

**THE ATHELINGS**  
**OR**  
**THE THREE GIFTS**  
**VOL. II**

**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 prince it much  
Beyond the trick of others.”

CYMBELINE

# THE ATHELINGS.

## BOOK II—CHAPTER I.

### THE WILLOWS.

THE Willows was a large low house, with no architectural pretensions, but bright as villa could be upon the sunniest side of the Thames. The lawn sloped to the river, and ended in a deep fringe and border of willows, sweeping into the water; while half-way across the stream lay a little fairy island, half enveloped in the same silvery foliage, but with bowers and depths of leaves within, through which some stray sunbeam was always gleaming. The flower-beds on the lawn were in a flush with roses; the crystal roof of a large conservatory glistened in the sun. Flowers and sunshine, fragrance and stillness, the dew on the grass, and the morning light upon the river—no marvel that to eyes so young and inexperienced, this Richmond villa looked like a paradise on earth.

It was early morning—very early, when nobody seemed awake but themselves in the great house; and Agnes and Marian came down stairs softly, and, half afraid of doing wrong, stole out upon the lawn. The sun had just begun to gather those blobs of dew from the roses, but all over the grass lay jewels, bedded deep in the close-shorn sod, and shining in the early light. An occasional puff of wind came crisp across the river, and turned to the sun the silvery side of all those drooping willow-leaves, and the willows themselves swayed and sighed towards the water, and the water came up upon them now and then with a playful plunge and flow. The two girls said nothing to each other as they wandered along the foot of the slope, looking over to the island, where already the sun had penetrated to his nest of trees. All this simple beauty, which was not remarkable to the fashionable guests of Mrs

Edgerley, went to the very heart of these simple children of Bellevue. It moved them to involuntary delight—joy which could give no reason, for they thought there had never been such a beautiful summer morning, or such a scene.

And by-and-by they began to talk of last night—last night, their first night at the Willows, their first entrance into the home life of “the great.” They had no moral maxims at their finger-ends, touching the vanity of riches, nor had the private opinion entertained by Papa and Mamma, that “the country” paid for the folly of “the aristocracy,” and that the science of Government was a mere piece of craft for the benefit of “the privileged classes,” done any harm at all to the unpolitical imaginations of Agnes and Marian. They were scarcely at their ease yet, and were a great deal more timid than was comfortable; yet they took very naturally to this fairy life, and found an unfailing fund of wonder and admiration in it. They admired everything indeed, had a certain awe and veneration for everybody, and could not sufficiently admire the apparent accomplishments and real grace of their new associates.

“Agnes!—I wonder if there is anything I could learn?” said Marian, rather timidly; “everybody here can do something; it is very different from doing a little of everything, like Miss Tavistock at Bellevue—and we used to think her accomplished!—but do you think there is anything I could learn?”

“And me!” said Agnes, somewhat disconsolately.

“You? no, indeed, you do not need it,” said Marian, with a little pride. “You can do what none of them can do;—but they can talk about everything these people, and every one of them can do

something. There is that Sir Langham—you would think he was only a young gentleman—but Mrs Edgerley says he makes beautiful sketches. We did not understand people like these when we were at home.”

“What do you think of Sir Langham, May?” asked Agnes seriously.

“Think of him? oh, he is very pleasant,” said Marian, with a smile and a slight blush: “but never mind Sir Langham; do you think there is anything I could learn?”

“I do not know,” said Agnes; “perhaps you could sing. I think you might sing, if you would only take courage and try.”

“Sing! oh no, no!”; said Marian; “no one could venture to sing after the young lady—did you hear her name, Agnes?—who sang last night. She did not speak to any one, she was more by herself than we were. I wonder who she could be.”

“Mrs Edgerley called her Rachel,” said Agnes. “I did not hear any other name. I think it must be the same that Mrs Edgerley told mamma about; you remember she said——”

“I am here,” said a low voice suddenly, close beside them. The girls started back, exceedingly confused and ashamed. They had not perceived a sort of little bower, woven among the willows, from which now hastily appeared the third person who spoke. She was a little older than Agnes, very slight and girlish in her person—very dark of complexion, with a magnificent mass of black hair, and large liquid dark eyes. Nothing else about her was remarkable; her features were small and delicate, her cheeks colourless, her very lips pale; but her eyes, which were not of a



slumbrous lustre, but full of light, rapid, earnest, and irregular, lighted up her dark pallid face with singular power and attractiveness. She turned upon them quickly as they stood distressed and irresolute before her.

“I did not mean to interrupt you,” said this new-comer; “but you were about to speak of me, and I thought it only honest to give you notice that I was here.”

“Thank you,” said Agnes with humility. “We are strangers, and did not know—we scarcely know any one here; and we thought you were nearly about our own age, and perhaps would help us—” Here Agnes stopped short; she was not skilled in making overtures of friendship.

“No, indeed no,” cried their new acquaintance, hurriedly. “I never make friends. I could be of no use. I am only a dependent, scarcely so good as that. I am nothing here.”

“And neither are we,” said Agnes, following shyly the step which this strange girl took away from them. “We never were in a house like this before. We do not belong to great people. Mrs Edgerley asked us to come, because we met her at Mr Burlington’s, and she has been very kind, but we know no one. Pray, do not go away.”

The thoughtful eyes brightened into a sudden gleam. “We are called Atheling,” said Marian, interposing in her turn. “My sister is Agnes, and I am Marian—and you Miss——”

“My name is Rachel,” said their new friend, with a sudden and violent blush, making all her face crimson. “I have no other—call

me so, and I will like it. You think I am of your age; but I am not like you—you do not know half so much as I know.”

“No—that is very likely,” said Agnes, somewhat puzzled; “but I think you do not mean education,” said the young author immediately, seeing Marian somewhat disposed to resent on her behalf this broad assertion. “You mean distress and sorrow. But we have had a great deal of grief at home. We have lost dear little children, one after another. We are not ignorant of grief.”

Rachel looked at them with strange observation, wonder, and uncertainty. “But you are ignorant of me—and I am ignorant of you,” she said slowly, pausing between her words. “I suppose you mean just what you say, do you? and I am not much used to that. Do you know what I am here for?—only to sing and amuse the people—and you still want to make friends with me!”

“Mrs Edgerley said you were to be a singer, but you did not like it,” said Marian; “and I think you are very right.”

“Did she say so?—and what more?” said Rachel, smiling faintly. “I want to hear now, though I did not when I heard your voices first.”

“She said you were a connection of the family,” said Agnes.

The blood rushed again to the young stranger’s brow. “Ah! I understand,” she said; “she implied—yes. I know how she would do. And you will still be friends with *me*?”

At that moment it suddenly flashed upon the recollection of both the girls that Mamma had disapproved of this prospective acquaintance. They both blushed with instant consciousness, and neither of them spoke. In an instant Rachel became frozen into a

haughtiness far exceeding anything within the power of Mrs Edgerley. Little and slight as she was, her girlish frame rose to the dignity of a young queen. Before Agnes could say a word, she had left them with a slight and lofty bow. Without haste, but with singular rapidity, she crossed the dewy lawn, and went into the house, acknowledging, with a stately inclination of her head, some one who passed her. The girls were so entirely absorbed, watching her progress, that they did not perceive who this other person was.

## CHAPTER II.

### AN EMBARRASSING COMPANION.

“STRANGE creature!” said Sir Langham Portland, who had joined the girls almost before they were aware; “Odd girl! If Lucifer had a sister, I should know where to find her; but a perfect siren so far as music is concerned. Did you hear her sing last night—that thing of Beethoven’s—what is the name of it? Do you like Beethoven, though? *She*, I suppose, worships him.”

“We know very little about music,” said Marian. She thought it proper to make known the fact, but blushed in spite of herself, and was much ashamed of her own ignorance. Marian was quite distressed and impatient to find herself so much behind every one else.

“Oh!” said Sir Langham—which meant that the handsome guardsman was a good deal flattered by the blush, and did not care at all for the want of information—in fact, he was cogitating within himself, being no great master of the art of conversation, what to speak of next.

“I am afraid Miss—Rachel was not pleased,” said Agnes; “we disturbed her here. I am afraid she will think we were rude.”

“Eh!” said Sir Langham, with a look of astonishment. “Oh, don’t trouble yourself—she’s accustomed to that. Pretty place this. Suppose a fellow on the island over there, what a capital sketch he could make;—with two figures instead of three, the effect would be perfect!”

“We were two figures before you came,” said Marian, turning half away, and with a smile.

“Ah! quite a different suggestion,” said Sir Langham. “Your two figures were all white and angelical—maiden meditation—mine would be—Elysium. Happy sketcher! happier hero!—and you could not suppose a more appropriate scene.”

But Agnes and Marian were much too shy and timid to answer this as they might have answered Harry Oswald under the same circumstances. Agnes half interrupted him, being somewhat in haste to change the conversation. “You are an artist yourself?” said Agnes.

“No,” said Sir Langham; “not at all,—no more than everybody else is. I have no doubt you know a hundred people better at it than I.”

“I do not think, counting every one,” said Marian, “that we know a hundred, or the half of a hundred, people altogether; and none of them make sketches. Mrs Edgerley said yours were quite remarkable.”

“A great many things are quite remarkable with Mrs Edgerley,” said Sir Langham through his mustache. “But what an amazing circle yours must be! One must do something with one’s spare time. That old fellow is the hardest rascal to kill of any I know—don’t you find him so?”

“No—not when we are at home,” said Marian.

“Ah! in the country, I suppose; and you are Lady Bountifuls, and attend to all the village,” said Sir Langham. He had quite made up his mind that these young girls, who were not fashionable nor

remarkable in any way, save for the wonderful beauty of the youngest, were daughters of some squire in Banburyshire, whom it was Lord Winterbourne's interest to do a service to.

"No, indeed, we have not any village—we are not Lady Bountifuls; but we do a great many things at home," said Marian. Something restrained them both, however, from their heroic purpose of declaring at once their "rank in life;" they shrank, with natural delicacy, from saying anything about themselves to this interrogator, and were by no means clear that it would be right to tell Sir Langham Portland that they lived in Bellevue.

"May we go through the conservatory, I wonder?" said Agnes;—the elder sister, remembering the parting charge of her mother, began to be somewhat uneasy about their handsome companion—he might possibly fall in love with Marian—that was not so very dreadful a hypothesis,—for Agnes was human, and did not object to see the natural enemies of womankind taken captive, subjugated, or even entirely slain. But Marian might fall in love with *him*! That was an appalling thought; two distinct lines of anxiety began to appear in Agnes's forehead; and the imagination of the young genius instantly called before her the most touching and pathetic picture, of a secret love and a broken heart.

"Marian, we may go into the conservatory," repeated Agnes; and she took her sister's hand and led her to where the Scotch gardener was opening the windows of that fairy palace. Sir Langham still gave them his attendance, following Marian as she passed through the ranks of flowers, and echoing her delight. Sir Langham was rather relieved to find them at last in enthusiasm about something. This familiar and well-known feature of young ladyhood set him much more at his ease.

And the gardener, with benign generosity, gathered some flowers for his young visitors. They thanked him with such thoroughly grateful thanks, and were so respectful of his superior knowledge, that this worthy functionary brightened under their influence. Sir Langham followed surprised and amused. He thought Marian's simple ignorance of all those delicate splendid exotic flowers, as pretty as he would have thought her acquaintance with them had she been better instructed; and when one of her flowers fell from her hand, lifted it up with the air of a paladin, and placed it in his breast. Marian, though she had turned aside, *saw* him do it by some mysterious perception—not of the eye—and blushed with a secret tremor, half of pleasure, half of amusement. Agnes regarded it a great deal more seriously. Agnes immediately discovered that it was time to go in. She was quite indifferent, we are grieved to say, to the fate of Sir Langham, and thought nothing of disturbing the peace of that susceptible young gentleman; but her protection and guardianship of Marian was a much more serious affair. Their windows were in the end of the house, and commanded no view—so Mrs Edgerley, with a hundred regrets, was grieved to tell them—but these windows looked over an orchard and a clump of chestnuts, where birds sang and dew fell, and the girls were perfectly contented with the prospect; they had three rooms—a dressing-room, and two pretty bedchambers—into all of which the morning sun threw a sidelong glance as he passed; and they had been extremely delighted with their pretty apartments last night.

“Well!” said Agnes, as they arranged their flowers and put them in water, “everything is very pretty, May, but I almost wish we were at home.”

“Why?” said Marian; but the beautiful sister had so much perception of the case, that she did not look up, nor show any particular surprise.

“Why?—because—because people don’t understand what we are, nor who we belong to, nor how different—— Marian, you know quite well what is the cause!”

“But suppose people don’t want to know?” said Marian, who was provokingly calm and at her ease; “we cannot go about telling everybody—no one cares. Suppose we were to tell Sir Langham, Agnes? He would think we meant that he has to come to Bellevue; and I am sure you would not like to see him there!”

This was a very conclusive argument, but Agnes had made up her mind to be annoyed.

“And there was Rachel,” said Agnes, “I wonder why just at that moment we should have thought of mamma—and now I am sure she will not speak to us again.”

“Mamma did not think it quite proper,” said Marian doubtfully;—“I am sure I cannot tell why—but we were very near making up friendship without thinking; perhaps it is better as it is.”

“It is never proper to hurt any one’s feelings—and she is lonely and neglected and by herself,” said Agnes. “Mamma cannot be displeased when I tell her; and I will try all I can to-day to meet with Rachel again. I think Rachel would think better of our house than of the Willows. Though it is a beautiful place, it is not kindly; it never could look like home.”

“Oh, nonsense! if we had it to ourselves, and they were all here!” cried Marian. That indeed was a paradisaical conception.



Agnes's uneasy mood could not stand against such an idea, and she arranged her hair with renewed spirits, having quite given up for the moment all desire for going home.

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