

THE ATHELINGS
OR
THE THREE GIFTS
VOL. I.

BY MARGARET OLIPHANT

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“T’ the cave wherein they bow, their thoughts do hit
The roofs of palaces; and nature prompts them,
In simple and low things, to prize it much
Beyond the trick of others.”
CYMBELINE

THE ATHELINGS.

BOOK I.—CHAPTER I. IN THE STREET.

ONE of them is very pretty—you can see that at a glance: under the simple bonnet, and through the thin little veil, which throws no cloud upon its beauty, shines the sweetest girl's face imaginable. It is only eighteen years old, and not at all of the heroical cast, but it brightens like a passing sunbeam through all the sombre line of passengers, and along the dull background of this ordinary street. There is no resisting that sweet unconscious influence: people smile when they pass her, unawares; it is a natural homage paid involuntarily to the young, sweet, innocent loveliness, unconscious of its own power. People have smiled upon her all her days; she thinks it is because everybody is amiable, and seeks no further for a cause.

The other one is not very pretty; she is twenty: she is taller, paler, not so bright of natural expression, yet as far from being commonplace as can be conceived. They are dressed entirely alike, thriftily dressed in brown merino, with little cloaks exact to the same pattern, and bonnets, of which every bow of ribbon outside, and every little pink rosebud within, is a complete fac-simile of its sister bud and bow. They have little paper-parcels in their hands each of them; they are about the same height, and not much different in age; and to see these twin figures, so entirely resembling each other, passing along at the same inconsistent youthful pace, now rapid and now lingering, you would scarcely be prepared for the characteristic difference in their looks and in their minds.

It is a spring afternoon, cheery but cold, and lamps and shop-windows are already beginning to shine through the ruddy twilight. This is a suburban street, with shops here and there, and sombre lines of houses between. The houses are all graced with “front gardens,” strips of ground enriched with a few smoky evergreens, and flower-plots ignorant of flowers; and the shops are of a highly miscellaneous character, adapted to the wants of the locality. Vast London roars and travails far away to the west and to the south. This is Islington, a mercantile and clerkish suburb. The people on the omnibuses—and all the omnibuses are top-heavy with outside passengers—are people from the City; and at this time in the afternoon, as a general principle, everybody is going home.

The two sisters, by a common consent, come to a sudden pause: it is before a toy-shop; and it is easy to discover by the discussion which follows that there are certain smaller people who form an important part of the household at home.

“Take this, Agnes,” says the beautiful sister; “see how pretty! and they could both play with this; but only Bell would care for the doll.”

“It is Bell’s turn,” said Agnes; “Beau had the last one. This we could dress ourselves, for I know mamma has a piece over of their last new frocks. The blue eyes are the best. Stand at the door, Marian, and look for my father, till I buy it; but tell me first which they will like best.”

This was not an easy question. The sisters made a long and anxious survey of the window, varied by occasional glances behind them “to see if papa was coming,” and concluded by a rapid decision on Agnes’s part in favour of one of the ugliest of the dolls.

But still Papa did not come; and the girls were proceeding on their way with the doll, a soft and shapeless parcel, added to their former burdens, when a rapid step came up behind them, and a clumsy boy plunged upon the shoulder of the elder.

“Oh, Charlie!” exclaimed Agnes in an aggrieved but undoubting tone. She did not need to look round. This big young brother was unmistakable in his salutations.

“I say, my father’s past,” said Charlie. “Won’t he be pleased to find you two girls out? What do you wander about so late for? it’s getting dark. I call that foolish, when you might be out, if you pleased, all the day.”

“My boy, you do not know anything about it,” said the elder sister with dignity; “and you shall go by yourself if you do not walk quietly. There! people are looking at us; they never looked at us till you came.”

“Charlie is so handsome,” said Marian laughing, as they all turned a corner, and, emancipated from the public observation, ran along the quiet street, a straggling group, one now pressing before, and now lagging behind. This big boy, however, so far from being handsome, was strikingly the opposite. He had large, loose, ill-compacted limbs, like most young animals of a large growth, and a face which might be called clever, powerful, or good-humoured, but certainly was, without any dispute, ugly. He was of dark complexion, had natural furrows in his brow, and a mouth, wide with fun and happy temper at the present moment, which could close with indomitable obstinacy when occasion served. No fashion could have made Charlie Atheling fashionable; but his plain apparel looked so much plainer and coarser than his sisters’,

that it had neither neatness nor grace to redeem its homeliness. He was seventeen, tall, *big*, and somewhat clumsy, as unlike as possible to the girls, who had a degree of natural and simple gracefulness not very common in their sphere. Charlie's masculine development was unequivocal; he was a thorough *boy* now, and would be a manful man.

"Charlie, boy, have you been thinking?" asked Agnes suddenly, as the three once more relapsed into a sober pace, and pursued their homeward way together. There was the faintest quiver of ridicule in the elder sister's voice, and Marian looked up for the answer with a smile. The young gentleman gave some portentous hitches of his broad shoulders, twisted his brow into ominous puckers, set his teeth—and at last burst out with indignation and unrestrained vehemence—

"Have I been thinking?—to be sure! but I can't make anything of it, if I think for ever."

"You are worse than a woman, Charlie," said the pretty Marian; "you never can make up your mind."

"Stuff!" cried the big boy loudly; "it isn't making up my mind, it's thinking what will do. You girls know nothing about it. I can't see that one thing's better than another, for my part. One man succeeds and another man's a failure, and yet the one's as good a fellow and as clever to work as the other. I don't know what it means."

"So I suppose you will end with being misanthropical and doing nothing," said Agnes; "and all Charlie Atheling's big intentions will burst, like Beau's soap-bubbles. I would not have that."

“I won’t have that, and so you know very well,” said Charlie, who was by no means indisposed for a quarrel. “You are always aggravating, you girls—as if you knew anything about it! I’ll tell you what; I don’t mind how it is, but I’m a man to be something, as sure as I live.”

“You are not a man at all, poor little Charlie—you are only a boy,” said Marian.

“And we are none of us so sure to live that we should swear by it,” said Agnes. “If you are to be something, you should speak better sense than that.”

“Oh, a nice pair of tutors you are!” cried Master Charlie. “I’m bigger than the two of you put together—and I’m a man. You may be as envious as you like, but you cannot alter that.”

Now, though the girls laughed, and with great contempt scouted the idea of being envious, it is not to be denied that some small morsel of envy concerning masculine privileges lay in the elder sister’s heart. It was said at home that Agnes was clever—this was her distinction in the family; and Agnes, having a far-away perception of the fact, greatly longed for some share of those wonderful imaginary advantages which “opened all the world,” as she herself said, to a man’s ambition; she coloured a little with involuntary excitement, while Marian’s sweet and merry laughter still rang in her ear. Marian could afford to laugh—for this beautiful child was neither clever nor ambitious, and had, in all circumstances, the sweetest faculty of content.

“Well, Charlie, a man can do anything,” said Agnes; “*we* are obliged to put up with trifles. If I were a man, I should be content with nothing less than the greatest—I know that!”

“Stuff!” answered the big boy once more; “you may romance about it as you like, but I know better. Who is to care whether you are content or not? You must be only what you can, if you were the greatest hero in the world.”

“I do not know, for my part, what you are talking of,” said Marian. “Is this all about what you are going to do, Charlie, and because you cannot make up your mind whether you will be a clerk in papa’s office, or go to old Mr Foggo’s to learn to be a lawyer? I don’t see what heroes have to do with it either one way or other. You ought to go to your business quietly, and be content. Why should *you* be better than papa?”

The question was unanswerable. Charlie hitched his great shoulders, and made marvellous faces, but replied nothing. Agnes went on steadily in a temporary abstraction; Marian ran on in advance. The street was only half-built—one of those quietest of suburban streets which are to be found only in the outskirts of great towns. The solitary little houses, some quite apart, some in pairs—detached and semi-detached, according to the proper description—stood in genteel retirement within low walls and miniature shrubberies. There was nothing ever to be seen in this stillest of inhabited places—therefore it was called Bellevue: and the inhabitants veiled their parlour windows behind walls and boarded railings, lest their privacy should be invaded by the vulgar vision of butcher, or baker, or green-grocer’s boy. Other eyes than those of the aforesaid professional people never disturbed the composure of Laurel Cottage and Myrtle Cottage, Elmtree Lodge and Halcyon House—wherefore the last new house had a higher wall and a closer railing than any of its predecessors; and it was edifying to observe everybody’s virtuous resolution to see nothing where there was visibly nothing to see.

At the end of this closed-up and secluded place, one light, shining from an unshuttered window, made a gleam of cheerfulness through the respectable gloom. Here you could see shadows large and small moving upon the white blind—could see the candles shifted about, and the sudden reddening of the stirred fire. A wayfarer, when by chance there was one, could scarcely fail to pause with a momentary sentiment of neighbourship and kindness opposite this shining window. It was the only evidence in the darkness of warm and busy human life. This was the home of the three young Athelings—as yet the centre and boundary of all their pleasures, and almost all their desires.

CHAPTER II.

HOME.

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

heavy, tardy, melancholy years, the records of which are written, many names, upon one gravestone, and upon the hearts of these two cheerful people, among their children at their own hearth. They have lived through their day of visitation, and come again into the light beyond; but it is easy to understand the peculiar tenderness with which father and mother bend over these last little children—angels of consolation—and how everything in the house yields to the pretty childish caprice of little Bell and little Beau.

Yes, of course, you have found it out: everybody finds it out at the first glance; everybody returns to it with unfailing criticism. To tell the truth, the house is a very cheap house, being so large a one. Had it been in good order, the Athelings could never have pretended to such a “desirable family residence” as this house in Bellevue; and so you perceive this room has been papered by Charlie and the girls and Mrs Atheling. It is a very pretty paper, and was a great bargain; but unfortunately it is not matched—one-half of the pattern, in two or three places, is hopelessly divorced from the other half. They were very zealous, these amateur workpeople, but they were not born paperhangers, and, with the best intentions in the world, have drawn the walls awry. At the time Mrs Atheling was extremely mortified, and Agnes overcome with humiliation; but Charlie and Marian thought it very good fun; Papa burst into shouts of laughter; Bell and Beau chorused lustily, and at length even the unfortunate managers of the work forgave themselves. It never was altered, because a new paper is an important consideration where so many new frocks, coats, and bonnets are perpetually wanting: everybody became accustomed to it; it was an unfailing source of family witticism; and Mrs Atheling came to find so much relaxation from her other cares in the constant mental effort to piece together the disjointed pattern, that

even to her there was consolation in this dire and lamentable failure. Few strangers came into the family-room, but every visitor who by chance entered it, with true human perversity turned his eyes from the comfort and neatness of the apartment, and from the bright faces of its occupants, to note the flowers and arabesques of the pretty paper, wandering all astray over this unfortunate wall.

Yet it was a pretty scene—with Marian's beautiful face at one side of the table, and the bright intelligence of Agnes at the other—the rosy children on the rug, the father reposing from his day's labour, the mother busy with her sweet familiar never-ending cares; even Charlie, ugly and characteristic, added to the family completeness. The head of the house was only a clerk in a merchant's office, with a modest stipend of two hundred pounds a-year. All the necessities of the family, young and old, had to be supplied out of this humble income. You may suppose there was not much over, and that the household chancellor of the exchequer had enough to do, even when assisted by that standing committee with which she consulted solemnly over every little outlay. The committee was prudent, but it was not infallible. Agnes, the leading member, had extravagant notions. Marian, more careful, had still a weakness for ribbons and household embellishments, bright and clean and new. Sometimes the committee *en permanence* was abruptly dismissed by its indignant president, charged with revolutionary sentiments, and a total ignorance of sound financial principles. Now and then there occurred a monetary crisis. On the whole, however, the domestic kingdom was wisely governed, and the seven Athelings, parents and children, lived and prospered, found it possible to have even holiday dresses, and books from the circulating library, ribbons for

the girls, and toys for the babies, out of their two hundred pounds a-year.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

The ribbons accordingly were lifted away, and placed in a heap upon a much-used work-table which stood in the window. The kettle sang by the fire. The tea was made. Into two small chairs of wickerwork, raised upon high stilts to reach the table, were hoisted Bell and Beau. The talk of these small interlocutors had all this time been incessant, but untranslatable. It was the unanimous opinion of the family Atheling that you could "make out every word" spoken by these little personages, and that they were quite remarkable in their intelligibility; yet there were difficulties in the

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