX OF COINS

The reading went on for a good hour. Then the colonel rose from his sofa and went out, and young Dallas turned to Esther. During this hour Esther had been sitting still in her corner by her boxes; not doing anything; and her face, which had brightened at William's first coming in, had fallen back very nearly to its former heavy expression. Now it lighted up again, as the visitor left his seat and came over to her. He had not been so taken up with his reading but he had noticed her from time to time; observed the drooping brow and the dull eye, and the sad lines of the lips, and the still, spiritless attitude. He was touched with pity for the child, whom he had once been accustomed to see very different from this. He came and threw himself down on the floor by her side.

'Well, Queen Esther!' said he. 'What have you got there?'

'Coins.'

'Coins! What are you doing with them?'

'Nothing.'

'So it seems. What do you want to do?'

'I wanted to amuse myself.'

'And don't succeed? Naturally. What made you think you would? Numismatology isn't what one would call a *lively* study.

What were you going to do with these old things, eh?'

'Nothing,' said Esther hopelessly. 'I used to hear papa talk about them; and I liked to hear him.'

'Why don't you get him to talk to you about them again?'

'Oh, he was not talking to *me*.'

'To whom, then?'

Esther hesitated; the young man saw a veil of moisture suddenly dim the grave eyes, and the lips that answered him were a little unsteady.

'It was mamma,' she breathed rather than spoke.

'And you liked to hear?' he went on purposely.

'Oh, yes. But now I can't understand anything by myself.'

'You can understand by yourself as much as most people I know. Let us see what you have got here. May I look?'

He lifted a small piece of metal out of its nest, in a shallow tray which was made by transverse slips of wood to be full of such nests, or little square compartments. The trays were beautifully arranged, one fitting close upon another till they filled the box to its utmost capacity.

'What have we here? This piece has seen service. Here is a tree, Queen Esther, – a flourishing, spreading tree, – and below it the letters, R. E. P. F., if I read aright, and then the word "Reich." What is that, now? "R. E. P. F. Reich." And here is a motto above, I am sorry to say, so far worn that my reading it is a matter of question. "Er," – that is plain, – then a worn word, then, "das Land." Do you understand German?'

'No; I don't know anything.'

'Too sweeping, Queen Esther. But I wish I could read that word! Let us try the other side. Ha! here we have it. "Lud. xvi." – two letters I can't make out – then "Fr. and Nav. Rex." Louis the Sixteenth, king of France and Navarre.'

'I know him, I believe,' said Esther. 'He was beheaded, wasn't he, in the great French revolution?'

'Just that. He was not a wise man, you know.'

'If he had been a wise man, could he have kept his life?'

'Well, I don't know, Queen Esther, whether any wisdom would have been wise enough for that. You see, the people of France were mad; and when a people get mad, they don't listen to reason, naturally. Here's another, now; what's this? "Zeelandia, 1792," not so very old. On the other side – here's a shield, peculiar too; with the motto plain enough, – "Luctor et emergo." A good motto that.'

'What does it mean?'

'It means, something like – "Struggle and come out," or "come through," – literally, "emerge." Our English word comes from it. Colonel Gainsborough does not teach you Latin, then?'

'No,' said Esther, sighing. 'He doesn't teach me much lately, of anything.'

Dallas cast a quick look at the girl, and saw again the expression of quiet hopelessness that had moved him. He went on turning over the coins.

'Do you want to learn Latin?'

'Yes.'

'Why?'

'Why do *you* want to learn it, Pitt?'

'Well, you see, it is different. I must, you know. But queens are not expected to know the dead languages – not Queen Esther, at any rate.'

'Do you learn them because it is expected of you?'

The young man laughed a little.

'Well, there *are* other reasons. Now here's a device. Two lions rampant – shield surmounted by a crown; motto, "Sp. nos in Deo." *Let us hope in God*.'

'Whose motto was that?'

'Just what I can't make out. I don't know the shield – which I ought to know; and the reverse of the coin has only some unintelligible letters: D. Gelriae, 1752. Let us try another, Queen Esther. Ha! here's a coin of William and Mary – both their blessed heads and names; and on the reverse a figure three, and the inscription claiming that over Great Britain, *France* and Ireland, they were "Rex and Regina." Why, this box of coins is a capital place to study history.'

'I don't know history,' Esther said.

'But you are going to know it.'

'Am I? How can I?'

'Read.'

'I don't know what to read. I have just read a little history of England – that's all. Mother gave me that. But when I read, there

are so many things I don't know and want to ask about.'

'Ask the colonel.'

'Oh, he doesn't care to be troubled,' the little girl said sadly.

'Ask me.'

'*You!* But you are not here to ask.'

'True; well, we must see. Ah, here's a pretty thing! See, Esther, here's an elegant crown, really beautiful, with the fleurs de lys of France, and the name of the luckless Louis XVI. "Roi de France and de Navarre" but no date. On the other side, "Isles de France and de Bourbon." These coins seem to belong to European history.'

'There's another box with Greek and Roman coins, and, the names of Roman emperors; but I know *them* even less still than I do these,' said Esther.

'Your want of knowledge seems to weigh upon your mind, Queen Esther.'

'I can't help it,' said the little girl resignedly.

'Are you sure of that? I am not. Well, I wish I knew who this is.'

He had taken up a very small coin, much less than a three-cent piece, and with the help of a magnifying glass was studying it eagerly.

'Why?' said Esther.

'It is such a beautiful head! Wonderfully beautiful, and old. Crowned, and with a small peaked beard; but the name is so worn

off. On the other side "Justitia." Queen Esther, this box is a first-rate place to study history.'

'Is it?'

'It is. What do you say? Suppose you let me come here and study history with you over these old coins; and then you come over to my house and learn Latin with me. Hey?'

He glanced up, and Esther looked at him with a wondering, grave, inquiring face. He nodded in answer and smiled, a little quizzically.

'What do you mean, Pitt?'

'There was a wise man once, who said, the use of language is to conceal one's thoughts. I hope you are not labouring under the impression that such is *my* practice and belief?'

'But would you teach me?' said the girl gravely.

'If your majesty approves.'

'I think it would be very troublesome to you?'

'I, on the contrary, think it would not.'

'But it would after a little while?' said Esther.

'When I want to stop, I'll let you know.'

'Will you? Would you?'

'Both would and will.'

The girl's face grew intense with life, yet without losing its gravity.

'When, Pitt? When would you teach me, I mean?'

'I should say, every day; wouldn't you?'

'And you'll come here to study the coins?'

'And teach you what I learn.'

'Oh! And you'll give me Latin lessons? Lessons to study?'

'Certainly.'

'And we will study history over the coins?'

'Don't you think it will be a good way? Here's a coin of Maria Theresa, now: 1745, Hungary and Böhmen, that is Bohemia. This old piece of copper went through the Seven Years' war.'

'What war was that?'

'Oh, we'll read about it, Queen Esther. "Ad usum," "Belgae, Austria."

These coins are delightful. See here – don't you want to go for a walk?'

'Oh yes! I've had one walk to-day already, and it just makes me want another. Did you see my flowers?'

She jumped up and brought them to him.

'Here's the liverleaf, and anemone, and bloodroot; and we couldn't find the columbine, but it must be out. Christopher calls them all sorts of hard names, that I can't remember.'

'*Anemone* is anemone, at any rate. These two, Esther, this and the*Hepatica*, belong to one great family, the family of the Crowfoots – Ranunculaceae.'

'Oh, but that is harder and harder!'

'No it isn't; it is easier and easier. See, these belong to one family; so you learn to know them as relations, and then you can remember them.'

'How do you know they are of the same family?'

'Well, they have the family features. They all have an acrid sap or juice, exogenous plants, with many stamens. These are the stamens, do you know? They have calyx and corolla both, and the corolla has separate petals, see; and the Ranunculaceae have the petals and sepals deciduous, and the leaves generally cut, as you see these are. They are what you may call a bitter family; it runs in the blood, that is to say, in the juice of them; and a good many of the members of the family are downright wicked, that is, poisonous.'

'Pitt, you talk very queerly?'

'Not a bit more queer than the things are I am talking of. Now this *Sanguinaria* belongs to the Papaveraceae – the poppy family.'

'Does it! But it does not look like them, like poppies.'

'This coloured juice that you see when you break the stem, is one of the family marks of this family. I won't trouble you with the others. But you must learn to know them, Queen Esther. King Solomon knew every plant from the royal cedar to the hyssop on the wall; and I am sure a queen ought to know as much. Now the blood of the Papaveraceae has a taint also; it is apt to have a narcotic quality.'

'What is narcotic?'

'Putting to sleep.'

'That's a good quality.'

'Hm!' said Dallas; 'that's as you take it. It isn't healthy to go so fast asleep that you never can wake up again.'

'Can people do that?' asked Esther in astonishment.

'Yes. Did you never hear of people killing themselves with laudanum, or opium?'

'I wonder why the poppy family was made so?'

'Why not?'

'So mischievous.'

'That's when people take too much of them. They are very good for medicine sometimes, Queen Esther.'

The girl's appearance by this time had totally changed. All the dull, weary, depressed air and expression were gone; she was alert and erect, the beautiful eyes filled with life and eagerness, a dawning of colour in the cheeks, the brow busy with stirring thoughts. Esther's face was a grave face still, for a child of her years; but now it was a noble gravity, showing intelligence and power and purpose; indicating capacity, and also an eager sympathy with whatever is great and worthy to take and hold the attention. Whether it were history that Dallas touched upon, or natural science; the divisions of nations or the harmonies of plants; Esther was ready, with her thoughtful, intent eyes, taking in all he could give her; and not merely as a snatch-bite of curiosity, but as the satisfaction of a good healthy mental appetite for mental food.

Until to-day the young man had never concerned himself much about Esther. Good nature had moved him to-day, when he saw the dullness that had come over the child and recognised her forlorn solitude; and now he began to be interested in the development of a nature he had never known before. Young

Dallas was a student of everything natural that came in his way, but this was the first bit of human nature that had consciously interested him. He thought it quite worth investigating a little more.

CHAPTER IV
LEARNING

They had a most delightful walk. It was not quite the first they had taken together; however, they had had none like this. They roved through the meadows and over the low rocky heights and among the copsewood, searching everywhere for flowers, and finding a good variety of the dainty and delicate spring beauties. Columbine, most elegant, stood in groups upon the rocks; *Hepatica* hid under beds of dead leaves; the slender *Uvularia* was met with here and there; anemone and bloodroot and wild geranium, and many another. And as they were gathered, Dallas made Esther observe their various features and family characteristics, and brought her away from Christopher's technical phraseology to introduce her instead to the living and everlasting relations of things. To this teaching the little girl presently lent a very delighted ear, and brought, he could see, a quick wit and a keen power of discrimination. It was one thing to call a delicate little plant arbitrarily *Sanguinaria canadensis;* it was another thing to find it its place among the floral tribes, and recognise its kindred and associations and family character.

On their way home, Dallas proposed that Esther should stop at his house for a minute, and become a little familiar with the place where she was to come to study Latin; and he led her in

as he spoke.

The Dallases' house was the best in the village. Not handsome in its exterior, which bore the same plain and somewhat clumsy character as all the other buildings in its neighbourhood; but inside it was spacious, and had a certain homely elegance. Rooms were large and exceedingly comfortable, and furnished evidently with everything desired by the hearts of its possessors. That fact has perhaps more to do with the pleasant, *liveable* air of a house than aesthetic tastes or artistic combinations apart from it. There was a roomy verandah, with settees and cane chairs, and roses climbing up the pillars and draping the balustrade. The hall, which was entered next, was wide and homelike, furnished with settees also, and one or two tables, for summer occupation, when doors could be set open front and back and the wind play through. Nobody was there to-day, and Dallas turned to a door at the right and opened it. This let them into a large room where a fire was burning, and a soft genial warmth met them, along with a certain odour, which Esther noticed and felt without knowing what it was. It was very faint, yet unmistakeable; and was a compound probably made up from the old wood of the house, burning coals in the chimney, great cleanliness, and a distant, hidden, secret store of all manner of delicate good things, fruits and sweets and spices, of which Mrs. Dallas's store closet held undoubtedly a great stock and variety. The brass of the old-fashioned grate glittered in the sunlight, it was so beautifully kept; between the windows hung a circular mirror, to the frame of

which were appended a number of spiral, slim, curling branches, like vine tendrils, each sustaining a socket for a candle. The rest of the furniture was good; dark and old and comfortable; painted vases were on the mantelpiece, and an old portrait hung over it. The place made a peculiar agreeable impression upon any one entering it; ease and comfort and good living were so at home in it, and so invited one to take part in its advantages. Esther had hardly been in the house since the death of her mother, and it struck her almost as a stranger. So did the lady sitting there, in state, as it seemed to the girl.

For Mrs. Dallas was a stately person. Handsome, tall, of somewhat large and full figure and very upright carriage; handsomely dressed; and with a calm, superior air of confidence, which perhaps had more effect than all the other good properties mentioned. She was sitting in an easy-chair, with some work in her hands, by a little work-table on which lay one or two handsomely bound books. She looked up and reviewed Esther as her son and she came in.

'I have brought Esther Gainsborough, mother; you know her, don't you?'

'I know her, certainly,' Mrs. Dallas answered, holding out her hand to the child, who touched it as somewhat embodying a condescension rather than a kindness. 'How is your father, my dear?'

'He does not feel very well,' said Esther; 'but he never does.'

'Pity!' said the lady; but Esther could not tell what she meant.

It was a pity, of course, that her father did not feel well. 'Where have you been all this while?' the lady went on, addressing her son.

'Where? – well, in reality, walking over half the country. See our flowers! In imagination, over half the world. Do you know what a collection of coins Colonel Gainsborough has?'

'No,' said the lady coldly.

'He has a very fine collection.'

'I see no good in coins that are not current.'

'Difference of opinion, you see, there, mother. An old piece, which when it was current was worth only perhaps a farthing or two, now when its currency is long past would sell maybe for fifty or a hundred pounds.'

'That is very absurd, Pitt!'

'Not altogether.'

'Why not?'

'Those old coins are history.'

'You don't want them for history. You have the history in books.'

Pitt laughed.

'Come away, Esther,' he said. 'Come and let me show you where you are to find me when you want me.'

'Find you for what?' asked the lady, before they could quit the room.

'Esther is coming to take lessons from me,' he said, throwing his head back laughingly as he went.

'Lessons! In what?'

'Anything she wants to learn, that I can teach her. We have been studying history and botany to-day. Come along, Esther. We shall not take our lessons *here*.'

He led the way, going out into the hall and at the further end of it passing into a verandah which there too extended along the back of the house. The house on this side had a long offset, or wing, running back at right angles with the main building. The verandah also made an angle and followed the side of this wing, which on the ground floor contained the kitchen and offices. Half way of its length a stairway ran up, on the outside, to a door nearer the end of the building. Up this stair young Dallas went, and introduced Esther to a large room, which seemed to her presently the oddest and also the most interesting that she had ever in her life seen. Its owner had got together, apparently, the old bits of furniture that his mother did not want any longer; there was an old table, devoid of all varnish, in the floor, covered, however, with a nice green cloth; two or three chairs were the table's contemporaries, to judge by their style, and nothing harder or less accommodating to the love of ease ever entered surely a cabinetmaker's brain. The wood of which they were made had, however, come to be of a soft brown colour, through the influence of time, and the form was not inelegant. The floor was bare and painted, and upon it lay here an old rug and there a great thick bearskin; and on the walls there were several heads of animals, which seemed to Esther very remarkable and extremely

ornamental. One beautiful deer's head, with elegant horns; and one elk head, the horns of which in their sweep and extent were simply enormous; then there were one or two fox heads, and a raccoon; and besides all these, the room was adorned with two or three birds, very well mounted. The birds, as the animals, were unknown to Esther, and fascinated her greatly. Books were in this room too, though not in large numbers; a flower press was in one place, a microscope on the table, a kind of *étagère* was loaded with papers; and there were boxes, and glasses, and cases; and a general air of a place where a good deal of business was done, and where a variety of tastes found at least attempted gratification. It was a pleasant room, though the description may not sound like it; the heterogeneous articles were in nice order; plenty of light blazed in at the windows, and the bearskin on the floor looked eminently comfortable. If that were luxurious, it was the only bit of luxury in the room.

'Where will you sit?' asked its owner, looking round. 'There isn't anything nice enough for you. I must look up a special chair for you to occupy when you come here. How do you like my room?'

'I like it – very much,' said Esther slowly, turning her eyes from one strange object to another.

'Nobody comes here but me, so we shall have no interruption to fear. When you come to see me, Queen Esther, you will just go straight through the house, out on the piazza, and up these stairs, with out asking anybody; and then you will turn the handle of the

door and come in, without knocking. If I am here, well and good; if I am not here, wait for me. You like my deer's horns? I got them up in Canada, where I have been on hunting expeditions with my father.'

'Did *you* kill them?'

'Some of them. But that great elk head I bought.'

'What big bird is that?'

'That? That is the white-headed eagle – the American eagle.'

'Did that come from Canada too?'

'No; I shot him not far from here, one day, by great luck.'

'Are they difficult to shoot?'

'Rather. I sat half a day in a booth made with branches, to get the chance. There were several of them about that day, so I lay in wait. They are not very plenty just about here. That other fellow is the great European lammergeyer.'

Esther had placed herself on one of the hard wooden chairs, but now she rose and went nearer the birds, standing before them in great admiration. Slowly then she went from one thing in the room to another, pausing to contemplate each. A beautiful white owl, very large and admirably mounted, held her eyes for some time.

'That is the Great Northern Owl,' observed her companion. 'They are found far up in the regions around the North Pole, and only now and then come so far south as this.'

'What claws!' said Esther.

'Talons. Yes, they would carry off a rabbit very easily.'

'Do they!' cried Esther, horrified.

'I don't doubt that fellow has carried off many a one, as well as hosts of smaller fry – squirrels, mice, and birds.'

'He looks cruel,' observed Esther, with an abhorrent motion of her shoulders.

'He does, rather. But he is no more cruel than all the rest.'

'The rest of what?' said Esther, turning towards him.

'The rest of creation – all the carnivorous portion of it, I mean.'

'Are they all like that? they don't look so. The eyes of pigeons, for instance, are quite different.'

'Pigeons are not flesh-eaters.'

'Oh!' said Esther wonderingly. 'No, I know; they eat bread and grain; and canary birds eat seeds. Are there *many* birds that live on flesh?'

'A great many, Queen Esther. All creation, nearly, preys on some other part of creation – except that respectable number that are granivorous, and herbivorous, and graminivorous.'

Esther stood before the owl, musing; and Dallas, who was studying the child now, watched her.

'But what I want to know, is,' began Esther, as if she were carrying on an argument, '*why* those that eat flesh look so much more wicked than the others that eat other things?'

'Do they?' said Dallas. 'That is the first question.'

'Why, yes,' said Esther, 'they do, Pitt. If you will think. There are sheep and cows and rabbits, and doves and chickens' —

'Halt there!' cried Dallas. 'Chickens are as good flesh-eaters

as anybody, and as cruel about it, too. See two chickens pulling at the two ends of one earthworm.'

'Oh, don't!' said Esther. 'I remember they do; and they haven't nice eyes either, Pitt. But little turkeys have.'

Dallas burst out laughing.

'Well, just think,' Esther persisted. 'Think of horses' beautiful eyes; and then think of a tiger.'

'Or a cat,' said Dallas.

'But why is it, Pitt?'

'Queen Esther, my knowledge, such as it is, is all at your majesty's service; but the information required lies not therein.'

'Well, isn't it true, what I said?'

'I am inclined to think, and will frankly admit, that there is something in it.'

'Then don't you think there must be a *real* difference, to make them look so different? and that I wasn't wrong when I called the owl cruel!'

'The study of animal psychology, so far as I know, has never been carried into a system. Meanwhile, suppose we come from what I cannot teach, to what I can? Here's a Latin grammar for you.'

Esther came to his side immediately, and listened with grave attention to his explanations and directions.

'And you want me to learn these declensions?'

'It is a necessary preliminary to learning Latin.'

Esther took the book with a very awakened and contented

face; then put a sudden irrelevant question. 'Pitt, why didn't you tell Mrs. Dallas what you were going to teach me?'

The young man looked at her, somewhat amused, but not immediately ready with an answer.

'Wouldn't she like you to give me lessons?'

'I never asked her,' he answered gravely.

Esther looked at him, inquiring and uncertain.

'I never asked her whether I might take lessons from your father, either.'

'No, of course not; but' —

'But what?'

'I don't know. I don't want to do it if she would not like it.'

'Why shouldn't she like it? She has nothing to do with it. It is I who am going to give you the lessons, not she. And now for a lesson in botany.'

He brought out a quantity of his dried flowers, beautifully preserved and arranged; and showed Esther one or two groups of plants, giving her various initiatory instruction by the way. It was a most delightful half hour to the little girl; and she went home after it, with her Latin grammar in her hands, very much aroused and wakened up and cheered from her dull condition of despondency; just what Pitt had intended.

CHAPTER V
CONTAMINATION

The lessons went on, and the interest on both sides knew no flagging. Dallas had begun by way of experiment, and he was quite contented with his success. In his room, over Latin and botany, at her own home, over history and the boxes of coins, he and Esther daily spent a good deal of time together. They were pleasant enough hours to him; but to her they were sources of life-giving nourishment and delight. The girl had been leading a forlorn existence; mentally in a desert and alone; and, added to that, with an unappeased longing for her departed mother, and silent, quiet, wearing grief for the loss of her. Even now, her features often settled into the dulness which had so struck Dallas; but gradually there was a lightening and lifting of the cloud: when studying she was wholly intent on her business, and when talking or reciting or examining flowers there was a play of life and thought and feeling in her face which was a constant study to her young teacher, as well as pleasure, for the change was his work. He read indications of strong capacity; he saw the tokens of rare sensitiveness and delicacy; he saw there was a power of feeling as well as a capacity for suffering covered by the quiet composure and reserve of manner and habit which, he knew, were rather signs of the depth of that which they covered. Esther

interested him. And then, she was so simply upright and honest, and so noble in all her thoughts, so high-bred by nature as well as education, that her young teacher's estimation constantly grew, and to interest was soon added liking. He had half expected that when the novelty was off the pleasure of study would be found to falter; but it was no such matter. Esther studied as honestly as if she had been a fifth form boy at a good school; with a delight in it which boys at school, in any form, rarely bring to their work. She studied absorbedly, eagerly, persistently; whatever pleasure she might get by the way, she was plainly bent on learning; and she learned of course fast. And in the botanical studies they carried on together, and in the historical studies which had the coins for an illumination, the child showed as keen enjoyment as other girls of her age are wont to feel in a story-book or in games and plays. Of games and plays Esther knew nothing; she had no young companions, and never had known any; her intercourse had been almost solely with father and mother, and now only the father was left to her. She would have been in danger of growing morbid in her sorrow and loneliness, and her whole nature might have been permanently and without remedy dwarfed, if at this time of her life she had been left to grow like the wild things in the woods, without sympathy or care. For some human plants need a good deal of both to develop them to their full richness and fragrance; and Esther was one of these. The loss of her mother had threatened to be an irreparable injury to her. Colonel Gainsborough was a tenderly affectionate father:

still, like a good many men, he did not understand child nature, could not adapt himself to it, had no sort of notion of its wants, and no comprehension that it either needed or could receive and return his sympathy. So he did not give sympathy to his child, nor dreamed that she was in danger of starving for want of it. Indeed, he had never in his life given much sympathy to anybody, except his wife; and in the loss of his wife, Colonel Gainsborough thought so much of himself was lost that the remainder probably would not last long. He thought himself wounded to death. That it might be desirable, and that it might be duty to live for his daughter's sake, was an idea that had never entered his very masculine heart. Yet Colonel Gainsborough was a good man, and even had the power of being a tender one; he had been that towards his wife; but when she died he felt that life had gone from him.

All this, more or less, young Dallas came to discern and understand in the course of his associations with the father and daughter. And now it was with a little pardonable pride and a good deal of growing tenderness for the child, that he saw the change going on in Esther. She was always, now as before, quiet as a mouse in her father's presence; truly she was quiet as a mouse everywhere; but under the outward quiet Dallas could see now the impulse and throb of the strong and sensitive life within; the stir of interest and purpose and hope; the waking up of the whole nature; and he saw that it was a nature of great power and beauty. It was no wonder that the face through which this nature shone

was one of rare power and beauty too. Others could see that, besides him.

'What a handsome little girl that is!' remarked the elder Dallas one evening. Esther had just left the house, and his son come into the room.

'It seems to me she is here a great deal,' Mrs. Dallas said, after a pause. The remark about Esther's good looks called forth no response. 'I see her coming and going pretty nearly every day.'

'Quite every day,' her son answered.

'And you go there every day!'

'I do. About that.'

'Very warm intercourse!'

'I don't know; not necessarily,' said young Dallas. 'The classics are rather cool – and Numismatics refreshing and composing.'

'Numismatics! You are not teaching that child Numismatics, I suppose?'

'She is teaching me.'

Mrs. Dallas was silent now, with a dissatisfied expression. Her husband repeated his former remark.

'She's a handsome little maid. Are you teaching her, Pitt?'

'A little, sir.'

'What, pray? if I may ask.'

'Teaching her to support existence. It about comes to that.'

'I do not understand you, I confess. You are oracular.'

'I did not understand *her*, until lately. It is what nobody else does, by the way.'

'Why should not anybody else understand her?' Mrs. Dallas asked.

'Should, – but they do not. That's a common case, you know, mother.'

'She has her father; what's the matter with him?'

'He thinks a good deal is the matter with him.'

'Regularly hipped,' said the elder Dallas. 'He has never held up his head since his wife died. He fancies he is going after her as fast as he can go. Perhaps he is; such fancies are often fatal.'

'It would do him good to look after his child,' Mrs. Dallas said.

'I wish you would put that in his head, mother.'

'Does he *not* look after her?'

'In a sort of way. He knows where she is and where she goes; he has a sort of outward care of her, and so far it is very particular care; but there it stops.'

'She ought to be sent to school.'

'There is no school here fit for her.'

'Then she should be sent away, where there *is* a school fit for her.'

'Tell the colonel so.'

'I shall not meddle in Colonel Gainsborough's affairs,' said Mrs. Dallas, bridling a little; 'he is able to manage them himself; or he thinks he is, which comes to the same thing. But I should say, that child might better be in any other hands than his.'

'Well, she is not shut up to them,' said young Dallas, 'since I have taken her in hand.'

He strolled out of the room as he spoke, and the two elder people were left together. Silence reigned between them till the sound of his steps had quite ceased to be heard.

Mrs. Dallas was working at some wool embroidery, and taking her stitches with a thoughtful brow; her husband in his easy-chair was carelessly turning over the pages of a newspaper. They were a contrast. She had a tall, commanding figure, a gracious but dignified manner, and a very handsome, stately face. There was nothing commanding, and nothing gracious, about Mr. Dallas. His figure was rather small, and his manner insignificant. He was not a handsome man, either, although he may be said to have but just missed it, for his features were certainly good; but he did miss it. Nobody spoke in praise of Mr. Dallas's appearance. Yet his face showed sense; his eyes were shrewd, if they were also cold; and the mouth was good; but the man's whole air was unsympathetic. It was courteous enough; and he was careful and particular in his dress. Indeed, Mr. Dallas was careful of all that belonged to him. He wore long English whiskers of sandy hair, the head crop being very thin and kept very close.

'Hildebrand,' said Mrs. Dallas when the sound of her son's footsteps had died away, 'when are you going to send Pitt to college?'

Mr. Dallas turned another page of his newspaper, and did not hurry his answer.

'Why?'

'And *where* are you going to send him?'

'Really,' said Mr. Dallas, without ceasing his contemplation of the page before him, 'I do not know. I have not considered the matter lately.'

'Do you remember he is eighteen?'

'I thought you were not ready to let him go yet?'

Mrs. Dallas stopped her embroidery and sighed.

'But he must go, husband.'

Mr. Dallas made no answer. He seemed not to find the question pressing.

Mrs. Dallas sat looking at him now, neglecting her work.

'You have got to make up your mind to it, and so have I,' she went on presently. 'He is ready for college. All this pottering over the classics with Colonel Gainsborough doesn't amount to anything. It keeps him out of idleness, – if Pitt ever could be idle, – but he has got to go to college after all, sooner or later. He must go!' she repeated with another sigh.

'No special hurry, that I see.'

'What's gained by delay? He's eighteen. That's long enough for him to have lived in a place like this. If I had my way, Hildebrand, I should send him to England.'

'England!' Mr. Dallas put down his paper now and looked at his wife.

What had got into her head?

'Oxford is better than the things they call colleges in this country.'

'Yes; but it is farther off.'

'That's not a bad thing, in some respects. Hildebrand, you don't want Pitt to be formed upon the model of things in this country. You would not have him get radical ideas, or Puritanical.'

'Not much danger!'

'I don't know.'

'Who's to put them in his head? Gainsborough is not a bit of a radical.'

'He is not one of us,' said Mrs. Dallas. 'And Pitt is very independent, and takes his own views from nobody or from anybody. See his educating this girl, now.'

'Educating her!'

'Yes, he is with her and her father a great piece of every day; reading and talking and walking and drying flowers and giving lessons. I don't know what all they are doing. But in my opinion Pitt might be better employed.'

'That won't last,' said the father with a half laugh.

'What ought not to last, had better not be begun,' Mrs. Dallas said sententiously.

There was a pause.

'What are you afraid of, wife?'

'I am afraid of Pitt's wasting his time.'

'You have never been willing to have him go until now. I thought you stood in the way.'

'He was not wasting his time until lately. He was as well at home. But there must come an end to that,' the mother said, with another slight sigh. She was not a woman given to sighing;

it meant much from her.

'But England?' said Mr. Dallas. 'What's your notion about England?

Oxford is very well, but the ocean lies between.'

'Where would *you* send him?'

'I'd send him to the best there is on this side.'

'That's not Oxford. I believe it would be good for him to be out of this country for a while; forget some of his American notions, and get right English ones. Pitt is a little too independent.'

The elder Dallas caressed his whiskers and pondered. If the truth were told, he had been about as unwilling to let his son go away from home as ever his mother could be. Pitt was simply the delight and pride of both their hearts; the one thing they lived for; the centre of all hopes, and the end of all undertakings. No doubt he must go to college; but the evil day had been pushed far off, as far as possible. Pitt was a son for parents to be proud of. He had the good qualities of both father and mother, with some added of his own which they did not share, and which perhaps therefore increased their interest in him.

'I expect he will have a word to say about the matter himself,' the father remarked. 'Oh, well! there's no raging hurry, wife.'

'Husband, it would be a good thing for him to see the English Church as it is in England, before he gets much older.'

'What then?'

'He would learn to value it. The cathedrals, and the noble services in them, and the bishops; and the feeling that everybody

around him goes the same way; there's a great deal of power in that. Pitt would be impressed by it.'

'By the feeling that everybody around him goes that way? Not he. That's quite as likely to stir him up to go another way.'

'It don't work so, Hildebrand.'

'You think he's a likely fellow to be talked over into anything?'

'No; but he would be influenced. Nobody would try to talk him over, and without knowing it he would feel the influence. He couldn't help it. All the influence at Oxford would be the right way.'

'Afraid of the colonel? I don't think you need. He hasn't spirit enough left in him for proselyting.'

'I am not speaking of anybody in particular. I am afraid of the air here.'

Mr. Dallas laughed a little, but his face took a shade of gravity it had not worn. Must he send his son away? What would the house be without him?

CHAPTER VI
GOING TO COLLEGE

Whatever thoughts were harboured in the elder heads, nothing was spoken openly, and no steps were taken for some time. All through the summer the pleasant intercourse went on, and the lessons, and the botanizing, and the study of coins. And much real work was done; but for Esther one invaluable and abiding effect of a more general character was gained. She was lifted out of her dull despondency, which had threatened to become stagnation, and restored to her natural life and energy and the fresh spring of youthful spirits. So, when her friend really went away to college in the fall, Esther did not slip back to the condition from which he had delivered her.

But the loss of him was a dreadful loss to the child, although Pitt was not going over the sea, and would be home at Christmas. He tried to comfort her with this prospect. Esther took no comfort. She sat silent, tearless, pale, in a kind of despair. Pitt looked at her, half amused, half deeply concerned.

'And you must go on with all your studies, Esther, you know,' he was saying. 'I will show you what to do, and when I come home I shall go into a very searching examination to see whether you have done it all thoroughly.'

'Will you?' she said, lifting her eyes to him with a gleam of

sudden hope.

'Certainly! I shall give you lessons just as usual whenever I come home; indeed, I expect I shall do it all your life. I think I shall always be teaching and you always be learning. Don't you think that is how it will be, Queen Esther?' he said kindly.

'You cannot give me lessons when you are away.'

'But when I come back!'

There was a very faint yet distinct lightening of the gloom in her face. Yet it was plain Esther was not cheated out of her perception of the truth. She was going to lose her friend; and his absence would be very different from his presence; and the bits of vacation time would not help, or help only by anticipation, the long stretches of months in which there would be neither sight nor sound of him. Esther's looks had brightened for a moment, but then her countenance fell again and her face grew visibly pale. Pitt saw it with dismay.

'But Esther!' he said, 'this is nothing. Every man must go to college, you know, just as he must learn swimming and boating; and so I must go; but it will not last for ever.'

'How long?' said she, lifting her eyes to him again, heavy with their burden of sorrow.

'Well, perhaps three years; unless I enter Junior, and then it would be only two. That isn't much.'

'What will you do then?'

'Then? I don't know. Look after you, at any rate. Let us see. How old will you be in two years?'

'Almost fourteen.'

'Fourteen. Well, you see you will have a great deal to do before you can afford to be fourteen years old; so much that you will not have time to miss me.'

Esther made no answer.

'I'll be back at Christmas anyhow, you know; and that's only three months away, or a little more.'

'For how long?'

'Never mind; we will make a little do the work of a great deal. It will seem a long time, it will be so good.'

'No,' said Esther; 'that will make it only the shorter.'

'Why, Esther,' said he, half laughing, 'I didn't know you cared so much about me. I don't deserve all that.'

'I am not crying,' said the girl, rising with a sort of childish dignity; 'but I shall be alone.'

They had been sitting on a rock, resting and talking, and now set out again to go home. Esther spoke no more; and Pitt was silent, not knowing what to say; but he watched her, and saw that if she had not been crying at the time she had made that declaration, the tears had taken their revenge and were coming now. Yet only in a calm, repressed way; now and then he saw a drop fall, or caught a motion of Esther's hand which could only have been made to prevent a drop from falling. She walked along steadily, turning neither to the right hand nor the left; she who ordinarily watched every hedgerow and ran to explore every group of plants in the corner of a field, and was keen to see

everything that was to be seen in earth or heaven. Pitt walked along silently too. He was at a careless age, but he was a generous-minded fellow; and to a mind of that sort there is something exceedingly attractive and an influence exceedingly powerful in the fact of being trusted and depended on.

'Mother,' he said when he got home, 'I wish you would look after that little girl now and then.'

'What little girl?'

'You must know whom I mean; the colonel's daughter.'

'The colonel is sufficient for that, I should say.'

'But you know what sort of a man he is. And she has no mother, nor anybody else, except servants.'

'Isn't he fond of her?'

'Very fond; but then he isn't well, and he is a reserved, silent man; the child is left to herself in a way that is bad for her.'

'What do you suppose I can do?'

'A great deal; if you once knew her and got fond of her, mother.'

Mrs. Dallas made no promise; however, she did go to see Esther. It was about a week after Pitt's departure. She found father and daughter very much as her son had found them the day he was introduced to the box of coins. Esther was on the floor, beside the same box, and the colonel was on his sofa. Mrs. Dallas did take the effect of the picture for that moment before the colonel sprang up to receive her. Then she had to do with a somewhat formal but courtly host, and the picture was lost. The

lady sat there, stately in her silks and laces, carrying on a stiff conversation; for she and Colonel Gainsborough had few points of sympathy or mutual understanding; and for a while she forgot Esther. Then her eye again fell upon the child in her corner, sitting by her box with a sad, uninterested air.

'And how is Esther?' she said, turning herself a little towards that end of the room. 'Really I came to see Esther, colonel. How does she do?'

'She is much obliged to you, and quite well, madam, I believe.'

'But she must want playmates, colonel. Why don't you send her to school?'

'I would, if there were a good school at hand.'

'There are schools at New Haven, and Hartford, and Boston, – plenty of schools that would suit you.'

'Only that, as you observe, they are at New Haven, and Hartford, and

Boston; out of my reach.'

'You couldn't do without her for a while?'

'I hardly think it; nor she without me. We are all, each of us, that the other has.'

'Pitt used to give you lessons, didn't he?' the lady went on, turning more decidedly to Esther. Esther rose and came near.

'Yes, ma'am.'

'What did he teach you?'

Now Esther felt no more congeniality than her father did with this handsome, stately, commanding woman. Yet it would

have been impossible to the girl to say why she had an instant unwillingness to answer this simple question. She did not answer it, except under protest.

'It began with the coins,' she said vaguely. 'He said we would study history with them.'

'And did you?'

'Yes, ma'am.'

'How did you manage it? or how did he? He has original ways of doing things.'

'Yes, ma'am. We used to take only one or two of the coins at once, and then Pitt told me what to read.'

'What did he tell you to read?'

'A great many different books, at different times.'

'But tell Mrs. Dallas what books, Esther,' her father put in.

'There were so many, papa. Gibbon's History, and Plutarch's Lives, and

Rollin, and Vertot and Hume, and I – forget some of them.'

'How much of all these did you really read, Esther?'

'I don't know, ma'am. I read what he told me.'

The lady turned to Colonel Gainsborough with a peculiar smile. 'Sounds rather heterogeneous!' she said.

It was on Esther's lips to justify her teacher, and say how far from heterogeneous, how connected, and how thorough, and how methodical, the reading and the study had been; and how enriched with talk and explanations and descriptions and discussions. How delightful those conversations were, both to

herself and Pitt; how living the truth had been made; how had names and facts taken on them the shape and colouring of nature and reality. It rushed back upon Esther, and her lips opened; and then, an inexplicable feeling of something like caution came down upon her, and she shut her lips again.

'It was harmless amusement,' remarked the colonel carelessly.

Whether the mother thought that, may be questioned. She looked again at the child standing before her; a child truly, with childlike innocence and ignorance in her large eyes and pure lips. But the eyes were eyes of beauty; and the lips would soon and readily take to themselves the sweetness and the consciousness of womanhood, and a new bloom would come upon the cheek. The colonel had never yet looked forward to all that; but the wise eyes of the matron saw it as well as if already before her. This little girl might well by and by be dangerous. If Mrs. Dallas had come as a friend, she went away, in a sort, as an enemy, in so far, at least, as Esther's further and future relations with her son were concerned.

The colonel went back to his sofa. Esther sat down again by the coins. She was not quite old enough to reflect much upon the developments of human nature as they came before her; but she was conscious of a disagreeable, troubled sensation left by this visit of Mrs. Dallas. It had not been pleasant. It ought to have been pleasant: she was Pitt's mother; she came on a kind errand; but Esther felt at once repelled and put at a distance.

The child had not gone back to the dull despondency of the

time before Pitt busied himself with her; she was striving to fulfil all his wishes, and working hard in order to accomplish more than he expected of her. With the cherished secret hope of doing this, Esther was driving at her books early and late. She went from the coins to the histories Pitt had told her would illustrate them; she fagged away at the dry details of her Latin grammar; she even tried to push her knowledge of plants and see further into their relations with each other, though in this department she felt the want of her teacher particularly. From day to day it was the one pressing desire and purpose in Esther's mind, to do more, and if possible much more, than Pitt wanted her to do; so that she might surprise him and win his respect and approbation. She thought, too, that she was in a fair way to do this, for she was gaining knowledge fast, she knew; and it was a great help towards keeping up spirit and hope and healthy action in her mind. Nevertheless, she missed her companion and friend, with an intense longing want of him which nobody even guessed. All the more keen it was, perhaps, because she could speak of it to nobody. It consumed the girl in secret, and was only saved from being disastrous to her by the transformation of it into working energy, which transformation daily went on anew. It did not help her much, or she thought so, to remember that Pitt was coming home at the end of December. He would not stay; and Esther was one of those thoughtful natures that look all round a subject, and are not deceived by a first fair show. He could not stay; and what would his coming and the delight of it do, after all, but renew

this terrible sense of want and make it worse than ever? When he went away again, it would be for a long, long time, – an absence of months; how was it going to be borne?

The problem of life was beginning early for Esther. And the child was alone. Nobody knew what went on in her; she had nobody to whom she could open her heart and tell her trouble; and the troubles we can tell to nobody else somehow weigh very heavy, especially in young years. The colonel loved his child with all of his heart that was not buried in his wife's grave; still, he was a man, and like most men had little understanding of the workings of a child's mind, above all of a girl's. He saw Esther pale, thoughtful, silent, grave, for ever busy with her books; and it never crossed his thoughts that such is not the natural condition and wholesome manner of life for twelve years old. He knew nothing for himself so good as books; why should not the same be true for Esther? She was a studious child; he was glad to see her so sensible.

As for Pitt, he had fallen upon a new world, and was busily finding his feet, as it were. Finding his own place, among all these other aspirants for human distinction; testing his own strength, among the combatants in this wrestling school of human life; earning his laurels in the race for learning; making good his standing and trying his power amid the waves and currents of human influence. Pitt found his standing good, and his strength quite equal to the call for it, and his power dominating. At least it would have been dominating, if he had cared to rule; all he cared

for, as it happened, in that line, was to be independent and keep his own course. He had done that always at home, and he found no difficulty in doing it at college. For the rest, his abilities were unquestioned, and put him at once at the head of his fellows.

CHAPTER VII
COMING HOME

Without being at all an unfaithful friend, it must be confessed Pitt's mind during this time was full of the things pertaining to his own new life, and he thought little of Esther. He thought little of anybody; he was not at a sentimental age, nor at all of a sentimental disposition, and he had enough else to occupy him. It was not till he had put the college behind him, and was on his journey home, that Esther's image rose before his mental vision; the first time perhaps for months. It smote him then with a little feeling of compunction. He recollected the child's sensitive nature, her clinging to him, her lonely condition; and the grave, sad eyes seemed to reproach him with having forgotten her. He had not forgotten her; he had only not remembered. He might have taken time to write her one little letter; but he had not thought of it. Had she ceased to think of *him* in any corresponding way? Pitt was very sure she had not. Somehow his fancy was very busy with Esther during this journey home. He was making amends for months of neglect. Her delicate, tender, faithful image seemed to stand before him; – forgetfulness would never be charged upon Esther, nor carelessness of anything she ought to care for; – of that he was sure. He was quite ashamed of himself, that he had sent her never a little token of remembrance

in all this time. He recalled the girl's eagerness in study, her delight in learning, her modest, well-bred manner; her evident though unconscious loving devotion to himself, and her profound grief at his going away. There were very noble qualities in that young girl that would develop – into what might they develop? and how would those beautiful thoughtful eyes look from a woman's soul by and by? Had his mother complied with his request and shown any kindness to the child? Pitt had no special encouragement to think so. And what a life it must be for such a creature, at twelve years old, to be alone with that taciturn, reserved, hypochondriac colonel?

It was near evening when the stage-coach brought Pitt to his native village and set him down at home. There was no snow on the ground yet, and his steps rang on the hard frozen path as he went up to the door, giving clear intimation of his approach. Within there was waiting. The mother and father were sitting at the two sides of the fireplace, busy with keeping up the fire to an unmaintainable standard of brilliancy, and looking at the clock; now and then exchanging a remark about the weather, the way, the distance, and the proper time of the expected arrival, – till that sharp sound of a step on the gravel came to their ears, and both parents started up and rushed to the door. There was a general confusion of kisses and hand-clasps and embraces, from which Pitt at last emerged.

'Oh, my boy, how late you are!'

'Not at all, mother; just right.'

'A tedious, cold ride, hadn't you?'

'No, mother; not at all. Roads in capital order; smooth as a plank floor; came along splendidly; but there'll be snow to-morrow.'

'Oh, I hope not, till you get the greens!'

'Oh, I'll get the greens, never fear; and put them up, too.'

Wherewith they entered the brilliantly-lighted room, where the supper table stood ready, and all eyes could meet eyes, and read tokens each of the other's condition.

'He looks well,' said Mrs. Dallas, regarding her son.

'Why shouldn't I look well?'

'Hard work,' suggested the mother.

'Work is good for a fellow. I never got hard work enough yet. But home is jolly, mother. That's the use of going away, I suppose,' said the young man, drawing a chair comfortably in front of the fire; while Mrs. Dallas rang for supper and gave orders, and then sat down to gaze at him with those mother's eyes that are like nothing else in the world. Searching, fond, proud, tender, devoted, – Pitt met them and smiled.

'I am all right,' he said.

'Looks so,' said the father contentedly. 'Hold your own, Pitt?'

'Yes, sir.'

'Ahead of everybody?'

'Yes, sir,' said the young man, a little more reservedly.

'I knew it!' said the elder man, rubbing his hands; 'I thought I knew it. I made sure you would.'

'He hasn't worked too hard either,' said the mother, with a careful eye of examination. 'He looks as he ought to look.'

A bright glance of the eye came to her. 'I tell you I never had enough to do yet,' he said.

'And, Pitt, do you like it?'

'Like what, mother?'

'The place, and the work, and the people? – the students and the professors?'

'That's what I should call a comprehensive question! You expect one yes or no to cover all that?'

'Well, how do you like the people?'

'Mother, when you get a community like that of a college town, you have something of a variety of material, don't you see? The people are all sorts. But the faculty are very well, and some of them capital fellows.'

'Have you gone into society much?'

'No, mother. Had something else to do.'

'Time enough for that,' said the elder Dallas contentedly. 'When a man has the money you'll have, my boy, he may pretty much command society.'

'Some sorts,' said Pitt.

'All sorts.'

'Must be a poor kind of society, I should say, that makes money the first thing.'

'It's the best sort you can get in this world,' said the elder man, chuckling. 'There's nothing but money that will buy bread and

butter; and they all want bread and butter. You'll find they all want bread and butter, whatever else they want, – or have.'

'Of course they want it; but what has that to do with society?'

'You'll find out,' said the other, with an unctuous kind of complacency.

'But there's no society in this country,' said Mrs. Dallas. 'Now, Pitt, turn your chair round, – here's the supper, – if you want to sit by the fire, that is.'

The supper was a royal one, for Mrs. Dallas was a good housekeeper; and the tone of it was festive, for the spirits of them all were in a very gay and Christmas mood. So it was with a good deal of surprise as well as chagrin that Mrs. Dallas, after supper, saw her son handling his greatcoat in the hall.

'Pitt, you are not going out?'

'Yes, mother, for a little while.'

'Where can you be going?'

'I want to run over to Colonel Gainsborough's for a minute or two.'

'Colonel Gainsborough! You don't want to see him to-night?'

'Neither to-night nor any time – at least I can live without it; but there's somebody else there that would like to see me. I'll be back soon, mother.'

'But, Pitt, that is quite absurd! That child can wait till morning, surely; and I want you myself. I think I have a better claim.'

'You have had me a good while already, and shall have me again,' said Pitt, laughing. 'I am just going to steal a little bit of

the evening, mother. Be generous!'

And he opened the hall door and was off, and the door closed behind him. Mrs. Dallas went back to the supper room with a very discomfited face.

'Hildebrand,' she said, in a tone that made her husband look up, 'there is no help for it! We shall have to send him to England.'

'What now?'

'Just what I told you. He's off to see that child. Off like the North wind! – and no more to be held.'

'That's nothing new. He never could be held. Pity we didn't name him

Boreas.'

'But do you see what he is doing?'

'No.'

'He is off to see that child.'

'That child to-day, and another to-morrow. He's a boy yet.'

'Hildebrand, I tell you there is danger.'

'Danger of what?'

'Of what you would not like.'

'My dear, young men do not fall dangerously in love with children. And that little girl is a child yet.'

'You forget how soon she will be not a child. And she is going to be a very remarkable-looking girl, I can tell you. And you must not forget another thing, husband; that Pitt is as persistent as he is wilful.'

'He's got a head, I think,' said Mr. Dallas, stroking his

whiskers thoughtfully.

'*That* won't save him. It never saved anybody. Men with heads are just as much fools, in certain circumstances, as men without them.'

'He might fancy some other child in England, if we sent him there, you know.'

'Yes; but at least she would be a Churchwoman,' said Mrs. Dallas, with her handsome face all cloudy and disturbed.

Meanwhile her son had rushed along the village street, or road rather, through the cold and darkness, the quarter of a mile to Colonel Gainsborough's house. There he was told that the colonel had a bad headache and was already gone to his room.

'Is Miss Esther up?'

'Oh yes, sir,' said Mrs. Barker doubtfully, but she did not invite the visitor in.

'Can I see her for a moment?'

'I haven't no orders, but I suppose you can come in, Mr. Dallas. It is

Mr. Dallas, ain't it?'

'Yes, it's I, Mrs. Barker,' said Pitt, coming in and beginning at once to throw off his greatcoat. 'In the usual room? Is the colonel less well than common?'

'Well, no, sir, not to call less well, as I knows on. It's the time o' year, sir, I make bold to imagine. He has a headache bad, that he has, and he's gone off to bed; but Miss Esther's well – so as she can be.'

Pitt got out of his greatcoat and gloves, and waited for no more. He had a certain vague expectation of the delight his appearance would give, and was a little eager to see it. So he went in with a bright face to surprise Esther.

The girl was sitting by the table reading a book she had laid close under the lamp; reading with a very grave face, Pitt saw too, and it a little sobered the brightness of his own. It was not the dulness of stagnation or of sorrow this time; at least Esther was certainly busily reading; but it was sober, steady business, not the absorption of happy interest or excitement. She looked up carelessly as the door opened, then half incredulously as she saw the entering figure, then she shut her book and rose to meet him. But then she did not show the lively pleasure he had expected; her face flushed a little, she hardly smiled, she met him as if he were more or less a stranger, – with much more dignity and less eagerness than he was accustomed to from her. Pitt was astonished, and piqued, and curious. However, he followed her lead, in a measure.

'How do you do, Queen Esther?' he said, holding out his hand.

'How do you do, Pitt?' she answered, taking it; but with the oddest mingling of reserve and doubt in her manner; and the great grave eyes were lifted to his face for a moment, with, it seemed to him, something of inquiry or questioning in them.

'Are you not glad to see me?'

'Yes,' she said, with another glance.

'Then *why* are you not glad to see me?' he asked impetuously.

'I am glad to see you, of course,' she said. 'Won't you sit down?'

'This won't do, you know,' said the young man, half-vexed and half-laughing, but wholly determined not to be kept at a distance in this manner. 'I am not going to sit down, if you are going to treat me like that.'

'Treat you how?'

'Why, as if I were a stranger, that you didn't care a pin about. What's the matter, Queen Esther?'

Esther was silent. Pitt was half-indignant; and then he caught the shimmer of something like moisture in the eyes, which were looking away from him to the fire, and his mood changed.

'What is it, Esther?' he said kindly. 'Take a seat, your majesty, and

I'll do the same. I see there is some talking to be done here.'

He took the girl's hand and put her in her chair, and himself drew up another near. 'Now what's the matter, Esther? Have you forgotten me?'

'No,' she said. 'But I thought – perhaps – you had forgotten me.'

'What made you think that?'

'You were gone away,' she said, hesitating; 'you were busy; papa said' —

'What did he say?'

'He said, probably I would never see you much more.'

But here the tears came to view undeniably; welled up, and

filled the eyes, and rolled over. Esther brushed them hastily away.

'And I hadn't the decency to write to you? Had that something to do with it?'

'I thought – if you *had* remembered me, you would perhaps have written, just a little word,' Esther confessed, with some hesitation and difficulty. Pitt was more touched and sorry than he would have supposed before that such a matter could make him.

'Look here, Esther,' he said. 'There are two or three things I want you to take note of. The first is, that you must never judge by appearances.'

'Why not?' asked Esther, considering him and this statement together.

'Because they are deceptive. They mislead.'

'Do they?'

'Very frequently.'

'What is one to judge by, then?'

'Depends. In this case, by your knowledge of the person concerned.'

Esther looked at him, and a warmer shine came into her eye.

'Yes,' she said, 'I thought it was not like you to forget. But then, papa said I would not be likely to see much more of you – ever' – (Esther got the words out with some difficulty, without, however, breaking down) – 'and I thought, I had to get accustomed to doing without you – and I had better do it.'

'*Why* should you not see much more of me?' Pitt demanded energetically.

'You would be going away.'

'And coming back again!'

'But going to England, perhaps.'

'Who said that?'

'I don't know. I think Mrs. Dallas told papa.'

'Well, now look here, Queen Esther,' Pitt said, more moderately: 'I told you, in the first place, you are not to judge by appearances. Do you see that you have been mistaken in judging me?'

She looked at him, a look that moved him a good deal, there was so much wistfulness in it; so much desire revealed to find him what she had found him in times past, along with the dawning hope that she might.

'Yes,' said he, nodding, 'you have been mistaken, and I did not expect it of you, Queen Esther. I don't think I am changeable; but anyhow, I haven't changed towards you. I have but just got home this evening; and I ran away from home and my mother as soon as we had done supper, that I might come and see you.'

Esther smiled: she was pleased, he saw.

'And in the next place, as to that crotchet of your not seeing much more of me, I can't imagine how it ever got up; but it isn't true, anyhow. I expect you'll see an immense deal of me. I may go some time to England; about that I can't tell; but if I go, I shall come back again, supposing I am alive. And now, do you see that it would be very foolish of you to try to get accustomed to doing without me? for I shall not let you do it.'

'I don't want to do it,' said Esther confidingly; 'for you know I have nobody else except you and papa.'

'What put such an absurd notion in your head! You a Stoic, Queen

Esther! You look like it!'

'What is a Stoic?'

'The sort of people that bite a nail in two, and smile as if it were a stick of peppermint candy.'

'I didn't know there were any such people.'

'No, naturally. So it won't do for you to try to imitate them.'

'But I was not trying anything like that.'

'What were you trying to do, then?'

Esther hesitated.

'I thought – I must do without you; and so – I thought I had better not think about you.'

'Did you succeed?'

'Not very well. But – I suppose I could, in time.'

'See you don't! What do you think in that case *I* should do?'

'Oh, you!' said Esther; 'that is different. I thought you would not care.'

'Did you! You did me honour. Now, Queen Esther, let us understand this matter. I do care, and I am going to care, and I shall always care. Do you believe it?'

'I always believe what you say,' said the girl, with a happy change in her face, which touched Pitt again curiously. Somehow, the contrast between his own strong, varied, rich, and active life,

with its abundance of resources and enjoyments, careless and satisfied, – and this little girl alone at home with her cranky father, and no variety or change or outlook or help, struck him painfully. It would hardly have struck most young men; but Pitt, with all his rollicking waywardness and self-pleasing, had a fine fibre in him which could feel things. Then Esther's nature, he knew, was one rich in possibilities; to which life was likely to bring great joy or great sorrow; more probably both.

'What book have you got there?' he asked suddenly.

'Book? – Oh, the Bible.'

'The Bible! That's something beyond your comprehension, isn't it?'

'No,' said Esther. 'What made you think it was?'

'Always heard it wasn't the thing for children. What set you at that,

Queen Esther? Reading about your namesake?'

'I have read about her. I wasn't reading about her to-night.'

'What were you after, then?'

'It's mamma's Bible,' said Esther rather slowly; 'and she used to say it was the best place to go for comfort.'

'Comfort! What do you want comfort for, Esther?'

'Nothing, now,' she said, with a smile. 'I am so glad you are come!'

'What *did* you want comfort for, then?' said he, taking her hand, and holding it while he looked into her eyes.

'I don't know – papa had gone to bed, and I was alone – and

somehow it seemed lonesome.'

'Will you go with me to-morrow after Christmas greens?'

'Oh, may I?' cried the girl, with such a flush of delight coming into eyes and cheeks and lips, that Pitt was almost startled.

'I don't think I could enjoy it unless you came. And then you will help me dress the rooms.'

'What rooms?'

'Our rooms at home. And now, what have you been doing since I have been away?'

All shadows were got rid of; and there followed a half-hour of most eager intercourse, questions and answers coming thick upon one another. Esther was curious to hear all that Pitt would tell her about his life and doings at college; and, nothing loath, Pitt gave it her. It interested him to watch the play of thought and interest in the child's features as he talked. She comprehended him, and she seemed to take in without difficulty the strange nature and conditions of his college world.

'Do you have to study hard?' she asked.

'That's as I please. One must study hard to be distinguished.'

'And you will be distinguished, won't you?'

'What do you think? Do you care about it?'

'Yes, I care,' said Esther slowly.

'You were not anxious about me?'

'No,' she said, smiling. 'Papa said you would be sure to distinguish yourself.'

'Did he? I am very much obliged to Colonel Gainsborough.'

'What for?'

'Why, for his good opinion.'

'But he couldn't help his opinion,' said Esther.

'Queen Esther,' said Pitt, laughing, 'I don't know about that. People sometimes hold opinions they have no business to hold, and that they would not hold, if they were not perverse-minded.'

Esther's face had all changed since he came in. The premature gravity and sadness was entirely dispersed; the eyes were full of beautiful light, the mouth taking a great many curves corresponding to as many alternations and shades of sympathy, and a slight colour of interest and pleasure had risen in the cheeks. If Pitt had vanity to gratify, it was gratified; but he had something better, he had a genuine kindness and liking for the little girl, which had suffered absolute pain, when he saw how his absence and silence had worked. Now the two were in full enjoyment of the old relations and the old intercourse, when the door opened, and Mrs. Barker's head appeared.

'Miss Esther, it's your time.'

'Time for what?' asked Pitt.

'It's my time for going to bed,' said Esther, rising. 'I'll come, Mrs.

Barker.'

'Queen Esther, does that woman say what you are to do and not do?' said

Pitt, in some indignation.

'Oh no; but papa. He likes me not to be up later than nine

o'clock.'

'What has Barker to do with it? I think she wants putting in her place.'

'She always goes with me and attends to me. Yes, I must go,' said

Esther.

'But the colonel is not here to be disturbed.'

'He would be disturbed, if I didn't go at the right time. Good-night,

Pitt.'

'Well, till to-morrow,' said the young man, taking Esther's hand and kissing it. 'But this is what I call a very summary proceeding. Queen Esther, does your majesty always do what you are expected to do, and take orders from everybody!'

'No; only from papa and you. Good-night, Pitt. Yes, I'll be ready to-morrow.'

CHAPTER VIII
A NOSEGAY

Pitt walked home, half amused at himself that he should take so much pains about this little girl, at the same time very firmly resolved that nothing should hinder him. Perhaps his liking for her was deeper than he knew; it was certainly real; while his kindly and generous temper responded promptly to every appeal that her affection and confidence made upon him. Affection and confidence are very winning things, even if not given by a beautiful girl who will soon be a beautiful woman; but looking out from Esther's innocent eyes, they went down into the bottom of young Dallas's heart. And besides, his nature was not only kind and noble; it was obstinate. Opposition, to him, in a thing he thought good to pursue, was like blows of a hammer on a nail; drove the purpose farther in.

So he made himself, it is true, very pleasant indeed to his parents at home, that night and the next morning; but then he went with Esther after cedar and hemlock branches. It may be asked, what opposition had he hitherto found to his intercourse with the colonel's daughter? And it must be answered, none. Nevertheless, Pitt felt it in the air, and it had the effect on him that the north wind and cold are said to have upon timber.

It was a day of days for Esther. First the delightful roving

walk, and cutting the greens, which were bestowed in a cart that attended them; then the wonderful novelty of dressing the house. Esther had never seen anything of the kind before, which did not hinder her, however, from giving very good help. The hall, the sitting-room, the drawing-room, and even Pitt's particular, out-of-the-way work-room, all were wreathed and adorned and dressed up, each after its manner. For Pitt would not have one place a repetition of another. The bright berries of the winterberry and bittersweet were mingled with the dark shade of the evergreens in many ingenious ways; but the crowning triumph of art, perhaps, to Esther's eyes, was a motto in green letters, picked out with brilliant partridge berries, over the end of the sitting-room, – 'Peace on earth.' Esther stood in delighted admiration before it, also pondering.

'Pitt,' she said at last, 'those partridge berries ought not to be in it.'

'Why not?' said Pitt, in astonishment. 'I think they set it off capitally.'

'Oh, so they do. I didn't mean that. They are beautiful, very. But you know what you said about them.'

'What did I say?'

'You said they were poison.'

'Poison! What then, Queen Esther? they won't hurt anybody up there. No partridge will get at them.'

'Oh no, it isn't that, Pitt; but I was thinking – Poison shouldn't be in that message of the angels.'

Pitt's face lighted up.

'Queen Esther,' said he solemnly, 'are you going to be *that* sort of person?'

'What sort of person?'

'One of those whose spirits are attuned to finer issues than their neighbours? They are the stuff that poets are made of. You are not a poet, are you?'

'No, indeed!' said Esther, laughing.

'Don't! I think it must be uncomfortable to have to do with a poet. You may notice, that in nature the dwellers on the earth have nothing to do with the dwellers in the air.'

'Except to be food for them,' said Esther.

'Ah! Well, – leaving that, – I should never have thought about the partridge berries in that motto, and my mother would never have thought of it. For all that, you are right. What shall we do? take 'em down?'

'Oh, no, they look so pretty. And besides, I suppose, Pitt, by and by, poison itself will turn to peace.'

'What?' said Pitt. 'What is that? What can you mean, Queen Esther?'

'Only,' said Esther a little doubtfully, 'I was thinking. You know, when the time comes there will be nothing to hurt or destroy in all the earth; the wild beasts will not be wild, and so I suppose poison will not be poison.'

'The wild beasts will not be wild? What *will* they be, then?'

'Tame.'

'Where did you get that idea?'

'It is in the Bible. It is not an idea.'

'Are you sure?'

'Certainly. Mamma used to read it to me and tell me about it.'

'Well, you shall show *me* the place some time. How do you like it, mother?'

This question being addressed to Mrs. Dallas, who appeared in the doorway. She gave great approval.

'Do you like the effect of the partridge berries?' Pitt asked.

'It is excellent, I think. They brighten it up finely.'

'What would you say if you knew they were poison?'

'That would not make any difference. They do no hurt unless you swallow them, I suppose.'

'Esther finds in them an emblem of the time when the message of peace shall have neutralized all the hurtful things in the world, and made them harmless.'

Mrs. Dallas's eye fell coldly upon Esther. 'I do not think the Church knows of any such time,' she answered, as she turned away. Pitt whistled for some time thereafter in silence.

The decorations were finished, and most lovely to Esther's eyes; then, when they were all done, she went home to tea. For getting the greens and putting them up had taken both the morning and the afternoon to accomplish. She went home gaily, with a brisk step and a merry heart, at the same time thinking busily.

Home, in its dull uniformity and stillness, was a contrast after

the stir and freshness and prettiness of life in the Dallases's house. It struck Esther rather painfully. The room where she and her father took their supper was pleasant and homely indeed; a bright fire burned on the hearth, or in the grate, rather, and a bright lamp shone on the table; Barker had brought in the tea urn, and the business of preparing tea for her father was one that Esther always liked. But, nevertheless, the place approached too nearly a picture of still life. The urn hissed and bubbled, a comfortable sound; and now and then there was a falling coal or a jet of gas flame in the fire; but I think these things perhaps made the stillness more intense and more noticeable. The colonel sat on his sofa, breaking dry toast into his tea and thoughtfully swallowing it; he said nothing, unless to demand another cup; and Esther, though she had a healthy young appetite, could not quite stay the mental longing with the material supply. Besides, she was pondering something curiously.

'Papa,' she said at last, 'are you busy? May I ask you something?'

'Yes, my dear. What is it?'

'Papa, what is Christmas?'

The colonel looked up.

'What is Christmas?' he repeated. 'It is nothing, Esther; nothing at all. A name – nothing more.'

'Then, why do people think so much of Christmas?'

'They do not. Sensible people do not think anything of it. Christmas is nothing to me.'

'But, papa, why then does anybody make much of it? Mrs. Dallas has her house all dressed up with greens.'

'You had better keep away from Mrs. Dallas's.'

'But it looks so pretty, papa! Is there any harm in it?'

'Harm in what?'

'Dressing the house so? It is all hemlock wreaths, and cedar branches, and bright red berries here and there; and Pitt has put them up so beautifully! You can't think how pretty it all is. Is there any harm in that, papa?'

'Decidedly; in my judgment.'

'Why do they do it then, papa?'

'My dear, they have a foolish fancy that it is the time when Christ was born; and so in Romish times a special Popish mass was said on that day; and from that the twenty-fifth of December got its present name – Christ-mass; that is what it is.'

'Then He was not born the twenty-fifth of December?'

'No, nor in December at all. Nothing is plainer than that spring was the time of our Lord's coming into the world. The shepherds were watching their flocks by night; that could not have been in the depth of winter; it must have been in the spring.'

'Then why don't they have Christmas in springtime?'

'Don't ask *me*, my dear; I don't know. The thing began in the ages of ignorance, I suppose; and as all it means now is a time of feasting and jollity, the dead of winter will do as well as another time. But it is a Popish observance, my child; it is a Popish observance.'

'There's no harm in it, papa, is there? if it means only feasting and jollity, as you say.'

'There is always harm in superstition. This is no more the time of Christ's birth than any other day that you could choose; but there is a superstition about it; and I object to giving a superstitious reverence to what is nothing at all. Reverence the Bible as much as you please; you cannot too much; but do not put any ordinance of man, whether it be of the Popish church or any other, on a level with what the Bible commands.'

The colonel had finished his toast, and was turning to his book again.

'Pitt has been telling me of the way they keep Christmas in England,' Esther went on. 'The Yule log, and the games, and the songs, and the plays.'

'Godless ways,' said the colonel, settling himself to his reading, – 'godless ways! It is a great deal better in this country, where they make nothing of Christmas. No good comes of those things.'

Esther would disturb her father no more by her words, but she went on pondering, unsatisfied. In any question which put Mrs. Dallas and her father on opposite sides, she had no doubt whatever that her father must be in the right; but it was a pity, for surely in the present case Mrs. Dallas's house had the advantage. The Christmas decorations had been so pretty! the look of them was so bright and festive! the walls she had round her at home were bare and stiff and cold. No doubt her father must be right,

but it was a pity!

The next day was Christmas day. Pitt being in attendance on his father and mother, busied with the religious and other observances of the festival, Esther did not see him till the afternoon. Late in the day, however, he came, and brought in his hands a large bouquet of hothouse flowers. If the two had been alone, Esther would have greeted him and them with very lively demonstrations; as it was, it amused the young man to see the sparkle in her eye, and the lips half opened for a cry of joy, and the sudden flush on her cheek, and at the same time the quiet, unexcited demeanour she maintained. Esther rose indeed, but then stood silent and motionless and said not a word; while Pitt paid his compliments to her father. A new fire flashed from her eye when at last he approached her and offered her the flowers.

'Oh, Pitt! Oh, Pitt!' was all Esther with bated breath could say. The colonel eyed the bouquet a moment and then turned to his book. He was on his sofa, and seemingly gave no further heed to the young people.

'Oh, Pitt, where *could* you get these?' The girl's breath was almost taken away.

'Only one place where I could get them. Don't you know old Macpherson's greenhouse?'

'But he don't let people in, I thought, in winter?'

'He let *me* in.'

'Oh, Pitt, how wonderful! What is this? Now you must tell me all the names. This beautiful white geranium with purple lines?'

'It's a *Pelargonium;* belongs to the Geraniaceae; this one they call Mecranthon. It's a beauty, isn't it? This little white blossom is myrtle; don't you know myrtle?'

'And this geranium – this purple one?'

'That is Napoleon, and this Louise, and this Belle. This red magnificence is a *Metrosideros;* this white flower, is – I forget its name; but *this*, this sweet one, is Daphne. Then here are two heaths; then this thick leaf is *Laurustinus*, and this other, with the red bud, *Camellia japonica*.'

'Oh, how perfectly beautiful!' exclaimed the delighted child. 'Oh, how perfectly beautiful! And this yellow flower?'

'*Coronilla*.'

'And this, is it a *red* wallflower?'

'A red wallflower; you are right.'

'How lovely! and how sweet! And these blue?'

'These little blue flowers are *Lobelia;* they are cousins of the cardinal flower; *that* is *Lobelia cardinalis;* these are *Lobelia erinus* and *Lobelia gracilis*.'

He watched the girl, for under the surprise and pleasure of his gift her face was itself but a nobler flower, all glowing and flashing and fragrant. With eyes dewy with delight she hung over the bouquet, almost trembling in her eagerness of joy. She set the flowers carefully in a vase, with tender circumspection, lest a leaf might be wronged by chance crowding or inadvertent handling. Pitt watched and read it all. He felt a great compassion for Esther. This creature, full of life and sensibility, receptive

to every influence, at twelve years old shut up to the company of a taciturn and melancholy father and an empty house! What would ever become of her? There was the colonel now, on the sofa, attending only to his book; caring nothing for what was so moving his child. Nobody cared, or was anywhere to sympathize with her. And if she grew up so, shut up to herself, every feeling and desire repressed for want of expression or of somebody to express it to, how would her nature ever develop? would it not grow stunted and poor, compared with what it might be? He was sorry for his little playmate and friend; and it did the young fellow credit, I think, for at his age boys are not wont to be tenderly sympathetic towards anything, unless it be a beloved mother or sister. Pitt silently watched the putting the flowers in water, speculating upon the very unhopeful condition of this little human plant, and revolving schemes in his mind.

After he had gone, Colonel Gainsborough bade Esther show him her flowers. She brought the dish to his sofa. The colonel reviewed them with a somewhat jealous eye, did not seem to perceive their beauty, and told her to take them away again. But the next day, when Esther was not in the room, he examined the collection carefully, looking to see if there were anything that looked like contraband 'Christmas greens.' There were some sprigs of laurel and holly, that served to make the hues of the bouquet more varied and rich. *That* the colonel did not think of; all he saw was that they were bits of the objectionable 'Christmas.' Colonel Gainsborough carefully pulled them out and

threw them in the fire; and nothing, I fear, saved the laurustinus and japonica from a like fate but their exquisite large blossoms. Esther was not slow to miss the green leaves abstracted from her vase.

'Papa,' she said, in some bewilderment, 'I think somebody has been at my flowers; there is some green gone.'

'I took out some sprigs of laurel and holly,' said her father. 'I cannot have any Christmas decorations here.'

'Oh, papa, Pitt did not mean them for any such thing!'

'Whether he meant it or no, I prefer not to have them there.'

Esther was silenced, but she watched her vase with rather anxious eyes after that time. However, there was no more meddling; the brilliant blossoms were allowed to adorn the place and Esther's life as long as they would, or could. She cherished them to the utmost of her knowledge, all the rather that Pitt was gone away again; she gave them fresh water, she trimmed off the unsightly dry leaves and withered blossoms; but all would not do; they lasted for a time, and then followed the law of their existence and faded. What Esther did then, was to fetch a large old book and lay the different sprigs, leaves or flowers, carefully among its pages and put them to dry. She loved every leaf of them. They were associated in her mind with all that pleasant interlude of Christmas: Pitt's coming, his kindness; their going after greens together, and dressing the house. The bright interlude was past; Pitt had gone back to college; and the little girl cherished the faded green things as something belonging to that good time

which was gone. She would dry them carefully and keep them always, she thought.

A day or two later, her father noticed that the vase was empty, and asked Esther what she had done with her flowers?

'They were withered, papa; they were spoilt; I could not keep them.'

'What did you do with them?'

'Papa, I thought I would try to dry them.'

'Yes, and what did you do with them?'

'Papa, I put them in that old, odd volume of the Encyclopaedia.'

'Bring it here and let me see.'

Much wondering and a little discomfited, Esther obeyed. She brought the great book to the side of the sofa, and turned over the pages carefully, showing the dried and drying leaves. She had a great love to them; what did her father want with them?

'What do you propose to do with those things, when they are dry? They are staining the book.'

'It's an old book, papa; it is no harm, is it?'

'What are you going to do with them? Are they to remain here permanently?'

'Oh, no, sir; they are only put here to dry. I put a weight on the book. They will be dry soon.'

'And what then?'

'Then I will take them out, papa. It's an old book.'

'And what will you do with them?'

'I will keep them, sir.'

'What is the use of keeping the flowers after their beauty is gone? I do not think that is worth while.'

'*Some* of their beauty is gone,' said Esther, with a certain tenderness for the plants manifested in her manner, – 'but I love them yet, papa.'

'That is not wise, my child. Why should you love a parcel of dry leaves? Love what is worthy to be loved. I think I would throw them all in the fire.'

'Oh, papa!'

'That's the best, my dear. They are only rubbish. I object to the hoarding of rubbish. It is a poor habit.'

The colonel turned his attention again to his book, and perhaps did not even remark how Esther sat with a disconsolate face on the floor, looking at her condemned treasures. He would not have understood it if he had seen. In his nature there was no key to the feeling which now was driving the tears into Esther's eyes and making her heart swell. Like many men, and many women, for the matter of that, Colonel Gainsborough had very little power of association. He would indeed have regarded with sacred reverence anything that had once belonged to his wife, down to her shoe; in that one instance the tension of feeling was strong enough to make the chords tremble under the lightest touch. In other relations, what did it matter? They were nothing to him; and if Colonel Gainsborough made his own estimate the standard of the worth of things, he only did what I am afraid

we all do, more or less. At any rate, his was not one of those finer strung natures which recognise the possibility of worlds of knowledge and feeling not open to themselves. It is also just possible that he divined his daughter's sentiment in regard to the flowers enough to be jealous of it.

But Esther did not immediately move to obey his order. She sat on the floor with the big book before her, the open page showing a half dry blossom of the Mecranthon geranium which was still to her eyes very beautiful. And all the associations of that pleasant Christmas afternoon when Pitt had brought it and told her what its name was, rose up before her. She was exceedingly unwilling to burn it. The colonel perhaps had a guess that he had given a hard command; for he did not look again at Esther or speak to her, or take any notice of her delay of obedience. That she would obey he knew; and he let her take her time. So he did not see the big tears that filled her eyes, nor the quiet way in which she got rid of them; while the hurt, sorrowful, regretful look on her face would have certainly moved Pitt to indignation if he had been where he could see it. I am afraid, if the colonel had seen it, *he* would have been moved quite in a different way. Not to anger, indeed; Colonel Gainsborough was never angry with his child, as truly she never gave him cause; but I think he would privately have applauded the wisdom of his regulation, which removed such objects of misplaced sentiment out of the way of doing further harm. And Esther sat and looked at the Mecranthon, brushed away her tears softly, swallowed her

regrets and unwillingness, and finally rose up, carried her book to the fire, and one by one, turning the leaves, took out her drying favourites and threw them into the glowing grate. It was done; and she carried the book away and put it in its old place.

But a week later it happened that Esther bethought her to open the Encyclopaedia again, to look at *the marks her flowers had left* on the pages. For they *had* stained the book a little, and here and there she could discern the outline of a sprig, and trace a faint dash of colour left behind by the petals of some flower rich in its dyes. If it appears from this that the colonel was right in checking the feeling which ran to such extremes, I cannot help that; I am reporting the facts. Esther turned over the book from one place to another where her flowers had lain. Here had been heath; there coronilla; here – oh, here was *still* the wallflower! Dried beautifully; delicate and unbroken, and perfect and sweet. There was nothing else left, but here was the wallflower. A great movement of joy filled Esther's heart; then came a doubt. Must this be burned too? Would this one little sprig matter? She had obeyed her father, and destroyed all the rest of the bouquet; and this wallflower had been preserved without her knowledge. Since it had been saved, might it not be saved? Esther looked, studied, hesitated; and finally could not make up her mind without further order to destroy this last blossom. She never thought of asking her father's mind about it. The child knew instinctively that he would not understand her; a sorrowful thing for a child to know; it did not occur to her that if he*had* understood her feeling, he would

have been still less likely to favour it. She kept the wallflower, took it away from its exposed situation in the Encyclopaedia, and put it in great safety among her own private possessions.

CHAPTER IX
WANT OF COMFORT

The months were many and long before there came another break in the monotony of Esther's life. The little girl was thrown upon her own ressources, and that is too hard a position for her years, or perhaps for any years. She had literally no companion but her father, and it is a stretch of courtesy to give the name to him. Another child would have fled to the kitchen for society, at least to hear human voices. Esther did not. The instincts of a natural high breeding restrained her, as well as the habits in which she had been brought up. Mrs. Barker waited upon her at night and in the morning, at her dressing and undressing: sometimes Esther went for a walk, attended by Christopher; the rest of the time she was either alone, or in the large, orderly room where Colonel Gainsborough lay upon the sofa, and there Esther was rather more alone than anywhere else. The colonel was reading; reverence obliged her to keep quiet; he drew long breaths of weariness or sadness every now and then, which every time came like a cloud over such sunshine as she had been able to conjure up; and besides all that, notwithstanding the sighs and the reading, her father always noticed and knew what she was doing. Now it is needless to say that Colonel Gainsborough had forgotten what it was to be a child; he was therefore an incompetent critic of a

child's doings or judge of a child's wants. He had an impatience for what he called a 'waste of time;' but Esther was hardly old enough to busy herself exclusively with history and geography; and the little innocent amusements to which she had recourse stood but a poor chance under his censorship. 'A waste of time, my daughter,' he would say, when he saw Esther busy perhaps with some childish fancy work, or reading something from which she promised herself entertainment, but which the colonel knew promised nothing more. A word from him was enough. Esther would lay down her work or put away the book, and then sit in forlorn uncertainty what she should do to make the long hours drag less heavily. History and geography and arithmetic she studied, in a sort, with her father; and Colonel Gainsborough was not a bad teacher, so far as the progress of his scholar was concerned. So far as her pleasure went, the lessons were very far behind those she used to have with Pitt. And the recitations were short. Colonel Gainsborough gave his orders, as if he were on a campaign, and expected to see them fulfilled. Seeing them fulfilled, he turned his attention at once to something else.

Esther longed for her former friend and instructor with a longing which cannot be put into words. Yet longing is hardly the expression for it; she was not a child to sit and wish for the unattainable; it was rather a deep and aching sense of want. She never forgot him. If Pitt's own mother thought of him more constantly, she was the only person in the world of whom that was true. Pitt sometimes wrote to Colonel Gainsborough, and

then Esther treasured up every revelation and detail of the letter and added them to what she knew already, so as to piece out as full an image as possible of Pitt's life and doings. But how the child wanted him, missed him, and wept for him! Though of the latter not much; she was not a child given to crying. The harder for her, perhaps.

The Dallases, husband and wife, were not much seen at this time in the colonel's quiet house. Mr. Dallas did come sometimes of an evening and sat and talked with its master; and he was not refreshing to Esther, not even when the talk ran upon his absent son; for the question had begun to be mooted publicly, whether Pitt should go to England to finish his education. It began to be spoken of in Pitt's letters too; he supposed it would come to that, he said; his mother and father had set their hearts on Oxford or Cambridge. Colonel Gainsborough heartily approved. It was like a knell of fate to Esther.

They were alone together one day, as usual, the father and daughter; and silence had reigned a long while in the room, when Esther broke it. She had been sitting poring over a book; now she looked up with a very burdened brow and put her question.

'Papa, how do people get comfort out of the Bible?'

'Eh – what, my dear?' said the colonel, rousing his attention.

'What must one do, to get comfort out of the Bible?'

'Comfort?' repeated the colonel, now looking round at her. 'Are you in want of comfort, Esther?'

'I would like to know how to find it, papa, if it is here.'

'Here? What have you got there? Come where I can see you.'

Esther drew near, unwillingly. 'It is the Bible, papa.'

'And *what* is it you want from the Bible? – Comfort?'

'Mamma used to say one could get comfort in the Bible, and I wanted to know how.'

'Did she?' said the colonel with grave thoughtfulness. But he said no more. Esther waited. Her father's tone had changed; he seemed to have gone back into regions of the past, and to have forgotten her. The minutes ran on, without her daring to remind him that her question was still unanswered. The colonel at last, with a long sigh, took up his book again; then seemed to bethink him, and turned to Esther.

'I do not know, my dear,' he said. 'I never could get it there myself, except in a very modified way. Perhaps it is my fault.'

The subject was disposed of, as far as the colonel was concerned. Esther could ask him no more. But that evening, when Mrs. Barker was attending upon her, she made one more trial.

'Barker, do you know the Bible much?'

'The Bible, Miss Esther!'

'Yes. Have you read it a great deal? do you know what is in it?'

'Well, Miss Esther, I ain't a heathen. I do read my Bible, to be sure, more or less, all my life, so to speak; which is to say, ever since I could read at all.'

'Did you ever find comfort in it?'

'Comfort, Miss Esther? Did I ever find *comfort* in it, did ye ask?' the housekeeper repeated, very much puzzled. 'Well, I can't

just say. Mebbe I never was just particlarly lookin' for that article when I went to my Bible. I don't remember as I never was in no special want o' comfort – sich as should set me to lookin' for it; 'thout it was when missus died.'

'*She* said, one could find comfort in the Bible,' Esther went on, with a tender thrill in the voice that uttered the beloved pronoun.

'Most likely it's so, Miss Esther. What my mistress said was sure and certain true; but myself, it is something which I have no knowledge of.'

'How do you suppose one could find comfort in the Bible, Barker? How should one look for it?'

''Deed, Miss Esther, your questions is too hard for me. I'd ask the colonel, if I was you.'

'But I ask you, if you can tell me.'

'And that's just which I ain't wise enough for. But when I don't know where a thing is, Miss Esther, I allays begins at one end and goes clean through to the other end; and then, if the thing ain't there, why I knows it, and if it is there, I gets it.'

'It would take a good while,' said Esther musingly, 'to go through the whole Bible from one end to the other.'

'That's which I am thinkin', Miss Esther. I'm thinkin' one might forget what one started to look for, before one found it. But there! the Bible ain't just like a store closet, neither, with all the things ticketed on shelves. I'm thinkin' a body must do summat besides look in it.'

'What?'

'I don't know, Miss Esther; I ain't wise, no sort o' way, in sich matters; but I was thinkin' the folks I've seen, as took comfort in their Bibles, they was allays saints.'

'Saints! What do you mean by that?'

'That's what they was,' said Barker decidedly. 'They was saints. I never was no saint myself, but I've seen 'em. You see, mum, I've allays had summat else on my mind, and my hands, I may say; and one can't attend to more'n one thing at once in this world. I've allays had my bread to get and my mistress to serve; and I've attended to my business and done it. That's which I've done.'

'Couldn't you do that and be a saint too?'

'There's no one can't be two different people at one and the same time,

Miss Esther. Which I would say, if there is, it ain't me.'

If this was not conclusive, at least it was unanswerable by Esther, and the subject was dropped. Whether Esther pursued the search after comfort, no one knew; indeed, no one knew she wanted it. The colonel certainly not; he had taken her question to be merely a speculative one. It did sometimes occur to Barker that her young charge moped; or, as she expressed it to Mr. Bounder, 'didn't live as a child had a right to;' but it was not her business, and she had spoken truly: her business was the thing Mrs. Barker minded exclusively.

So Esther went on living alone, and working her way, as she could, alone, out of all the problems that suggested themselves

to her childish mind. What sort of a character would grow up in this way, in such a close mental atmosphere and such absence of all training or guiding influences, was an interesting question, which, however, never presented itself before Colonel Gainsborough's mind. That his child was all right, he was sure; indeed how could she go wrong? She was her mother's daughter, in the first place; and in the next place, his own;*noblesse oblige*, in more ways than one; and then – she saw nobody! That was a great safeguard. But the one person whom Esther did see, out of her family, or I should say the two persons, sometimes speculated about her; for to them the subject had a disagreeable practical interest. Mr. Dallas came now and then to sit and have a chat with the colonel; and more rarely Mrs. Dallas called for a civil visit of enquiry; impelled thereto partly by her son's instances and reminders. She communicated her views to her husband.

'She is living a dreadful life, for a child. She will be everything that is unnatural and premature.'

Mr. Dallas made no answer.

'And I wish she was out of Seaforth; for as we cannot get rid of her, we must send away our own boy.'

'Humph!' said her husband. 'Are you sure? Is that a certain necessity?'

'Hildebrand, you would like to have him finish his studies at Oxford?' said his wife appealingly.

'Yes, to be sure; but what has that to do with the other thing? You started from that little girl over there.'

'Do you want Pitt to make her his wife?'

'No!' with quiet decision.

'He'll do it; if you do not take all the better care.'

'I don't see that it follows.'

'You do not see it, Hildebrand, but I do. Trust me.'

'What do you reason from?'

'You won't trust me? Well, the girl will be very handsome; she'll be*very* handsome, and that always turns a young man's head; and then, you see, she is a forlorn child, and Pitt has taken it in to his head to replace father and mother, and be her good genius. I leave you to judge if that is not a dangerous part for him to play. He writes to me every now and then about her.'

Not very often; but Mrs. Dallas wanted to scare her husband. And so there came to be more and more talk about Pitt's going abroad; and Esther felt as if the one spot of brightness in her sky were closing up for ever. If Pitt did go, – what would be left?

It was a token of the real strength and fine properties of her mental nature, that the girl did not, in any true sense, *mope*. In want of comfort she was; in sad want of social diversion and cheer, and of variety in her course of thought and occupation; she suffered from the want; but Esther did not sink into idleness and stagnation. She worked like a beaver; that is, so far as diligence and purpose characterize those singular animals' working. She studied resolutely and eagerly the things she had studied with Pitt, and which he had charged her to go on with. His influence was a spur to her constantly; for he had wished it, and he would

be coming home by and by for the long vacation, and then he would want to see what she had done. Esther was not quite alone, so long as she had the thought of Pitt and of that long vacation with her. If he should go to England, – then indeed it would be loneliness. Now she studied, at any rate, having that spur; and she studied things also with which Pitt had had no connection; her Bible, for instance. The girl busied herself with fancy work too, every kind which Mrs. Barker could teach her, and her father did not forbid. And in one other pleasure her father was helpful to her. Esther had been trying to draw some little things, working eagerly with her pencil and a copy, absorbed in her endeavours and in the delight of partial success; when one day her father came and looked over her shoulder. That was enough. Colonel Gainsborough was a great draughtsman; the old instinct of his art stirred in him; he took Esther's pencil from her hand and showed her how she ought to use it, and then went on to make several little studies for her to work at. From that beginning, the lessons went forward, to the mutual benefit of father and daughter. Esther developed a great aptitude for the art, and an enormous zeal. Whatever her father told her it would be good for her to do, in that connection, Esther did untiringly – ungrudgingly. It was the one exquisite pleasure which each day contained for her; and into it she gathered and poured her whole natural, honest, childlike desire for pleasure. No matter if all the rest of the day were work, the flower of delight that blossomed on this one stem was sweet enough to take the place of a whole nosegay, and it beautified

Esther's whole life. It hardly made the child less sober outwardly, but it did much to keep her inner life fresh and sound.

Pitt this time did not allow it to be supposed that he had forgotten his friends. Once in a while he wrote to Colonel Gainsborough, and sent a message or maybe included a little note for Esther herself. These messages and notes regarded often her studies; but toward the end of term there began to be mention made of England also in them; and Esther's heart sank very low. What would be left when Pitt was gone to England?

CHAPTER X
THE BLESSING

So spring came, and then high summer, and the time when the collegian was expected home. The roses were blossoming and the pinks were sweet, in the old-fashioned flower garden in front of the house; and the smell of the hay came from the fields where mowers were busy, and the trill of a bob-o'-link sounded in the meadow. It was evening when Pitt made his way from his father's house over to the colonel's; and he found Esther sitting in the verandah, with all this sweetness about her. The house was old and country fashioned; the verandah was raised but a step above the ground, – low, and with slim little pillars to support its roof; and those pillars were all there was between Esther and the flowers. At one side of the house there was a lawn; in front, the space devoted to the flowers was only a small strip of ground, bordered by the paling fence and the road. Pitt opened a small gate, and came up to the house, through an army of balsams, hollyhocks, roses, and honeysuckles, and balm and southernwood. Esther had risen to her feet, and with her book in her hand, stood awaiting him. Her appearance struck him as in some sense new. She looked pale, he thought, and the mental tension of the moment probably made it true, but it was not merely that. There was a refined, ethereal gravity

and beauty, which it is very unusual to see in a girl of thirteen; an expression too spiritual for years which ought to be full of joyous and careless animal life. Nevertheless it was there, and it struck Pitt not only with a sense of admiration, but almost with compassion; for what sort of apart and introverted life could it be which had called forth such a look upon so young a face? No child living among children could ever be like that; nor any child living among grown people who took proper care of her; unless indeed it were an exceptional case of disease, which sets apart from the whole world; but Esther was perfectly well.

'I've been watching for you,' she said as she gave him her hand, and a very lovely smile of welcome. 'I have been looking for you ever so long.'

I don't know what made Pitt do it, and I do not think he knew; he had never done it before; but as he took the hand, and met the smile, he bent down and pressed his lips to those innocent, smiling ones. I suppose it was a very genuine expression of feeling; the fact that he might not know *what* feeling is nothing to the matter.

Esther coloured high, and looked at him in astonishment. It was a flush that meant pleasure quite as much as surprise.

'I came as soon as I could,' he said.

'Oh, I knew you would! Sit down here, Pitt. Papa is sleeping; he had a headache. I am so glad you have come!'

'How is the colonel?'

'He says he's not well. I don't know.'

'And, Queen Esther, how are you?'

'Oh, I'm well.'

'Are you sure?'

'Why, certainly, Pitt. What should be the matter with me? There is never anything the matter with me.'

'I should say, a little too much thinking,' said Pitt, regarding her.

'Oh, but I have to think,' said Esther soberly.

'Not at all necessary, nor in my opinion advisable. There are other people in the world whose business it is to do the thinking. Leave it to them. You cannot do it, besides.'

'Who will do my thinking for me?' asked Esther, with a look and a smile which would have better fitted twice her years; a look of wistful inquiry, a smile of soft derision.

'I will,' said Pitt boldly.

'Will you? Oh, Pitt, I would like to ask you something! But not now,' she added immediately. 'Another time. Now, tell me about college.'

He did tell her. He gave her details of things he told no one else. He allowed her to know of his successes, which Pitt was too genuinely modest and manly to enlarge upon even to his father and mother; but to these childish eyes and this implicit trusting, loving, innocent spirit, he gave the infinite pleasure of knowing what he had secretly enjoyed alone, in the depths of his own mind. It pleased him to share it with Esther. As for her, her interest and sympathy knew no bounds.

Pitt, however, while he was talking about his own doings and affairs, was thinking about Esther. She had changed, somehow. That wonderful stage of life, 'where the brook and river meet,' she had hardly yet reached; she was really a little girl still, or certainly ought to be. What was then this delicate, grave, spiritual look in the face, the thoughtful intelligence, the refinement of perception, so beyond her years? No doubt it was due to her living alone, with a somewhat gloomy father, and being prematurely thrown upon a woman's needs and a woman's resources. Pitt recognised the fact that his own absence might have had something to do with it. So long as he had been with her, teaching her and making a daily breeze in her still life, Esther had been in a measure drawn out of herself, and kept from brooding. And then, beyond all, the natural organization of this fine creature was of the rarest; strong and delicate at once, of large capacities and with correspondingly large requirements; able for great enjoyment, and open also to keen suffering. He could see it in every glance of the big, thoughtful eyes, and every play of the sensitive lips, which had, however, a trait of steadfastness and grave character along with their sensitiveness. Pitt looked, and wondered, and admired. This child's face was taking on already a fascinating power of expression, quite beyond her years; and that was because the inner life was developing too soon into thoughtfulness and tenderness, and too early realizing the meaning of life. Nothing could be more innocent of self-consciousness than Esther; she did not even know that Pitt was

regarding her with more attention than ordinary, or, if she knew, she took it as quite natural. He saw that, and so indulged himself. What a creature this would be, by and by! But in the meantime, what was to become of her? Without a mother, or a sister, or a brother; all alone; with nobody near who even knew what she needed. What would become of her? It was not stagnation that was to be feared, but too vivid life; not that she would be mentally stunted, but that the growth would be to exhaustion, or lack the right hardening processes, and so be unhealthy.

The colonel awoke after a while, and welcomed his visitor as truly, if not as warmly, as Esther had done. He always had liked young Dallas; and now, after so long living alone, the sight of him was specially grateful. Pitt must stay and have tea; and the talk between him and the colonel went on unflaggingly. Esther said nothing now; but Pitt watched her, and saw how she listened; saw how her eyes accompanied him, and her lips gave their silent tokens of understanding. Meanwhile she poured out tea for the gentlemen; did it with quiet grace and neatness, and was quick to see and attend to any little occasion for hospitable care.

The old life began again now in good measure. Esther had no need to beg Pitt to come often; he came constantly. He took up her lessons, as of old, and carried them on vigorously; rightly thinking that good sound mental work was wholesome for the child. He joined her in drawing, and begged the colonel to give him instruction too; and they studied the coins in the boxes with fresh zeal. And they had glorious walks, and most delightful

botanizing, in the early summer mornings, or when the sun had got low in the western sky. Sometimes Pitt came with a little tax-cart and took Esther a drive. It was all delight; I cannot tell which thing gave her most pleasure. To study with Pitt, or to play with Pitt, one was as good as the other; and the summer days of that summer were not fuller of fruit-ripening sun, than of blessed, warm, healthy, and happy influences for this little human plant. Her face grew bright and joyous, though in moments when the talk took a certain sober tone Pitt could see the light or the shadow, he hardly knew which to call it, of that too early spiritual insight and activity come over it.

One day, soon after his arrival, he asked her what she had been thinking about so much. They were sitting on the verandah again, to be out of the way of the colonel; they were taking up lessons, and had just finished an examination in history. Pitt let the book fall.

'You said the other day, Queen Esther, that you were under the necessity of thinking. May I ask what you have been thinking about?'

'Did I say that?'

'Something like it.'

Esther's face became sober. 'Everybody must think, I suppose, Pitt?'

'That is a piece of your innocence. A great many people get along quite comfortably without doing any thinking at all.'

'One might as well be a squash,' said Esther gravely. 'I don't

see how they can live so.'

'Some people think too much.'

'Why?'

'I don't know why, I am sure. It's their nature, I suppose.'

'What harm, Pitt?'

'You keep a fire going anywhere, and it will burn up what is next to it.'

'Is thought like fire?'

'So far, it is. What were you thinking about, Queen Esther?'

'I had been wanting to ask you about it, Pitt,' the girl said, a little with the air of one who is rousing herself up to give a confidence. 'I was looking for something and I did not know where to find it.'

'Looking for what?'

'I remembered, mamma said people could always find comfort in the

Bible; but I did not know how to look for it.'

'Comfort, Queen Esther!' said Pitt, rousing himself now; 'you were not in want of that article, were you?'

'After you were gone, you know – I hadn't anybody left. And oh, Pitt, are you going to – England?'

'One thing at a time. Tell me about this extraordinary want of comfort, at twelve years old. That is improper, Queen Esther!'

'Why?' she said, casting up to him a pair of such wistful, sensitive, beautiful eyes, that the young man was almost startled.

'People at your age ought to have comfort enough to give away

to other people.'

'I shouldn't think they could, always,' said Esther quaintly.

'What is the matter with you?'

Esther looked down, a little uneasily. She felt that Pitt ought to have known. And he did know; however, he thought it advisable to have things brought out into the full light and put into form; hoping they might so be easier dealt with. Esther's next words were hardly consecutive, although perfectly intelligible.

'I know, of course, you cannot stay here always.'

'Of course. But then I shall always be coming back.'

Esther sighed. She was thinking that the absences were long and the times of being at home short; but what was the use of talking about it? That lesson, that words do not change the inevitable, she had already learned. Pitt was concerned.

'Where did you say your highness went to look for comfort?'

'In the Bible. Oh, yes, that was what I wanted your help about. I did not know how to look; and papa said he didn't; or I don't know if he*said* exactly that, but it came to the same thing. And then I asked Barker.'

'Was she any wiser?'

'No. She said her way of finding anything was to begin at one end and go through to the other; so I tried that. I began at the beginning; and I read on; but I found nothing until – I'll show you,' she said, suddenly breaking off and darting away; and in two minutes more she came back with her Bible. She turned over the leaves eagerly.

'Here, Pitt, – I came to this. Now what does it mean?'

She gave him the volume open at the sixth chapter of Numbers; in the end of which is the prescribed form for the blessing of the children of Israel. Pitt read the words to himself.

'The Lord bless thee, and keep thee. 'The Lord make His face shine upon thee, and be gracious unto thee. 'The Lord lift up His countenance upon thee, and give thee peace.'

Esther waited till she saw he had read them through.

'Now, Pitt, what does that mean?'

'Which?'

'That last: "The Lord lift up His countenance upon thee, and give thee peace." What does "lift up his countenance upon thee" mean?'

What *did* it mean? Pitt asked himself the question for the first time in his life. He was quite silent.

'You see,' said Esther quaintly, after a pause, – 'you see, *that* would be comfort.'

Pitt was still silent.

'Do you understand it, Pitt?'

'*Understand* it, Esther!' he said, knitting his brows, 'No. Nobody could do that, except – the people that had it. But I think I see what it means.'

'The people "that had it"? That had what?'

'This wonderful thing.'

'What wonderful thing?'

'Queen Esther, you ought to ask your father.'

'I can't ask papa,' said the little girl. 'If ever I speak to him of comfort, he thinks directly of mamma. I cannot ask him again.'

'And I am all your dependence?' he said half lightly.

'I mustn't depend upon you either. Only, now you are here, I thought I would ask you.'

'You ought to have a better counsellor. However, perhaps I can tell what you want to know, in part. Queen Esther, was your mother, or your father, ever seriously displeased with you?'

Esther reflected, a little astonished, and then said no.

'I suppose not!' said Pitt. 'Then you don't know by experience what it would be, to have either of them refuse to look at you or smile upon you? – hide their face from you, in short?'

'Why, no! never.'

'You're a happy girl.'

'But what has that to do with it?'

'Nothing to do with it; it is the very contrast and opposite, in fact.

Don't you see? "Lift up the light of thy countenance;" – you know what the "light" of a smiling, loving face of approval is? You know *that*,

Queen Esther?'

'That?' repeated Esther breathlessly. 'Yes, I know; but this is God.'

'Yes, and I do not understand; but that is what it means.'

'You don't understand!'

'No. How should I? But that is what it means. Something that

answers to what among us a bright face of love is, when it smiles upon us. That is "light," isn't it?'

'Yes,' said Esther. 'But how can this be, Pitt?'

'I cannot tell. But that is what it means. "The Lord make His face to shine upon thee." They are very fine words.'

'Then I suppose,' said Esther slowly, 'if anybody had *that*, he wouldn't want comfort?'

'He wouldn't be without it, you mean? Well, I should think he would not. "The Lord lift up His countenance upon thee, and give thee peace."'

'But I don't understand, Pitt.'

'No, Queen Esther. This is something beyond you and me.'

'How can one come to understand?'

Pitt was silent a minute, looking down at the words. 'I do not know,' he said. 'That is a question. It is a look of favour and love described here; but of course it would not give peace, unless the person receiving it knew he had it. How that can be, I do not see.'

Both were silent a little while.

'Well,' said Esther, 'you have given me a great deal of help.'

'How?'

'Oh, you have told me what this means,' said the child, hanging over the words, which Pitt still held.

'That does not give it to you.'

'No; but it is a great deal, to know what it means,' said Esther, in a tone which Pitt felt had a good element of hopefulness in it.

'What are you going to do about it?'

Esther lifted her head and looked at him. It was one of those looks which were older than her years; far-reaching, spiritual, with an intense mixture of pathos and hope in her eyes.

'I shall go on trying to get it,' she said. 'You know, Pitt, it is different with you. You go out into the world, and you have everything you want; but I am here quite alone.'

CHAPTER XI
DISSENT

The summer months were very rich in pleasure, for all parties; even Colonel Gainsborough was a little roused by the presence of his young friend, and came much more than usual out of his reserve. So that the conversations round the tea-table, when Pitt made one of their number, were often lively and varied; such as Esther had hardly known in her life before. The colonel left off his taciturnity; waked up, as it were; told old campaigning stories, and gave out stores of information which few people knew he possessed. The talks were delightful, on subjects natural and scientific, historical and local and picturesque. Esther luxuriated in the new social life which had blossomed out suddenly at home, perhaps with even an intensified keen enjoyment from the fact that it was so transient a blossoming; a fact which the child knew and never for a moment forgot. The thought was always with her, making only more tender and keen the taste of every day's delights. And Pitt made the days full. With a mixture of motives, perhaps, which his own mind did not analyze, he devoted himself very much to the lonely little girl. She went with him in his walks and in his drives; he sat on the verandah with her daily and gave her lessons, and almost daily he went in to tea with her afterwards, and said that Christopher grew

the biggest raspberries in 'town.' Pitt professed himself very fond of raspberries. And then would come one of those rich talks between him and the colonel; and when Pitt went home afterwards he would reflect with satisfaction that he had given Esther another happy day. It was true; and he never guessed what heart-aches the little girl went through, night after night, in anticipation of the days that were coming. She did not shed tears about it, usually; tears might have been more wholesome. Instead, Esther would stand at her window looking out into the moonlit garden, or sit on the edge of her bed staring down at the floor; with a dry ache at her heart, such as we are wont to say a young thing like her should not know. And indeed only one here and there has a nature deep and fine-strung enough to be susceptible of it.

The intensification of this pain was the approaching certainty that Pitt was going to England. Esther did not talk of it, rarely asked a question; nevertheless she heard enough now and then to make her sure what was corning. And, in fact, if anything had been wanting to sharpen up Mrs. Dallas's conviction that such a step was necessary, it would have been the experience of this summer. She wrought upon her husband, till himself began to prick up his ears and open his eyes; and between them they agreed that Pitt had better go. Some evils are easier nipped in the bud; and this surely was one, for Pitt was known to be a persistent fellow, if once he took a thing in his head. And though Mr. Dallas laughed, at the same time he trembled. It was resolved that Pitt

should make his next term at Oxford. The thought was not for a moment to be entertained, that all Mr. Dallas's money, and all the pretensions properly growing out of it, should be wasted on the quite penniless daughter of a retired army officer. For in this world the singular rule obtaining is, that the more you have the more you want.

One day Pitt came, as he still often did, to read with the colonel; more for the pleasure of the thing, and for the colonel's own sake, than for any need still existing. He found the colonel alone. It was afternoon of a warm day in August, and Esther had gone with Mrs. Barker to get blackberries, and was not yet returned. The air came in faintly through the open windows, a little hindered by the blinds which were drawn to moderate the light.

'How do you do, sir, to-day?' the young man asked, coming in with something of the moral effect of a breeze. 'This isn't the sort of weather one would like for going on a forlorn-hope expedition.'

'In such an expedition it doesn't matter much what weather you have,' said the colonel; 'and I do not think it matters much to me. I am much the same in all weathers; only that I think I am failing gradually. Gradually, but constantly.'

'You do not show it, colonel.'

'No, perhaps not; but I feel it.'

'You do not care about hearing me read to-day, perhaps?'

'Yes, I do; it distracts me; but first there is a word I want to

say to you, Pitt.'

He did not go on at once to say it, and the young man waited respectfully. The colonel sighed, passed his hand over his brow once or twice, sighed again.

'You are going to England, William?'

'They say so, sir. My father and mother seem to have set their minds on it.'

'Quite right, too. There's no place in the world like Oxford or Cambridge for a young man. Oxford or Cambridge, – which, William?'

'Oxford, sir, I believe.'

'Yes; that would suit your father's views best. How do you expect to get there? Will you go this year?'

'Oh yes, sir; that seems to be the plan. My father is possessed with the fear that I may grow to be not enough of an Englishman – or too much of an American; I don't know which.'

'I think you will be a true Englishman. Yet, if you live here permanently, you will have to be the other thing too. A man owes it to the country of his adoption; and I think your father has no thought of returning to England himself?'

'None at all, sir.'

'How will you go? You cannot take passage to England.'

'That can be managed easily enough. Probably I should take passage in a ship bound for Lisbon; from there I could make my way somehow to London.'

For, it may be mentioned, the time was the time of the last

American struggle with England, early in the century; and the high seas were not safe and quiet as now.

The colonel sighed again once or twice, and repeated that gesture with his hand over his brow.

'I suppose there is no telling how long you will be gone, if you once go?'

'I cannot come home every vacation,' said Pitt lightly. 'But since my father and mother have made up their minds to that, I must make up mine.'

'So you will be gone years,' said the colonel thoughtfully. 'Years. I shall not be here when you return, William.'

'You are not going to change your habitation, sir?' said the young man, though he knew what the other meant well enough.

'Not for any other upon earth,' said the colonel soberly. 'But I shall not be here, William. I am failing constantly. Slowly, if you please, but constantly. I am not as strong as I look, and I am far less well than your father believes. I should know best; and I know I am failing. If you remain in England three years, or even two years, when you come back I shall not be here.'

'I hope you are mistaken, colonel.'

'I am not mistaken.'

There was silence a few minutes. Pitt did not place unqualified trust in this judgment, even although, as he could not deny, the colonel might be supposed to know best. He doubted the truth of the prognostication; yet, on the other hand, he could not be sure that it was false. What if it were not false?

'I hope you are mistaken, colonel,' he said again; 'but if you are right – if it should be so as you fear' —

'I do not fear it,' put in the colonel, interrupting him.

'Not for yourself; but if it should be so, – what will become of Esther?'

'It was of her I wished to speak. She will be here.'

'Here in this house? She would be alone.'

'I should be away. But Mrs. Barker would look after her.'

'Barker!' Pitt echoed. 'Yes, Mrs. Barker could take care of the house and of the cooking, as she does now; but Esther would be entirely alone, colonel.'

'I have no one else to leave her with,' said the colonel gloomily.

'Let my mother take charge of her, in such a case. My mother would take care of her, as if Esther were her own. Let her come to my mother, colonel!'

'No,' said the colonel quietly, 'that would not be best. I am sure of Mrs. Dallas's kindness; but I shall leave Esther under the care of Barker and her brother. Christopher will manage the place, and keep everything right outside; and Barker will do her part faithfully. Esther will be safe enough so, for a while. She is a child yet. But then, William, I'll take a promise from you, if you will give it.'

'I will give any promise you like, sir. What is it?' said Pitt, who had never been in a less pleasant mood towards his friend. In fact he was entirely out of patience with him. 'What promise do you want, colonel?' he repeated.

'When you come back from England, Will, if I am no longer here, I want you to ask Esther for a sealed package of papers, which I shall leave with her. Then open the package; and the promise I want from you is that you will do according to the wishes you will find there expressed.'

Pitt looked at the colonel in much astonishment. 'May I not know what those wishes regard, sir?'

'They will regard all I leave behind me.'

There was in the tone of the colonel's voice, and the manner of utterance of his words, something which showed Pitt that further explanations were not to be had from him. He hesitated, not liking to bind himself to anything in the dark; but finally he gave the promise as required. He went home, however, in a doubtful mood as regarded himself, and a very impatient one as concerned the colonel. What ridiculous, precise notion was this that had got possession of him? How little was he able to comprehend the nature or the needs of his little daughter; and what disagreeable office might he have laid upon Pitt in that connection? Pitt revolved these things in a fever of impatience with the colonel, who had demanded such a pledge from him, and with himself, who had given it. 'I have been a fool for once in my life!' thought he.

Mr. and Mrs. Dallas were in the sitting-room, where Pitt went in. They had been watching for his return, though they took care not to tell him so.

'How's your friend the colonel to-day?' his father asked,

willing to make sure where his son had been.

'He thinks he is dying,' Pitt answered, in no very good humour.

'He has been thinking that for the last two years.'

'Do you suppose there is anything in it?'

'Nothing but megrims. He's hipped, that's all. If he had some work to do – that he *must* do, I mean – it's my belief he would be a well man to-day; and know it, too.'

'He honestly thinks he's dying. Slowly, of course, but surely.'

'Pity he ever left the army,' said Mrs. Dallas. 'He is one of those men who don't bear to be idle.'

'That's all humankind!' said her husband. 'Nobody bears to be idle.

Can't do it without running down.'

'Still,' said Pitt thoughtfully, 'you cannot tell. A man ought to be the best judge of his own feelings; and perhaps Colonel Gainsborough is ill, as he says.'

'What are you going to do about it?' said his father with a half sneer.

'Nothing; only, *if* he should turn out to be right, – if he should die within a year or two, what would become of his little daughter?'

Mr. and Mrs. Dallas exchanged a scarcely perceptible glance.

'Send her home to his family,' answered the former.

'Has he a family in England?'

'So he says. I judge, not a small one.'

'Not parents living, has he?'

'I believe not; but there are Gainsboroughs enough without that.'

'What ever made him come over here?'

'Some property quarrel, I gather, though the colonel never told me in so many words.'

'Then he might not like to send Esther to them. Property quarrels are embittering.'

'Do you know any sort of quarrel that isn't? It is impossible to say beforehand what Colonel Gainsborough might like to do. He's a fidgety man. If there's a thing I hate, in the human line, it's a fidget. You can't reason with 'em.'

'Then what would become of that child, mother, if her father were really to die?'

Pitt spoke now with a little anxiety; but Mrs. Dallas answered coolly.

'He would make the necessary arrangements.'

'But they have no friends here, and no relations. It would be dreadfully forlorn for her. Mother, if Colonel Gainsborough *should*die, wouldn't it be kind if you were to take her?'

'Too kind,' said Mr. Dallas. 'There is such a thing as being too kind,

Pitt. Did you never hear of it?'

'I do not comprehend, sir. What objection could there be? The child is not a common child; she is one that anybody might like to have in the house. I should think you and my mother might enjoy it very much, especially with me away.'

'Especially,' said the elder man drily. 'Well, Pitt, perhaps you are right; but for me there is this serious objection, that she is a dissenter.'

'A dissenter!' echoed Pitt in unfeigned astonishment. 'What is a "dissenter," here in the new country?'

'Very much the same thing that he is in the old country, I suspect.'

'And what is that, sir?'

'Humph! – well, don't you know? Narrow, underbred, and pig-headed, and with that, disgustingly radical. That is what it means to be a dissenter; always did mean.'

'Underbred! You cannot find, old country or new country, a better-bred man than Colonel Gainsborough; and Esther is perfect in her manners.'

'I haven't tried *her*,' said the other; 'but isn't he pig-headed? And isn't he radical, think you? They all are; they always were, from the days of Cromwell and Ireton.'

'But the child? – Esther knows nothing of politics.'

'It's in the blood,' said Mr. Dallas stroking unmoveably his long whiskers. 'It's in the blood. I'll have no dissenters in my house. It is fixed in the blood, and will not wash out.'

'I don't believe she knows what a dissenter means.'

'Your father is quite right,' put in Mrs. Dallas. 'I should not like a dissenter in my family. I should not know how to get on with her. In chance social intercourse it does not so much matter – though I feel the difference even there; but in the family – It is

always best for like to keep to like.'

'But these are only differences of form, mother.'

'Do you think so?' said Mrs. Dallas, drawing up her handsome person. 'I believe in form, Pitt, for my part; and when you get to England you will find that it is only the nobodies who dispense with it. But the Church is more than form, I should think. You'll find the Archbishop of Canterbury is something besides a form. And is our Liturgy a form?'

Pitt escaped from the discussion, half angry and half amused, but seriously concerned about Esther. And meanwhile Esther was having her own thoughts. She had come home from her blackberrying late, after Pitt had gone home; and a little further on in the afternoon she had followed him, to get her daily lesson. As the weather was warm all windows were standing open; and the talkers within the house, being somewhat eager and preoccupied in their minds, did not moderate their voices nor pay any attention to what might be going on outside; and so it happened that Esther's light step was not heard as it came past the windows; and it followed very easily that one or two half sentences came to her ear. She heard her own name, which drew her attention, and then Mr. Dallas's declaration that he would have no dissenters in his house. Esther paused, not certainly to listen, but with a sudden check arising from something in the tone of the words. As she stood still in doubt whether to go forward or not, a word or two more were spoken and also heard; and with that Esther turned short about, left all thought of her lesson, and

made her way home; walking rather faster than she had come.

She laid off her hat, went into the room where her father was, and sat down in the window with a book.

'Home again, Esther?' said he. 'You have not been long away.'

'No, papa.'

'Did you have your lesson?'

'No, papa.'

'Why not?'

'Pitt was talking to somebody.'

The colonel made no further remark, and the room was very still for awhile. Until after au hour or more the colonel's book went down; and then Esther from her window spoke again.

'Papa, if you please, what is a "dissenter"?'

'A *what?*' demanded the colonel, rousing himself.

'A "dissenter," papa.'

'What do you know about dissenters?'

'Nothing, papa. What is it?'

'What makes you ask?'

'I heard the word, papa, and I didn't know what it meant.'

'There is no need you should know what it means. A dissenter is one who dissents.'

'From what, sir?'

'From something that other people believe in.'

'But, papa, according to that, then, everybody is a dissenter; and that is not true, is it?'

'What has put the question into your head?'

'I heard somebody speaking of dissenters.'

'Whom?'

'Mrs. Dallas.'

'Ah!' The colonel smiled grimly. 'She might be speaking of you and me.'

Esther knew that to have been the fact, but she did not say so. She only asked,

'What do we dissent from, papa?'

'We dissent from the notion that form is more than substance, and the kernel less valuable than the shell.'

This told Esther nothing. She was mystified; at the same time, her respect for her father did not allow her to press further a question he seemed to avoid.

'Is Pitt a dissenter, papa?'

'There is no need you should trouble your head with the question of dissent, my child. In England there is an Established Church; all who decline to come into it are there called Dissenters.'

'Does it tire you to have me ask questions, papa?'

'No.'

'Who established the Church there?'

'The Government.'

'What for?'

'Wanted to rule men's consciences as well as their bodies.'

'But a government cannot do that, papa?'

'They have tried, Esther. Tried by fire and sword, and

cruelty, and persecution; by fines and imprisonments and disqualifications. Some submitted, but a goodly number dissented, and our family has always belonged to that honourable number. See you do it no discredit. The Gainsboroughs were always Independents; we fought with Cromwell, and suffered under the Stuarts. We have an unbroken record of striving for the right. Keep to your traditions, my dear.'

'But why should a Government wish to rule people's consciences, papa?'

'Power, my dear. As long as men's minds are free, there is something where power does not reach.'

'I should think everybody would *like* Dissenters, papa?' was Esther's simple conclusion.

'Mrs. Dallas doesn't,' said the colonel grimly.

CHAPTER XII
THE VACATION

The days went too fast, as the last half of Pitt's vacation passed away. Ay, there was no holding them, much as Esther tried to make each one as long as possible. I think Pitt tried too; for he certainly gave his little friend and playmate all he could of pleasure, and all he could of himself. Esther shared everything he did, very nearly, that was not done within his own home. Nothing could have been more delightful than those days of August and September, if only the vision of the end of them had not been so near. That vision did not hinder the enjoyment; it intensified it; every taste of summer and social delight was made keen with that spice of coming pain; even towards the very last, nothing could prevent Esther's enjoyment of every moment she and Pitt spent together. Only to be together was such pleasure. Every word he spoke was good in her ears; and to her eyes, every feature of his appearance, and every movement of his person was comely and admirable. She gave him, in fact, a kind of grave worship, which perhaps nobody suspected in its degree, because it was not displayed in the manner of childish effusiveness. Esther was never effusive; her manner was always quiet, delicate, and dignified, such as a child's can well be. And so even Pitt himself did not fully know how his little friend regarded him, though he

had sometimes a queer approach to apprehension. It struck him now and then, the grave, absorbed look of Esther's beautiful eyes; occasionally he caught a flash of light in them, such as in nature only comes from heavily-charged clouds. Always she liked to do what he liked, and gave quick regard to any expressed wish of his; always listened to him, and watched his doings, and admired his successes, with the unconditional devotion of an unquestioning faith. Pitt was half-aware of all this; yet he was at an age when speculation is apt to be more busy with matters of the head than of the heart; and besides, he was tolerably well accustomed to the same sort of thing at home, and took it probably as very natural and quite in order. And he knew well, and did not forget, that to the little lonely child his going away would be, even more than it might be to his mother, the loss of a great deal of brightness out of her daily life. He did even dread it a little. And as the time drew near, he saw that his fears were going to be justified.

Esther did not lament or complain; she never, indeed, spoke of his going at all; but what was much more serious, she grew pale. And when the last week came, the smile died out of her eyes and from her lips. No tears were visible; Pitt would almost rather have seen her cry, like a child, much as with all other men he hated tears; it would have been better than this preternatural gravity with which the large eyes opened at him, and the soft mouth refused to give way. She seemed to enter into everything they were doing with no less interest than usual; she was not abstracted; rather, Pitt got the impression that she carried about

with her, and brought into everything, the perfect recollection that he was going away. It began to oppress him.

'I wish I could feel, mother, that you would look a little after that motherless child,' he said, in a sort of despairing attempt one evening.

'She is not fatherless,' Mrs. Dallas answered composedly.

'No, but a girl wants a mother.'

'She is accustomed to the want now.'

'Mother, it isn't kind of you!'

'How would you have me show kindness?' Mrs. Dallas asked calmly. Now that Pitt was going away and safe, she could treat the matter without excitement. 'What would Colonel Gainsborough like me to do for his daughter, do you think?'

Pitt was silent, and vexed.

'What do you want me to do for her?'

'I'd like you to be a friend to her. She will need one.'

'If her father dies, you mean?'

'If he lives. She will be very lonely when I am gone away.'

'That is because you have accustomed her so much to your company. I never thought it was wise. She will get over it in a little while.'

Would she? Pitt studied her next day, and much doubted his mother's assertion. All the months of his last term in college had not been enough to weaken in the least Esther's love for him. It was real, honest, genuine love, and of very pure quality; a diamond, he was ready to think, of the first water. Only a child's

love; but Pitt had too fine a nature himself to despise a child's love; and full as his head was of novelties, hopes and plans and purposes, there was space in his heart for a very tender concern about Esther beside.

It came to the last evening, and he was sitting with her on the verandah. It was rather cool there now; the roses and honeysuckles and the summer moonshine were gone; the two friends chose to stay there because they could be alone, and nobody overhear their words. Words for a little while had ceased to flow. Esther was sitting very still, and Pitt knew how she was looking; something of the dry despair had come back to her face which had been in it when he was first moved to busy himself about her.

'Esther, I shall come back,' he said suddenly, bending down to look in her face.

'When?' she said, half under her breath. It was not a question; it was an answer.

'Well, not immediately; but the years pass away fast, don't you know that?'

'Are you sure you will come back?'

'Why, certainly! if I am alive I will. Why, if I came for nothing else,

I would come to see after you, Queen Esther.'

Esther was silent. Talking was not easy.

'And meanwhile, I shall be busy, and you will be busy. We have both a great deal to do.'

'You have.'

'And I am sure you have. Now let us consult. What have you got to do, before we see one an other again?'

'I suppose,' said Esther, 'take care of papa.'

She said it in a quiet, matter-of-course tone, and Pitt started a little. It was very likely; but it had not just occurred to him before, how large a part that care might play in the girl's life for some time to come.

'Does he need so much care?' he asked.

'It isn't real *care*,' said Esther, in the same tone; 'but he likes to have me about, to do things for him.'

'Queen Esther, aren't you going to carry on your studies for me, all the same?'

'For you!' said she, lifting her heavy eyes to him. It hurt him to see how heavy they were; weighted with a great load of sorrow, too mighty for tears.

'For me, certainly. I expect everything to go on just as if I were here to look after it. I expect everything to go on so, that when I come again I may find just what I want to find. You must not disappoint me.'

Esther did not say. She made no answer at all, and after a minute put a question which was a diversion.

'Where are you going first, Pitt?'

'To Lisbon.'

'Yes, I know that; but when you get to England?'

'London first. You know that is the great English centre?'

'Do you know any people there?'

'Not I. But I have a great-uncle there, living at Kensington. I believe that is part of London, though really I don't know much about it. I shall go to see him, of course.'

'Your great-uncle! That is, Mr. Dallas's own uncle?'

'No, my mother's. His name is Strahan.'

'And then you are going to Oxford? Why do you go there? Are not the colleges in America just as good?'

'I can tell better after I've seen Oxford. But no, Queen Esther; that is larger and older and richer than any college in America can be; indeed it is a cluster of colleges – it is a University.'

'Will you study in them all?'

'No,' said Pitt, laughing, 'not exactly! But it is a fine place, by all accounts – a noble place. And then, you know, we are English, and my father and mother wish me to be as English as possible. That is natural.'

'We are English too,' said Esther, sighing.

'Therefore you ought to be glad I am going.'

But Esther's cheek only grew a shade paler.

'Will you keep up your studies, like a good girl?'

'I will try.'

'And send me a drawing now and then, to let me see how you are getting on?'

She lifted her eyes to him again, for one of those grave, appealing looks. 'How could I get it to you?'

'Your father will have my address. I shall write to him, and I

shall write to you.'

She made no answer. The things filling her heart were too many for it, and too strong; there came no tears, but her breathing was laboured; and her brow was dark with what seemed a mountain of oppression. Pitt was half-glad that just now there came a call for Esther from the room behind them. Both went in. The colonel wanted Esther to search in a repository of papers for a certain English print of some months back.

'Well, my boy,' said he, 'are you off?'

'Just off, sir,' said Pitt, eyeing the little figure that was busy in the corner among the papers. It gave him more pain than he had thought to leave it. 'I wish you would come over, colonel. Why shouldn't you? It would do you good. I mean, when there is peace again upon the high seas.'

'I shall never leave this place again till I leave all that is earthly,' Colonel Gainsborough answered.

'May I take the liberty sometimes of writing to you, sir?'

'I should like it very much, William.'

'And if I find anything that would amuse Esther, sir, may I tell her about it?'

'I have no objection. She will be very much obliged to you. So you are going? Heaven be with you, my boy. You have lightened many an hour for me.'

He rose up and shook Pitt's hand, with a warm grasp and a dignified manner of leave-taking. But when Pitt would have taken Esther's hand, she brushed past him and went out into

the hall. Pitt followed, with another bow to the colonel, and courteously shutting the door behind him, wishing the work well over. Esther, however, made no fuss, hardly any demonstration. She stood there in the hall and gave him her hand silently, I might say coldly, for the hand was very cold, and her face was white with suppressed feeling. Pitt grasped the hand and looked at the face; hesitated; then opened his arms and took her into them and kissed her. Was she not like a little sister? and was it possible to let this heartache go without alleviation? No doubt if the colonel had been present he would not have ventured such a breach of forms; but as it was Pitt defied forms. He clasped the sorrowing little girl in his arms and kissed her brow and her cheek and her lips.

'I'm coming back again,' said he. 'See that you have everything all right for me when I come.'

Then he let her out of his arms and went off without another word. As he went home, he was ready to smile and shake himself at the warmth of demonstration into which he had been betrayed. He was not Esther's brother, and had no particular right to show himself so affectionate. The colonel would have been, he doubted, less than pleased, and it would not have happened in his dignified presence. But Esther was a child, Pitt said to himself, and a very tender child; and he could not be sorry that he had shown her the feeling was not all on her side. Perhaps it might comfort the child. It never occurred to him to reproach himself with showing more than he felt, for he had no occasion.

The feeling he had given expression to was entirely genuine, and possibly deeper than he knew, although he shook his head, figuratively, at himself as he went home.

Esther, when the door closed upon Pitt, stood still for some minutes, in the realization that now it was all over and he was gone. The hall door was like a grim kind of barrier, behind which the light of her life had disappeared. It remained so stolidly closed! Pitt's hand did not open it again; the hand was already at a distance, and would maybe never push that door open any more. He was gone, and the last day of that summer vacation was over. The feeling absorbed Esther for a few minutes and made her as still as a stone. It *did* comfort her that he had taken such a kindly leave of her, and at the same time it sealed the sense of her loss. For he was the only one in the world in whose heart it was to give her good earnest kisses like that; and he was away, away! Her father's affection for her was undoubted, nevertheless it was not his wont to give it that sort of expression. Esther was not comparing, however, nor reflecting; only filled with the sense of her loss, which for the moment chilled and stiffened her. She heard her father's voice calling her, and she went in.

'My dear, you stay too long in the cold. Is William gone?'

'Oh yes, papa.'

'This is not the right paper I want; this is an August paper. I want the one for the last week in July.'

Esther went and rummaged again among the pile of newspapers, mechanically, finding it hard to command her

attention to such an indifferent business. She brought the July paper at last.

'Papa, do you think he will ever come back?' she asked, trembling with pain and the effort not to show it.

'Come back? Who? William Dallas? Why shouldn't he come back? His parents are here; if he lives, he will return to them, no doubt.'

Esther sat down and said no more. The earth seemed to her dreadfully empty.

CHAPTER XIII
LETTERS

And so life seemed for many days to the child. She could not shake off the feeling, nor regain any brightness of spirit. Dull, dull, everything in earth and heaven seemed to be. The taste and savour had gone out of all her pleasures and occupations. She could not read, without the image of Pitt coming between her and the page; she could not study, without an unendurable sense that he was no longer there nor going to be there to hear her lessons. She had no heart for walks, where every place recalled some memory of Pitt, and what they had done or said there together; she shunned the box of coins, and hardly cared to gather one of the few lingering fall flowers. And the last of them were soon gone, for the pleasant season was ended. Then came rains and clouds and winds, and Esther was shut up to the house.

I can never tell how desolate she was. Truly she was only a girl of thirteen; she ought not to have been desolate, perhaps, for any no greater matter. She had her father, and her books, and her youth. Bat Esther had also a nature delicate and deep far beyond what is common; and then she was unduly matured by her peculiar life. Intercourse with light-hearted children like herself had not kept her thoughtless and careless. At thirteen Esther was looking into life, and finding it already confused and dark. At

thirteen also she was learning and practising self-command. Her father, not much of an observer unless in the field of military operations, had no perception that she was suffering; it never occurred to him that she might be solitary; he never knew that she needed his tenderest care and society and guidance. He might have replaced everything to Esther, so that she would have found no want at all. He did nothing of the kind. He was a good man; just and upright and highly honourable; but he was selfish, like most men. He lived to himself in his own deprivation and sorrow, and never thought but that Esther would in a few days get over the loss of her young teacher and companion. He hardly thought about it at all. The idea of filling Pitt's place, of giving her in his own person what left her when Pitt went away, did not enter his head. Indeed, he had no knowledge of what Pitt had done for her. If he had known it, there is little doubt it would have excited his jealousy. For it is quite in some people's nature to be jealous of another's having what they do not want themselves.

And so Esther suffered in a way and to a degree that was not good for her. Her old dull spiritless condition was creeping upon her again. She realized, more than it is the way of thirteen years old to realize, that something more than an ocean of waters – an ocean of circumstances – had rolled itself between her and the one friend and companion she had ever had. Pitt said he would return; but four or five years, for all present purposes, is a sort of eternity at her age; hope could not leap over it, and expectation died at the brink. Her want of comfort came back in full force;

but where was the girl to get it?

The sight of Mr. and Mrs. Dallas used to put her in a fever. Once in a while the two would come to make an evening call upon her father; and then Esther used to withdraw as far as possible into a corner of the room and watch and listen; watch the looks of the pair with a kind of irritated fascination, and listen to their talk with her heart jumping and throbbing in pain and anxiety and passionate longing. For they were Pitt's father and mother, and only the ocean of waters lay between him and them, which they could cross at any time; he belonged to them, and could not be separated from them. All which would have drawn Esther very near to them and made them delightful to her, but that she knew very well they desired no such approach. Whether it were simply because she and her father were 'dissenters' Esther could not tell; whatever the reason, her sensitive nature and discerning vision saw the fact. They made visits of neighbourly politeness to the one English family that was within reach; but more than politeness they desired neither to give nor receive. I suppose it was this perception which made the sight of the pair so irritating to Esther. *They* were near Pitt, but they did not wish that *she* should be. Esther kept well at a distance. But with all this they talked of their son perpetually: of his voyage, of his prospects, of his grand-uncle at Kensington, of his career in college, or at the University rather, and of his possible permanent remaining in the old country; at any rate, of his studying there for a profession. The colonel was only faintly interested, and would take up his

book with a sigh of relief when they were gone; but Esther would sit in passionate misery, not shedding any tears; only staring with her big eyes at the lire in a sort of fixed gravity most unfit for her years.

The months went heavily. Winters were rather severe and very long at Seaforth; Esther was much shut up to the house. It made things all the harder for her. To the colonel it made no difference. He lay upon his couch, summer or winter, and went on with his half-hearted reading, – half a heart was all he brought to it; while Esther would stand at the window, watching the snow drive past, or the beating down of the rain, or the glitter of the sunbeams upon a wide white world, and almost wonder at the thought that warm lights and soft airs and flowers and walks and botanizing had ever been out there, where now the glint of the sunbeams on the snow-crystals was as sharp as diamonds, and all vegetable life seemed to be gone for ever.

Pitt had sailed in November, various difficulties having delayed his departure to a month later than the time intended for it. Therefore news from him could not be looked for until the new year was on its way. Towards the end of January, however, as early as could possibly be hoped, a letter came to Colonel Gainsborough, which he immediately knew to be in Pitt's hand.

'No postmark,' he said, surveying it. 'I suppose it came by private opportunity.'

'Papa, you look a long while at the outside!' said Esther, who stood by full of excited impatience which she knew better than

to show.

'The outside has its interest too, my dear,' said her father. 'I was looking for the Lisbon postmark, but there is none whatever. It must have come by private hand.'

He broke the seal, and found within an enclosure directed to Esther, which he gave her. And Esther presently left the room. Her father, she saw, was deep in the contents of his letter, and would not notice her going, while if she stayed in the room she knew she would be called upon to read her own letter or to show it before she was ready. She wanted to enjoy the full first taste of it, slowly and thoroughly. Meanwhile, the colonel never noticed her going. Pitt's letter was dated 'Lisbon, Christmas Day, 1813,' and ran as follows: —

'MY DEAR COLONEL, – I have landed at last, as you see, in this dirtiest of all places I ever was in. I realize now why America is called the New world; for everything here drives the consciousness upon me that the world on this side is very old – so old, I should say, that it is past cleansing. I do suppose it is not fair to compare it with Seaforth, which is as bright in comparison as if it were an ocean shell shining with pure lights; but I certainly hope things will mend when I get to London.

'But I did not mean to talk to you about Lisbon, which I suppose you know better than I do. My hope is to give you the pleasure of an early piece of news. Probably the papers will already have given it to you, but it is just possible that the chances of weather and ships may let my letter get to you first, and in that

case my pleasure will be gained.

'There is great news. Napoleon has been beaten, beaten! isn't that great? He has lost a hundred thousand men, and is driven back over the Rhine. Holland has joined the Allies, and the Prince of Orange; and Lord Wellington has fought such a battle as history hardly tells of; seven days' fighting; and the victory ranks with the greatest that ever were gained.

> 'That is all I can tell you now, but it is so good you can afford to wait for further details. It is now more difficult than ever to get into France, and I don't know yet how I am going to make my way to England; it is specially hard for Americans, and I must be reckoned an American, you know. However, money will overcome all difficulties; money and persistence. I have written to Esther something about my voyage, which will, I hope, interest her. I will do myself the pleasure of writing again when I get to London. Meanwhile, dear sir, I remain
>
> 'Ever your grateful and most obedient,
>
> *'WILM. PITT DALLAS.'*

Esther, while her father was revelling in this letter, was taking a very different sort of pleasure in hers. There was a fire up-stairs in her room; she lit a candle, and, in the exquisite sense of having her enjoyment all to herself, went slowly over the lines; as slowly as she could.

'Lisbon, *Christmas Day*, 1813. 'MY DEAR LITTLE ESTHER, – If you think a voyage over the sea is in anything like a journey by land, you are mistaken. The only one thing in

which they are alike, is that in both ways you *get on*. But wheels go smoothly, even over a jolty road; and waves do nothing but toss you. It was just one succession of rollings and pitchings from the time we left New Bedford till we got sight of the coast of Portugal. The wind blew all the time *almost* a gale, rising at different points of our passage to the full desert of the name. One violent storm we had; and all the rest of the voyage we were pitching about at such a rate that we had to fight for our meals; tables were broken, and coffee and chocolate poured about with a reckless disregard of economy. For about halt the way it rained persistently; so altogether you may suppose, Queen Esther, that my first experience has not made me in love with the sea. But it wasn't bad, after all. The wind drove us along, that was one comfort; and it would have driven us along much faster, if our sails had been good for anything; but they were a rotten set, a match for the crew, who were a rascally band of Portuguese. However, we drove along, as I said, seeing nobody to speak to all the way except ourselves; not a sail in sight nearer than eight or ten miles off.

'Well, the 23rd we sighted land, to everybody's great joy, you may suppose. The wind fell, and that night was one of the most beautiful and delicious you can imagine. A smooth sea without a ripple, a clear sky without a cloud, stars shining down quietly, and air as soft as May at Seaforth. I stood on deck half the night, enjoying, and thinking of five hundred thousand things one after another. Now that I was almost setting my foot on a new world,

my life, past and future, seemed to rise up and confront me; and I looked at it and took counsel with it, as it were. Seaforth on one side, and Oxford on the other; the question was, what should William Pitt be between them? The question never looked so big to me before. Somehow, I believe, the utter perfection of the night suggested to me the idea of perfection generally; what a mortal may come to when at his best. Such a view of nature as I was having puts one out of conceit, I believe, with whatever is out of order, unseemly, or untrue, or what for any reason misses the end of its existence. *Then* rose the question, what is the end of existence? – but I did not mean to give you my moralizings, Queen Esther; I have drifted into it. I can tell you, though, that my moralizing got a sharp emphasis the next day.

'I turned in at last, leaving the world of air and water a very image of peace. I slept rather late, I suppose; was awakened by the hoarse voice of the captain calling all hands on deck, in a manner that showed me there must be urgent cause. I tumbled up as soon as possible. What do you think I saw?

'The morning was as fair as the night had been. The sea was smooth, the sun shining brilliantly. I suppose the colonel would tell you, that seas may be *too* smooth; anyhow I saw the fact now. There had been not wind enough during the night to make our sails of any use; a current had caught us, and we had been drifting, drifting, till now it appeared we were drifting straight on to a line of rocks which we could see at a little distance; made known both to eye and ear: to the former by a line of

white where the waves broke upon the rocks, and to the latter by the thundering noise the breakers made. Now you know, where waves break, a ship would stand very little chance of holding together; but what were we to do? The only thing possible we did, – let out our anchors; but the question was, would they hold? They did hold, but none too soon; for we were left riding only about three times our ship's length from the threatening danger. You see, we had a drunken crew; no proper watch was kept; the captain was first roused by the thunder of the waves dashing upon the rocks; and then nothing was ready or in order, and before the anchors could be got out we were where I tell you. The anchors held, but we could not tell how long they would hold, nor how soon the force of the waves would drag us, cables and all, to the rocks. There we sat and looked at the view and situation. We hoisted a signal and fired guns of distress; but we were in front of a rocky shore that gave us little hope of either being of avail. At last, after three hours of this, the captain and some of the passengers got into the yawl and went off to find help. We, left behind, stared at the breakers. After three more hours had gone, I saw the yawl coming back, followed by another small boat, and further off by four royal pilot boats with sails. I saw them with the glass, that is, from my station in the rigging. When they came up, all the passengers except half a dozen, of whom I was one, were transferred to the pilot boats. You should have heard the jabber of the Portuguese when they came on board! But the captain had determined to try to save his brig, as by this time a slight breeze

had sprung up, and I stayed with some of the others to help in the endeavour. When the rest of the passengers were safe on board the pilot boats, we set about our critical undertaking. Sails were spread, one anchor hoisted, the cable of the other cut, and we stood holding our breath, to see whether wind or water would prove strongest. But the sails drew; the brig slowly fell off before the wind, and we edged away from our perilous position. Then, when we were fairly off, there rose a roar of shouts that rent the air; for the boats had all waited, lying a few rods off, to see what would become of us. Queen Esther, I can tell you, if I had been a woman, I should have sat down and cried; what *I* did I won't say. As I looked back to the scene of our danger, there was a most lovely rainbow spanning it, showing in the cloud of spray that rose above the breakers.

'At six o'clock on Christmas eve I landed at Lisbon, where I got comfortable quarters in an English boarding-house. When I can get to London, I do not yet know. I am here at a great time, to see history as it is taking shape in human life and experience; something different from looking at it as cast into bronze or silver in former ages and packed up in a box of coins; hey, Queen Esther? But that's good too in its way. Your father will tell you the news.

'Your devoted subject,

'WILM. PITT DALLAS.'

CHAPTER XIV
STRUGGLES

Esther sat, swallowed up of excitement, poring over this letter, longer than she knew; whether it gave her most pain or pleasure she could not have told. Pleasure came in a great wave at first; and then pricks of pain began to make themselves felt, as if the pleasure wave had been full of sharp points. Her cheeks glowed, her eyes sent looks, or rather one steady look, at the paper, which would certainly have bored it through or set it on fire if moral qualities had taken to themselves material power. At last, remembering that she must not stay too long, she folded the letter up and returned to her father. He had taken *his*

Конец ознакомительного фрагмента.