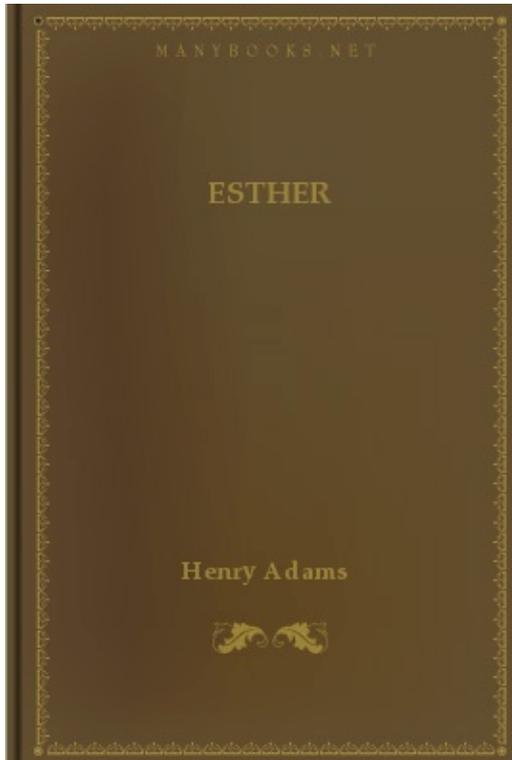


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Esther

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ESTHER

A Novel

Published in 1884 by Henry Holt and Company

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?"

"The heathen are all right," replied Strong. "The orthodox are the ragers."

"Never mind the orthodox," said Hazard. "I will look after them. Tell me about the Pagans. I felt like St. Paul preaching at Athens the God whom they ignorantly worshiped."

"I took with me the sternest little Pagan I know, my cousin, Esther Dudley," said Strong; "and the only question she asked was whether you believed it all."

"She hit the mark at the first shot," answered Hazard. "I must make them all ask that question. Tell me about your cousin. Who is she? Her name sounds familiar."

"As familiar as Hawthorne," replied Strong. "One of his tales is called after it. Her father comes from a branch of the old Puritan Dudleys, and took a fancy to the name when he met it in Hawthorne's story. You never heard of them before because you have been always away from New York, and when you were here they happened to be away. You know that half a dozen women run this city, and my aunt, Mrs. Murray, is one of the half-dozen. She is training Esther to take her place when she retires. I want you to know my Uncle Dudley and my cousin. I am going to have a little tea-party for them in my rooms, and you must help me with it."

Mr. Hazard asked only to have it put off until the week after the next because of his engagements, and hardly had they fixed the day when another caller appeared.

He was a man of their own age, so quiet and subdued in manner, and so delicate in feature, that he would have been unnoticed in any ordinary group, and shoved aside into a corner. He seemed to face life with an effort; his light-brown eyes had an uneasy look as though they wanted to rest on something that should be less hard and real than what they saw. He was not handsome; his mouth was a little sensual; his yellowish beard was ragged. He was apt to be silent until his shyness wore off, when he became a rapid, nervous talker, full of theories and schemes, which he changed from one day to another, but which were always quite complete and convincing for the moment. At times he had long fits of moodiness and would not open his mouth for days. At other times he sought society and sat up all night talking, planning, discussing, drinking, smoking, living on bread and cheese or whatever happened to be within reach, and sleeping whenever he happened to feel in the humor for it. Rule or method he had none, and his friends had for years given up the attempt to control him. They took it for granted that he would soon kill himself with his ill-regulated existence. Hazard thought that his lungs would give way, and Strong insisted that his brain was the weak spot, and no one ventured to hope that he would long hold out, but he lived on in defiance of them.

"Good evening, Wharton," said the clergyman. "I have been trying to find out from Strong what the heathen think of me. Tell us now the art view of the case. How are you satisfied?"

"Tell me what you were sketching in church," said Strong. "Was it not the new martyrdom of St. Stephen?"

"No," answered Wharton quietly. "It was my own. I found I could not look up; I knew how bad my own work was, and I could not stand seeing it; so I drew my own martyrdom rather than make a scandal by leaving the church."

"Did you hear my sermon?" asked the clergyman.

"I don't remember," answered Wharton vaguely; "what was it about?"

Strong and Hazard broke into a laugh which roused him to the energy of self-defense.

"I never could listen," he said. "It is a slow and stupid faculty. An artist's business is only to see, and to-day I could see nothing but my own things which are all bad. The whole church is bad. It is not altogether worth a bit of Japanese enamel that I have brought round here this evening to show Strong."

He searched first in one pocket, then in another, until he found what he wanted in the pocket of his overcoat, and a warm discussion at once began between him and Strong, who declared that he had a better piece.

"Mine was given me by a Daimio, in Kiusiu," said Strong. "It is the best old bit you ever saw. Come round to my rooms a week from to-morrow at five o'clock in the afternoon, and I will show you all my new japs. The Dudleys are coming to see them, and my aunt Mrs. Murray, and Hazard has promised to come."

"I saw you had Miss Dudley with you at church this morning," said Wharton, still absorbed in study of his enamel, and quite unconscious of his host's evident restlessness.

"Ah! then you could see Miss Dudley!" cried the clergyman, who could not forgive the abrupt dismissal of his own affairs by the two men, and was eager to bring the talk back to his church.

"I can always see Miss Dudley," said Wharton quietly.

"Why?" asked Hazard.

"She is interesting," replied the painter. "She has a style of her own, and I never can quite make up my mind whether to like it or not."

"It is the first time I ever knew you to hesitate before a style," said Hazard.

"I hesitate before every thing American," replied Wharton, beginning to show a shade of interest in what he was talking of. "I don't know--you don't know--and I never yet met any man who could tell me, whether American types are going to supplant the old ones, or whether they are to come to nothing for want of ideas. Miss Dudley is one of the most marked American types I ever saw."

"What are the signs of the most marked American type you ever saw?" asked Hazard.

"In the first place, she has a bad figure, which she makes answer for a good one. She is too slight, too thin; she looks fragile, willowy, as the cheap novels call it, as though you could break her in halves like a switch. She dresses to suit her figure and sometimes overdoes it. Her features are imperfect. Except her ears, her voice, and her eyes which have a sort of brown depth like a trout brook, she has no very good points."

"Then why do you hesitate?" asked Strong, who was not entirely pleased with this cool estimate of his cousin's person.

"There is the point where the subtlety comes in," replied the painter. "Miss Dudley interests me. I want to know what she can make of life. She gives one the idea of a lightly-sparred yacht in mid-ocean; unexpected; you ask yourself what the devil she is doing there. She sails gayly along, though there is no land in sight and plenty of rough weather coming. She never read a book, I believe, in her life. She tries to paint, but she is only a second rate amateur and will never be any thing more, though she has done one or two things which I give you my word I would like to have done myself. She picks up all she knows without an effort and knows nothing well, yet she seems to understand whatever is said. Her mind is as irregular as her face, and both have the same peculiarity. I notice that the lines of her eyebrows, nose and mouth all end with a slight upward curve like a yacht's sails, which gives a kind of hopefulness and self-confidence to her expression. Mind and face have the same curves."

"Is that your idea of our national type?" asked Strong. "Why don't you put it into one of your saints in the church, and show what you mean by American art?"

"I wish I could," said the artist. "I have passed weeks trying to catch it. The thing is too subtle, and it is not a

grand type, like what we are used to in the academies. But besides the riddle, I like Miss Dudley for herself. The way she takes my brutal criticisms of her painting makes my heart bleed. I mean to go down on my knees one of these days, and confess to her that I know nothing about it; only if her style is right, my art is wrong."

"What sort of a world does this new deity of yours belong to?" asked the clergyman.

"Not to yours," replied Wharton quickly. "There is nothing medieval about her. If she belongs to any besides the present, it is to the next world which artists want to see, when paganism will come again and we can give a divinity to every waterfall. I tell you, Hazard, I am sick at heart about our church work; it is a failure. Never till this morning did I feel the whole truth, but the instant I got inside the doors it flashed upon me like St. Paul's great light. The thing does not belong to our time or feelings."

The conversation having thus come round to the subject which Mr. Hazard wanted to discuss, the three men plunged deep into serious talk which lasted till after midnight had struck from the neighboring church.

Chapter II

Punctually the next day at three o'clock, Esther Dudley appeared in her aunt's drawing-room where she found half a dozen ladies chatting, or looking at Mr. Murray's pictures in the front parlor. The lady of the house sat in an arm-chair before the fire in an inner room, talking with two other ladies of the board, one of whom, with an aggressive and superior manner, seemed finding fault with every thing except the Middle Ages and Pericles.

"A tailor who builds a palace to live in," said she, "is a vulgar tailor, and an artist who paints the tailor and his palace as though he were painting a doge of Venice, is a vulgar artist."

"But, Mrs. Dyer," replied her hostess coldly, "I don't believe there was any real difference between a doge of Venice and a doge of New York. They all made fortunes more or less by cheating their neighbors, and when they were rich they wanted portraits. Some one told them to send for Mr. Tizian or Mr. Wharton, and he made of them all the gentlemen there ever were."

Mrs. Dyer frowned a protest against this heresy. "Tizian would have respected his art," said she; "these New York men are making money."

"For my part," said Mrs. Murray as gently as she could, "I am grateful to any one who likes beautiful things and is willing to pay for them, and I hope the artists will make them as beautiful as they can for the money. The number is small."

With this she rose, and moving to the table, called her meeting to order. The ladies seated themselves in a business-like way round about, and listened with masculine gravity to a long written report on the work done or needing to be done at the Children's Hospital. Debate rose on the question of putting in a new kitchen range and renewing the plumbing. Mrs. Dyer took the floor, or the table, very much to herself, dealing severely with the treatment of the late kitchen range, and bringing numerous complaints against the matron, the management and the hospital in general. There was an evident look of weariness on the part of the board when she began, but not until after a two hours' session did she show signs of exhaustion and allow a vote to be taken. The necessary work was then rapidly done, and at last Mrs. Murray, referring in a business-like way to her notes, remarked that she had nothing more to suggest except that Mr. Hazard, the new clergyman at St. John's, should be elected as a member of their visiting committee.

"Do we want more figure-heads there?" asked Mrs. Dyer. "Every day and every hour of Mr. Hazard's time ought to be devoted to his church. What we want is workers. We have no one to look after the children's clothes and go down into the kitchen. All our visitors are good for is to amuse the children for half an hour

now and then by telling them stories."

Mrs. Murray explained that the election was rather a matter of custom; that the rector of St. John's always had been a member of their committee, and it would look like a personal slight if they left him off; so the vote was passed and the meeting broke up. When the last echo of rapid talk and leave-taking had ceased, Mrs. Murray sat down again before the fire with the air of one who has tried to keep her temper and has not thoroughly satisfied her ambition.

"Mrs. Dyer is very trying," she said to Esther who stayed after the others went; "but there is always one such woman on every board. I should not care except that she gives me a dreadful feeling that I am like her. I hope I'm not, but I know I am."

"You're not, Aunt Sarah!" replied Esther. "She can stick pins faster and deeper than a dozen such as you. What makes me unhappy is that her spitefulness goes so deep. Her dig at me about telling stories to the children seemed to cut me up by the roots. All I do is to tell them stories."

"I hope she will never make herself useful in that way," rejoined Mrs. Murray grimly. "She would frighten the poor little things into convulsions. Don't let her worry you about usefulness. One of these days you will have to be useful whether you like it or not, and now you are doing enough if you are only ornamental. I know you will hold your tongue at the board meetings, and that is real usefulness."

"Very well, aunt! I can do that. And I can go on cutting out dolls' clothes for the children, though Mrs. Dyer will complain that my dolls are not sufficiently dressed. I wish I did not respect people for despising me."

"If we did not, there would be no Mrs. Dyers," answered her aunt. "She is a terrible woman. I feel always like a sort of dry lamp-wick when she has left me. Never mind! I have something else now to talk about. I want you to make yourself useful in a harder path."

"Not another Charity Board, aunt," said Esther rather piteously.

"Worse!" said Mrs. Murray. "A charity girl! Thirty years ago I had a dear friend who was also a friend of your poor mother's. Her name was Catherine Cortright. She married a man named Brooke, and they went west, and they kept going further and further west until at length they reached Colorado, where she died, leaving one daughter, a child of ten years old. The father married again and had a new family. Very lately he has died, leaving the girl with her step-mother and half-sisters. She is unhappy there; they seem to have brought her up in a strict Presbyterian kind of way, and she does not like it. Mr. Murray is an executor under her father's will, and when she comes of age in a few months, she will have a little independent property. She has asked me to look after her till then, and is coming on at once to make me a visit."

"You are always doing something for somebody," said Esther. "What do you expect her to be, and how long will she stay?"

"I don't expect any thing, my dear, and my heart sinks whenever I think of her. My letters say she is amiable and pretty; but if she is a rattlesnake, I must take her in, and you must help to amuse her."

"I will do all I can," replied Esther. "Don't be low about it. She can't be as bad as Mrs. Dyer even if she is a rattlesnake. If she is pretty, and turns out well, we will make George marry her."

"I wish we might," said her aunt.

Esther went her way and thought no more of the orphan, but Mrs. Murray carried the weight of all New York on her mind. Not the least of her anxieties was the condition of her brother-in-law, Esther's father. He was

now a confirmed invalid, grateful for society and amusement, and almost every day he expected his sister-in-law to take him to drive, if the weather was tolerable. The tax was severe, but she bore it with heroism, and his gratitude sustained her. When she came for him the next morning, she found him reading as usual, and waiting for her. "I was just wondering," said he, "whether I could read five minutes longer without a stimulant. Do you know that indiscriminate reading is a fiendish torture. No convict could stand it. I seldom take up a book in these days without thinking how much more amusing it would be to jolt off on a bright day at the head of a funeral procession. Between the two ways of amusing one's-self, I am principled against books."

"You have a very rough way of expressing your tastes," said Mrs. Murray with a shiver, as they got into her carriage. "Do you know, I never could understand the humor of joking about funerals."

"That surprises me," said Mr. Dudley. "A good funeral needs a joke. If mine is not more amusing than my friends', I would rather not go to it. The kind of funeral I am invited to has no sort of charm. Indeed, I don't know that I was ever asked to one that seemed to me to show an elegant hospitality in the host."

"If you can't amuse me better, William, I will drive you home again," said his sister-in-law.

"Not quite yet. I have something more to say on this business of funerals which is just now not a little on my mind."

"Are you joking now, or serious?" asked Mrs. Murray.

"I cannot myself see any humor in what I have to say," replied Mr. Dudley; "but I am told that even professional humorists seldom enjoy jokes at their own expense. The case is this. My doctors, who give me their word of honor that they are not more ignorant than the average of their profession, told me long ago that I might die at any moment. I knew then that I must be quite safe, and thought no more about it. Their first guess was wrong. Instead of going off suddenly and without notice, as a colonel of New York volunteers should, I began last summer to go off by bits, as though I were ashamed to be seen running away. This time the doctors won't say any thing, which alarms me. I have watched myself and them for some weeks until I feel pretty confident that I had better get ready to start. All through life I have been thinking how I could best get out of it, and on the whole I am well enough satisfied with this way, except on Esther's account, and it is about her that I want to consult you."

Mrs. Murray knew her brother-in-law too well to irritate him by condolence or sympathy. She said only: "Why be anxious? Esther can take care of herself. Perhaps she will marry, but if not, she has nothing to fear. The unmarried women nowadays are better off than the married ones."

"Oh!" said Mr. Dudley with his usual air of deep gravity; "it is not she, but her husband who is on my mind. I have hated the fellow all his life. About twice a year I have treacherously stabbed him in the back as he was going out of my own front door. I knew that he would interfere with my comfort if I let him get a footing. After all he was always a poor creature, and did not deserve to live. My conscience does not reproach me. But now, when I am weak, and his ghost rises in an irrepressible manner, and grins at me on my own threshold, I begin to feel a sort of pity, mingled with contempt. I want to show charity to him before I die."

"What on earth do you mean?" asked his sister-in-law with an impatient groan. "For thirty years I have been trying to understand you, and you grow worse every year."

"Now, I am not surprised to hear you say so. Any sympathy for the husband is unusual, no doubt, yet I am not prepared to admit that it is unintelligible. You go too far."

"Take your own way, William. When you are tired, let me know what it is that you think I can do."

"I want you to find the poor fellow, and tell him that I bear him no real ill-will."

"You want me to find a husband for Esther?"

"If you have nothing better to do. I have looked rather carefully through her list of friends, and, taking out the dancing men who don't count, I see nobody who would answer, except perhaps her Cousin George, and to marry him would be cold-blooded. She might as well marry you."

"I have thought a great deal about that match, as you know," replied Mrs. Murray. "It would not answer. I could get over the cousinship, if I must, but Esther will want a husband to herself and George is a vagabond. He could never make her happy."

"George had the ill-luck," said Mr. Dudley, "to inherit a small spark of something almost like genius; and a little weak genius mixed in with a little fortune, goes a long way towards making a jack-o-lantern. Still we won't exaggerate George's genius. After all there is not enough of it to prevent his being the best of the lot."

"He could not hold her a week," said Mrs. Murray; "nor she him."

"I own that on his wedding day he would probably be in Dakota flirting with the bones of a fossil monkey," said Mr. Dudley thoughtfully; "but what better can you suggest?"

"I suggest that you should leave it alone, and let Esther take care of her own husband," replied Mrs. Murray. "Women must take their chance. It is what they are for. Marriage makes no real difference in their lot. All the contented women are fools, and all the discontented ones want to be men. Women are a blunder in the creation, and must take the consequences. If Esther is sensible she will never marry; but no woman is sensible, so she will marry without consulting us."

"You are always eloquent on this subject," said Mr. Dudley. "Why have you never applied for a divorce from poor Murray?"

"Because Mr. Murray happens to be one man in a million," answered she. "Nothing on earth would induce me to begin over again and take such a risk a second time, with life before me. As for bringing about a marriage, I would almost rather bring about a murder."

"Poor Esther!" said he gloomily. "She has been brought up among men, and is not used to harness. If things go wrong she will rebel, and a woman who rebels is lost."

"Esther has known too many good men ever to marry a bad one," she replied.

"I am not sure of that," he answered. "When I am out of the way she will feel lonely, and any man who wants her very much can probably get her. Joking apart, it is there I want your help. Keep an eye on her. Your principles will let you prevent a marriage, even though you are not allowed to make one."

"I hope she will not want my help in either way," said Mrs. Murray; "but if she does, I will remember what you say--though I would rather go out to service at five dollars a week than do this kind of work. Do you know that I have already a girl on my hands? Poor Catherine Brooke's daughter is coming to-morrow from Colorado to be under my care for the next few months till she is of age. She never has been to the East, and I expect to have my hands full."

"If I had known it," said he, "I think I would have selected some wiser woman to look after Esther."

"You are too encouraging," replied Mrs. Murray. "If I talk longer with you I shall have a crying fit. Suppose

we change the subject and amuse ourselves in a cheerfuller way."

They finished their drive talking of less personal matters, but Mrs. Murray, after leaving her brother-in-law at his house, went back to her own with spirits depressed to a point as low as any woman past fifty cares to enjoy. She had reason to know that Mr. Dudley was not mistaken about his symptoms, and that not many months could pass before that must happen which he foresaw. He could find some relief in talking and even in jesting about it, but she could only with difficulty keep herself from an outburst of grief. She had every reason to feel keenly. To lose one's oldest friends is a trial that human nature never accustoms itself to bear with satisfaction, even when the loss does not double one's responsibilities; but in this case Mrs. Murray, as she grew old, saw her niece Esther about to come on her hands at the same time when a wild girl from the prairie was on the road to her very door, and she had no sufficient authority to control either of them. For a woman without children of her own, to act this part of matron to an extemporized girls' college might be praise-worthy, but could not bring repose of mind or body.

Mrs. Murray was still wider awake to this truth when she went the next day to the Grand Central Station to wait for the arrival of her Colorado orphan. The Chicago express glided in as gracefully and silently as though it were in quite the best society, and had run a thousand miles or so only for gentle exercise before dining at Delmonico's and passing an evening at the opera. Among the crowd of passengers who passed out were several women whose appearance gave Mrs. Murray a pang of fear, but at length she caught sight of one who pleased her fastidious eye. "I hope it is she," broke from her lips as the girl came towards her, and a moment later her hope was gratified. She drew a breath of relief that made her light-hearted. Whatever faults the girl might have, want of charm was not among them. As she raised her veil, the engine-stoker, leaning from his engine above them, nodded approval. In spite of dust and cinders, the fatigue and exposure of two thousand miles or so of travel, the girl was fresh as a summer morning, and her complexion was like the petals of a sweetbrier rose. Her dark blue woollen dress, evidently made by herself, soothed Mrs. Murray's anxieties more completely than though it had come by the last steamer from the best modiste in Paris.

"Is it possible you have come all the way alone?" she asked, looking about with lurking suspicion of possible lovers still to be revealed.

"Only from Chicago," answered Catherine; "I stopped awhile there to rest, but I had friends to take care of me."

"And you were not homesick or lonely?"

"No! I made friends on the cars. I have been taking care of a sick lady and her three children, who are all on their way to Europe, and wanted to pay my expenses if I would go with them."

"I don't wonder!" said Mrs. Murray with an unusual burst of sympathy.

No sooner had they fairly reached the house than Esther came to see the stranger and found her aunt in high spirits. "She is as natural and sweet as a flower," said Mrs. Murray. "To be sure she has a few Western tricks; she says she stopped awhile at Chicago, and that she has a raft of things in her trunks, and she asks häow, and says äout; but so do half the girls in New York, and I will break her of it in a week so that you will never know she was not educated in Boston and finished in Europe. I was terribly afraid she would wear a linen duster and water-waves."

Catherine became a favorite on the spot. No one could resist her hazel eyes and the curve of her neck, or her pure complexion which had the transparency of a Colorado sunrise. Her good nature was inexhaustible, and she occasionally developed a touch of sentiment which made Mr. Murray assert that she was the most dangerous coquette within his experience. Mr. Murray, who had a sound though uncultivated taste for pretty girls, succumbed to her charms, while George Strong, whose good nature was very like her own, never tired

of drawing her out and enjoying her comments on the new life about her.

"What kind of a revolver do you carry?" asked George, gravely, at his first interview with her; "do you like yours heavy, or say a 32 ball?"

"Don't mind him, Catherine," said Mrs. Murray; "he is always making poor jokes."

"Oh, but I'm not strong enough to use heavy shooting-irons," replied Catherine quite seriously. "I had a couple of light ones in my room at home, but father told me I could never hurt any thing with them, and I never did."

"Always missed your man?" asked George.

"I never fired at a man but once. One night I took one of our herders for a thief and shot at him, but I missed, and just got laughed at for a week. That was before we moved down to Denver, where we don't use pistols much."

Strong felt a little doubt whether she was making fun of him or he of her, and she never left him in perfect security on this point.

"What is your name in Sioux, Catherine," he would ask; "Laughing Strawberry, I suppose, or Jumping Turtle?"

"No!" she answered. "I have a very pretty name in Sioux. They call me the Sage Hen, because I am so quiet. I like it much better than my own name."

Strong was beaten at this game. She capped all his questions for him with an air of such good faith as made him helpless. Whether it were real or assumed, he could not make up his mind. He took a great fancy to the Sage Hen, while she in her turn took a violent liking for Esther, as the extremest contrast to herself. When Esther realized that this product of Colorado was likely to be on her hands for several hours every day, she felt less amused than either Strong or Mr. Murray, for Miss Brooke's conversation, though entertaining as far as it went, had not the charm of variety. It was not long before her visits to Esther's studio became so frequent and so exhausting that Esther became desperate and felt that some relief must at any cost be found. The poor little prairie flower found New York at first exciting; she felt shy and awkward among the swarms of strange people to whose houses Mrs. Murray soon began to take her by way of breaking her in at once to the manners of New York society; and whenever she could escape, she fled to Esther and her quiet studio, with the feelings of a bird to its nest. The only drawback to her pleasure there was that she had nothing to do; her reading seemed to have been entirely in books of a severely moral caste, and in consequence she could not be induced to open so much as a magazine. She preferred to chatter about herself and the people she met. Before a week had passed Esther felt that something must be done to lighten this burden, and it was then that, as we shall see, Mr. Hazard suggested her using Catherine for a model. The idea might not have been so easily accepted under other circumstances, but it seemed for the moment a brilliant one.

As Wharton had said of Esther, she was but a second-rate amateur. Whether there was a living artist whom Wharton would have classed higher than a first-rate amateur is doubtful. On his scale to be second-rate was a fair showing. Esther had studied under good masters both abroad and at home. She had not the patience to be thorough, but who had? She asked this question of Mr. Wharton when he attacked her for bad drawing, and Wharton's answer left on her mind the impression that he was himself the only thorough artist in the world; yet others with whom she talked hinted much the same thing of themselves. Esther at all events painted many canvases and panels, good or bad, some of which had been exhibited and had even been sold, more perhaps owing to some trick of the imagination which she had put into them than to their technical merit. Yet into one work she had put her whole soul, and with success. This was a portrait of her father, which that severe critic liked well enough to hang on the wall of his library, and which was admitted to have merits even by Wharton,

though he said that its unusual and rather masculine firmness of handling was due to the subject and could never be repeated.

Catherine was charmed to sit for her portrait. It was touching to see the superstitious reverence with which this prairie child kneeled before whatever she supposed to be learned or artistic. She took it for granted that Esther's painting was wonderful; her only difficulty was to understand how a man so trivial as George Strong, could be a serious professor, in a real university. She thought that Strong's taste for bric-à-brac was another of his jokes. He tried to educate her, and had almost succeeded when, in producing his last and most perfect bit of Japanese lacquer, he said: "This piece, Catherine, is too pure for man. We pray to it." Catherine sat as serious as eternity, but she believed in her heart that he was making fun of her.

In this atmosphere, to sit for her portrait was happiness, because it made her a part of her society. Esther was surprised to find what a difficult model she was, with liquid reflections of eyes, hair and skin that would have puzzled Correggio. Of course she was to be painted as the Sage Hen. George sent for sage brush, and got a stuffed sage hen, and photographs of sage-plains, to give Esther the local color for her picture.

Chapter III

Once a week, if she could, Esther passed an hour or two with the children at the hospital. This building had accommodations for some twenty-five or thirty small patients, and as it was a private affair, the ladies managed it to please themselves. The children were given all the sunlight that could be got into their rooms and all the toys and playthings they could profitably destroy. As the doctors said that, with most of them, amusement was all they would ever get out of life, an attempt was made to amuse them. One large room was fitted up for the purpose, and the result was so satisfactory that Esther got more pleasure out of it than the children did. Here a crowd of little invalids, playing on the yellow floor or lying on couches, were always waiting to be amused and longing to be noticed, and thought themselves ill-treated if at least one of the regular visitors did not appear every day to hear of their pains and pleasures. Esther's regular task was to tell them a story, and, learning from experience that she could double its effect by illustrating it, she was in the custom of drawing, as she went on, pictures of her kings and queens, fairies, monkeys and lions, with amiable manners and the best moral characters. Thus drawing as she talked, the story came on but slowly, and spread itself over weeks and months of time.

On this Saturday afternoon Esther was at her work in the play-room, surrounded by a dozen or more children, with a cripple, tortured by hip-disease, lying at her side and clinging to her skirt, while a proud princess, with red and white cheeks and voluminous robes, was making life bright with colored crayons and more highly colored adventures, when the door opened and Esther saw the Rev. Stephen Hazard, with her aunt, Mrs. Murray, on the threshold.

Mr. Hazard was not to blame if the scene before him made a sudden and sharp picture on his memory. The autumn sun was coming in at the windows; the room was warm and pleasant to look at; on a wide brick hearth, logs of hickory and oak were burning; two tall iron fire-dogs sat up there on their hind legs and roasted their backs, animals in which the children were expected to take living interest because they had large yellow glass eyes through which the fire sparkled; with this, a group of small invalids whose faces and figures were stamped with the marks of organic disease; and in the center--Esther!

Mr. Hazard had come here this afternoon partly because he thought it his duty, and partly because he wanted to create closer relations with a parishioner so likely to be useful as Mrs. Murray. He was miserable with a cold, and was weak with fatigue. His next sermon was turning out dull and disjointed. His building committee were interfering and quarreling with Wharton. A harsh north-west wind had set his teeth on edge and filled his eyes with dust. Rarely had he found himself in a less spiritual frame of mind than when he entered this room. The contrast was overwhelming. When Esther at first said quite decidedly that nothing would induce her to go on with her story, he felt at once that this was the only thing necessary to his comfort, and made so earnest an

appeal that she was forced to relent, though rather ungraciously, with a laughing notice that he must listen very patiently to her sermon as she had listened to his. The half hour which he now passed among kings and queens in tropical islands and cocoanut groves, with giants and talking monkeys, was one of peace and pleasure. He drew so good a monkey on a cocoanut tree that the children shouted with delight, and Esther complained that his competition would ruin her market. She rose at last to go, telling him that she was sorry to seem so harsh, but had she known that his pictures and stories were so much better than hers, she would never have voted to make him a visitor.

Mr. Hazard was flattered. He naturally supposed that a woman must have some fine quality if she could interest Wharton and Strong, two men utterly different in character, and at the same time amuse suffering children, and drag his own mind out of its deepest discouragement, without show of effort or consciousness of charm. In this atmosphere of charity, where all faiths were alike and all professions joined hands, the church and the world became one, and Esther was the best of allies; while to her eyes Mr. Hazard seemed a man of the world, with a talent for drawing and a quick imagination, gentle with children, pleasant with women, and fond of humor. She could not help thinking that if he would but tell pleasant stories in the pulpit, and illustrate them on a celestial blackboard such as Wharton might design, church would be an agreeable place to pass one's Sunday mornings in. As for him, when she went away with her aunt, he returned to his solitary dinner with a mind diverted from its current. He finished his sermon without an effort. He felt a sort of half-conscious hope that Esther would be again a listener, and that he might talk it over with her. The next morning he looked about the church and was disappointed at not seeing her there. This young man was used to flattery; he had been sickened with it, especially by the women of his congregation; he thought there was nothing of this nature against which he was not proof; yet he resented Esther Dudley's neglect to flatter him by coming to his sermon. Her absence was a hint that at least one of his congregation did not care to hear him preach a second time.

Piqued at this indifference to his eloquence and earnestness he went the next afternoon, according to his agreement, to Strong's rooms, knowing that Miss Dudley was to be there, and determined to win her over. The little family party which Strong had got together was intended more for this purpose than for any other, and Strong, willing to do what he could to smooth his friend's path, was glad to throw him in contact with persons from whom he could expect something besides flattery. Strong never conceived it possible that Hazard could influence them, but he thought their influence likely to be serious upon Hazard. He underrated his friend's force of character.

His eyes were soon opened. Catherine Brooke made her first appearance on this occasion, and was greatly excited at the idea of knowing people as intellectual as Mr. Hazard and Mr. Wharton. She thought them a sort of princes, and was still ignorant that such princes were as tyrannical as any in the Almanach de Gotha, and that those who submitted to them would suffer slavery. Her innocent eagerness to submit was charming, and the tyrants gloated over the fresh and radiant victim who was eager to be their slave. They lured her on, by assumed gentleness, in the path of bric-à-brac and sermons.

In her want of experience she appealed to Strong, who had not the air of being their accomplice, but seemed to her a rather weak-minded ally of her own. Strong had seated her by the window, and was teaching her to admire his collections, while Wharton and Hazard were talking with the rest of the party on the other side of the room.

"What kind of an artist is Mr. Wharton?" asked Catherine.

"A sort of superior house-painter," replied Strong. "He sometimes does glazing."

"Nonsense!" said Catherine contemptuously. "I know all about him. Esther has told me. I want to know how good an artist he is. What would they think of him in Paris?"

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