

# **Esther**

**by**

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## Chapter I

The new church of St. John's, on Fifth Avenue, was thronged the morning of the last Sunday of October, in the year 1880. Sitting in the gallery, beneath the unfinished frescoes, and looking down the nave, one caught an effect of autumn gardens, a suggestion of chrysanthemums and geraniums, or of October woods, dashed with scarlet oaks and yellow maples. As a display of austerity the show was a failure, but if cheerful content and innocent adornment please the Author of the lilies and roses, there was reason to hope that this first service at St. John's found favor in his sight, even though it showed no victory over the world or the flesh in this part of the United States. The sun came in through the figure of St. John in his crimson and green garments of glass, and scattered more color where colors already rivaled the flowers of a prize show; while huge prophets and evangelists in flowing robes looked down from the red walls on a display of human vanities that would have called out a vehement Lamentation of Jeremiah or Song of Solomon, had these poets been present in flesh as they were in figure.

Solomon was a brilliant but not an accurate observer; he looked at the world from the narrow stand-point of his own temple. Here in New York he could not have truthfully said that all was vanity, for even a more ill-natured satirist than he must have confessed that there was in this new temple to-day a perceptible interest in religion. One might almost have said that religion seemed to be a matter of concern. The audience wore a look of interest, and, even after their first gaze of admiration and whispered criticism at the splendors of their new church, when at length the clergyman entered to begin the service, a ripple of excitement swept across the field of bonnets until there was almost a murmur as of rustling cornfields within the many colored walls of St. John's.

In a remote pew, hidden under a gallery of the transept, two persons looked on with especial interest. The number of strangers who crowded in after them forced them to sit closely together, and their low whispers of comment were unheard by their neighbors. Before the service began they talked in a secular tone.

"Wharton's window is too high-toned," said the man.

"You all said it would be like Aladdin's," murmured the woman.

"Yes, but he throws away his jewels," rejoined the man. "See the big prophet over the arch; he looks as though he wanted to come down--and I think he ought."

"Did Michael Angelo ever take lessons of Mr. Wharton?" asked the woman seriously, looking up at the figures high above the pulpit.

"He was only a prophet," answered her companion, and, looking in another direction, next asked:

"Who is the angel of Paradise, in the dove-colored wings, sliding up the main aisle?"

"That! O, you know her! It is Miss Leonard. She is lovely, but she is only an angel of Paris."

"I never saw her before in my life," he replied; "but I know her bonnet was put on in the Lord's honor for the first time this morning."

"Women should take their bonnets off at the church door, as Mussulmen do their shoes," she answered.

"Don't turn Mahommedan, Esther. To be a Puritan is bad enough. The bonnets match the decorations."

"Pity the transepts are not finished!" she continued, gazing up at the bare scaffolding opposite.

"You are lucky to have any thing finished," he rejoined. "Since Hazard got here every thing is turned upside down; all the plans are changed. He and Wharton have taken the bit in their teeth, and the church committee have got to pay for whatever damage is done."

"Has Mr. Hazard voice enough to fill the church?" she asked.

"Watch him, and see how well he'll do it. Here he comes, and he will hit the right pitch on his first word."

The organ stopped, the clergyman appeared, and the talkers were silent until the litany ended and the organ began again. Under the prolonged rustle of settling for the sermon, more whispers passed.

"He is all eyes," murmured Esther; and it was true that at this distance the preacher seemed to be made up of two eyes and a voice, so slight and delicate was his frame. Very tall, slender and dark, his thin, long face gave so spiritual an expression to his figure that the great eyes seemed to penetrate like his clear voice to every soul within their range.

"Good art!" muttered her companion.

"We are too much behind the scenes," replied she.

"It is a stage, like any other," he rejoined; "there should be an entre-acte and drop-scene. Wharton could design one with a last judgment."

"He would put us into it, George, and we should be among the wicked."

"I am a martyr," answered George shortly.

The clergyman now mounted his pulpit and after a moment's pause said in his quietest manner and clearest voice:

"He that hath ears to hear, let him hear."

An almost imperceptible shiver passed through Esther's figure.

"Wait! he will slip in the humility later," muttered George.

On the contrary, the young preacher seemed bent on letting no trace of humility slip into his first sermon. Nothing could be simpler than his manner, which, if it had a fault, sinned rather on the side of plainness and monotony than of rhetoric, but he spoke with the air of one who had a message to deliver which he was more anxious to give as he received than to add any thing of his own; he meant to repeat it all without an attempt to soften it. He took possession of his flock with a general advertisement that he owned every sheep in it, white or black, and to show that there could be no doubt on the matter, he added a general claim to right of property in all mankind and the universe. He did this in the name and on behalf of the church universal, but there was self-assertion in the quiet air with which he pointed out the nature of his title, and then, after sweeping all human thought and will into his strong-box, shut down the lid with a sharp click, and bade his audience kneel.

The sermon dealt with the relations of religion to society. It began by claiming that all being and all thought rose by slow gradations to God,--ended in Him, for Him--existed only through Him and because of being His.

The form of act or thought mattered nothing. The hymns of David, the plays of Shakespeare, the metaphysics of Descartes, the crimes of Borgia, the virtues of Antonine, the atheism of yesterday and the materialism of to-day, were all emanations of divine thought, doing their appointed work. It was the duty of the church to deal with them all, not as though they existed through a power hostile to the deity, but as instruments of the deity to work out his unrevealed ends. The preacher then went on to criticise the attitude of religion towards science. "If there is still a feeling of hostility between them," he said, "it is no longer the fault of religion. There have been times when the church seemed afraid, but she is so no longer. Analyze, dissect, use your microscope or your spectrum till the last atom of matter is reached; reflect and refine till the last element of thought is made clear; the church now knows with the certainty of science what she once knew only by the certainty of faith, that you will find enthroned behind all thought and matter only one central idea,--that idea which the church has never ceased to embody,--I AM! Science like religion kneels before this mystery; it can carry itself back only to this simple consciousness of existence. I AM is the starting point and goal of metaphysics and logic, but the church alone has pointed out from the beginning that this starting-point is not human but divine. The philosopher says--I am, and the church scouts his philosophy. She answers:--No! you are NOT, you have no

existence of your own. You were and are and ever will be only a part of the supreme I AM, of which the church is the emblem."

In this symbolic expression of his right of property in their souls and bodies, perhaps the preacher rose a little above the heads of his audience. Most of his flock were busied with a kind of speculation so foreign to that of metaphysics that they would have been puzzled to explain what was meant by Descartes' famous COGITO ERGO SUM, on which the preacher laid so much stress. They would have preferred to put the fact of their existence on almost any other experience in life, as that "I have five millions," or, "I am the best-dressed woman in the church,--therefore I am somebody." The fact of self-consciousness would not have struck them as warranting a claim even to a good social position, much less to a share in omnipotence; they knew the trait only as a sign of bad manners. Yet there were at least two persons among the glorified chrysanthemums of St. John's Garden this day, who as the sermon closed and the organ burst out again, glanced at each other with a smile as though they had enjoyed their lecture.

"Good!" said the man. "He takes hold."

"I hope he believes it all," said his companion.

"Yes, he has put his life into the idea," replied the man. "Even at college he would have sent us all off to the stake with a sweet smile, for the love of Christ and the glory of the English Episcopal Church."

The crowd soon began to pour slowly out of the building and the two observers were swept along with the rest until at length they found themselves outside, and strolled down the avenue. A voice from behind stopped them.

"Esther!" it called.

Esther turned and greeted the caller as aunt. She was a woman of about fifty, still rather handsome, but with features to which time had given an expression of character and will that harmonized only with a manner a little abrupt and decided. She had the air of a woman who knew her own mind and commonly had her own way.

"Well, Esther, I am glad to see you taking George to church. Has he behaved himself?"

"You are wrong again, Aunt Sarah," said George; "it is I who have been taking Esther to church. I thought it was worth seeing."

"Church is always worth seeing, George, and I hope your friend Mr. Hazard's sermon has done you good."

"It did me good to see Wharton there," answered George; "he looked as though it were a first representation, and he were in a stage box. Hazard and he ought to have

appeared before the curtain, hand in hand, and made little speeches. I felt like calling them out."

"What did you think of it, Esther?" asked her aunt.

"I thought it very entertaining, Aunt Sarah. I felt like a butterfly in a tulip bed. Mr. Hazard's eyes are wonderful."

"I shall never get you two to be reverential," said her aunt sternly. "It was the best sermon I ever heard, and I would like to hear you answer it, George, and make your answer as little scientific as you can."

"Aunt Sarah, I never answered any one in my life, not even you, or Esther, or the man who said that my fossil bird was a crocodile. Why do you want me to answer him?"

"Because I don't believe you can."

"I can't. I am a professor of paleontology at the college, and I answer questions about bones. You must get my colleague who does the metaphysics to answer Hazard's sermon. Hazard and I have had it out fifty times, and discussed the whole subject till night reeled, but we never got within shouting distance of each other. He might as well have stood on the earth, and I on the nearest planet, and bawled across. So we have given it up."

"You mean that you were beaten," rejoined his aunt. "I am glad you feel it, though I always knew it was so. After all, Mr. Hazard has got more saints on his church walls than he will ever see in his audience, though not such pretty ones. I never saw so many lovely faces and dresses together. Esther, how is your father to-day?"

"Not very well, aunt. He wants to see you. Come home with us and help us to amuse him."

So talking, all three walked along the avenue to 42d Street, and turning down it, at length entered one of the houses about half way between the avenues. Up-stairs in a sunny room fitted up as a library and large enough to be handsome, they found the owner, William Dudley, a man of sixty or thereabouts, sitting in an arm-chair before the fire, trying to read a foreign review in which he took no interest. He moved with an appearance of effort, as though he were an invalid, but his voice was strong and his manner cheerful.

"I hoped you would all come. This is an awful moment. Tell me instantly, Sarah; is St. Stephen a success?"

"Immense! St. Stephen and St. Wharton too. The loveliest clergyman, the sweetest church, the highest-toned sermon and the lowest-toned walls," said she. "Even George owns that he has no criticisms to make."

"Aunt Sarah tells the loftiest truth, Uncle William," said the professor; "every Christian emblem about the church is superlatively correct, but paleontologically it is a fraud. Wharton and Hazard did the emblems, and I supplied them with antediluvian beasts which were all right when I drew them, but Wharton has played the devil with them, and I don't believe he knows the difference between a saurian and a crab. I could not recognize one of my own offspring."

"And how did it suit you, Esther?"

"I am charmed," replied his daughter. "Only it certainly does come just a little near being an opera-house. Mr. Hazard looks horribly like Meyerbeer's Prophet. He ordered us about in a fine tenor voice, with his eyes, and told us that we belonged to him, and if we did not behave ourselves he would blow up the church and us in it. I thought every moment we should see his mother come out of the front pews, and have a scene with him. If the organ had played the march, the effect would have been complete, but I felt there was something wanting."

"It was the sexton," said the professor; "he ought to have had a medieval costume. I must tell Wharton to-night to invent one for him. Hazard has asked me to come round to his rooms, because he thinks I am an unprejudiced observer and will tell him the exact truth. Now what am I to say?"

"Tell him," said the aunt, "that he looked like a Christian martyr defying the beasts in the amphitheater, and George, you are one of them. Between you and your Uncle William I wonder how Esther and I keep any religion at all."

"It is not enough to save you, Aunt Sarah," replied the professor. "You might just as well go with us, for if the Church is half right, you haven't a chance."

"Just now I must go with my husband, who is not much better than you," she replied. "He must have his luncheon, church or no church. Good-by."

So she departed, notifying Esther that the next day there was to be at her house a meeting of the executive committee of the children's hospital, which Esther must be careful to attend.

When she was out of the room the professor turned to his uncle and said: "Seriously, Uncle William, I wish you knew Stephen Hazard. He is a pleasant fellow in or out of the pulpit, and would amuse you. If you and Esther will come to tea some afternoon at my rooms, I will get Hazard and Wharton and Aunt Sarah there to meet you."

"Will he preach at me?" asked Mr. Dudley.

"Never in his life," replied the professor warmly. "He is the most rational, unaffected parson in the world. He likes fun as much as you or any other man, and is interested in every thing."



"I will come if Esther will let me," said Mr. Dudley. "What have you to say about it, Esther?"

"I don't think it would hurt you, father. George's building has an elevator."

"I didn't mean that, you watch-dog. I meant to ask whether you wanted to go to George's tea party?"

"I should like it of all things. Mr. Hazard won't hurt me, and I always like to meet Mr. Wharton."

"Then I will ask both of them this evening for some day next week or the week after, and will let you know," said George.

"Is he easily shocked?" asked Mr. Dudley. "Am I to do the old-school Puritan with him, or what?"

"Stephen Hazard," replied the professor, "is as much a man of the world as you or I. He is only thirty-five; we were at college together, took our degrees together, went abroad at the same time, and to the same German university. He had then more money than I, and traveled longer, went to the East, studied a little of every thing, lived some time in Paris, where he discovered Wharton, and at last some few years ago came home to take a church at Cincinnati, where he made himself a power. I thought he made a mistake in leaving there to come to St. John's, and wrote him so. I thought if he came here he would find that he had no regular community to deal with but just an Arab horde, and that it was nonsense to talk of saving the souls of New Yorkers who have no souls to be saved. But he thought it his duty to take the offer. Aunt Sarah hit it right when she called him a Christian martyr in the amphitheater. At college, we used to call him St. Stephen. He had this same idea that the church was every thing, and that every thing belonged to the church. When I told him that he was a common nuisance, and that I had to work for him like a church-warden, he laughed as though it were a joke, and seriously told me it was all right, and he didn't mind my skepticism at all. I know he was laughing at me this morning, when he made me go to church for the first time in ten years to hear that sermon which not twenty people there understood."

"One always has to pay for one's friend's hobbies," said Mr. Dudley. "I am glad he has had a success. If we keep a church we ought to do it in the best style. What will you give me for my pew?"

"I never sat in a worse," growled Strong.

"I'll not change it then," said Mr. Dudley. "I'll make Esther use it to mortify her pride."

"Better make it over to the poor of the parish," said the professor; "you will get no thanks for it even from them."

Mr. Dudley laughed as though it were no affair of his, and in fact he never sat in his pew, and never expected to do so; he had no taste for church-going. A lawyer in moderate practice, with active interest in public affairs, when the civil war broke out he took a commission as captain in a New York regiment, and, after distinguishing himself, was brought home, a colonel, with a bullet through his body and a saber cut across his head. He recovered his health, or as much of it as a man can expect to recover after such treatment, and went back to the law, but coming by inheritance into a property large enough to make him indifferent to his profession, and having an only child whose mother was long since dead, he amused the rest of his life by spoiling this girl. Esther was now twenty-five years old, and for fifteen years had been absolute mistress of her father's house. Her Aunt Sarah, known in New York as Mrs. John Murray of 53d Street, was the only person of whom she was a little--a very little--afraid. Of her Cousin George she was not in the least afraid, although George Strong spoke with authority in the world when he cared to speak at all. He was rich, and his professorship was little more to him than a way of spending money. He had no parents, and no relations besides the Dudleys and the Murrays. Alone in the world, George Strong looked upon himself as having in Esther a younger sister whom he liked, and a sort of older sister, whom he also liked, in his Aunt Sarah.

When, after lunching with the Dudleys, Professor Strong walked down Fifth Avenue to his club, he looked, to the thousand people whom he passed, like what he was, an intelligent man, with a figure made for action, an eye that hated rest, and a manner naturally sympathetic. His forehead was so bald as to give his face a look of strong character, which a dark beard rather helped to increase. He was a popular fellow, known as George by whole gangs of the roughest miners in Nevada, where he had worked for years as a practical geologist, and it would have been hard to find in America, Europe, or Asia, a city in which some one would not have smiled at the mention of his name, and asked where George was going to turn up next.

He kept his word that evening with his friend Hazard. At nine o'clock he was at the house, next door to St. John's church, where the new clergyman was trying to feel himself at home. In a large library, with book-cases to the ceiling, and books lying in piles on the floor; with pictures, engravings and etchings leaning against the books and the walls, and every sort of literary encumbrance scattered in the way of heedless feet; in the midst of confusion confounded, Mr. Hazard was stretched on a sofa trying to read, but worn out by fatigue and excitement. Though his chaos had not settled into order, it was easy to read his character from his surroundings. The books were not all divinity. There were classics of every kind, even to a collection of Eastern literature; a mass of poetry in all languages; not a few novels; and what was most conspicuous, an elaborate collection of illustrated works on art, Egyptian, Greek, Roman, Medieval, Mexican, Japanese, Indian, and whatever else had come in his way. Add to this a shelf of music, and then--construct the tall, slender, large-eyed, thin-nosed, dark-haired figure lying exhausted on the sofa.

He rose to greet Strong with a laugh like a boy, and cried: "Well, skeptic, how do the heathen rage?"

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