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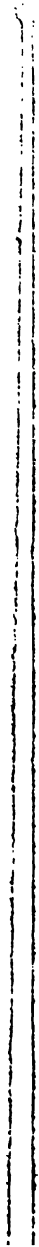
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AN IDYL OF WORK.

BY

LUCY LARCOM.



BOSTON:  
JAMES R. OSGOOD AND COMPANY,  
LATE TICKNOR & FIELDS, AND FIELDS, OSGOOD, & Co.  
1875.

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TO WORKING-WOMEN,

*This Book*

IS DEDICATED

BY ONE OF THEIR SISTERHOOD.

## PREFACE.

---

SOME explanation of the intention of this book is perhaps desirable.

It refers to a period in the history of a well-known manufacturing city, about thirty years since, when the work of the mills was done almost entirely by young girls from various parts of New England,—many of whom had comfortable homes, yet chose this method of winning for themselves a degree of pecuniary independence.

The writer of these pages was at an early age familiar with the details of mill-labor; and her first literary efforts were made as a contributor to original magazines like the "Lowell Offering," which were filled, and, for the greater part of their existence, edited, by mill-girls.

A truthful sketch of factory-life, drawn from the memory of it as then known,—and a sketch only, for this "Idyl" does not claim completeness either as poem or as narrative,—is all that she has sought to produce. The routine of such a life is essentially prosaic; and the introduction of several leading characters of equal interest has seemed to make artistic unity impossible: it has not, indeed, been attempted.

And it may be as well to say that, while this is intended to be a truthful sketch, so far as modes of living and working are concerned, and also in touches of character and in some incidents, no one's story herein outlined is that of any particular person the writer has ever known.

In naming the book an "Idyl," it was felt that some play of fancy could be permitted, and the necessarily literal description of work-day occupations relieved by glimpses of the mountain landscapes among which so many of these young working-girls were bred, and to which their thoughts, as well as their feet, would often be found returning. The picturesque beauty of the Merrimack, then almost undisturbed, and the grand background of the New Hampshire hills, whence it descends, do indeed make the memory of those days idyllic.

No one can feel more gratefully the charm of noble scenery, or the refreshment of escape into the unspoiled solitudes of nature, than the laborer at some close in-door employment. The toiler is saved from being a drudge by remembering that his work goes on side by side with the grand processes of creation ; by feeling himself surrounded with the glory of the earth and the heavens, — at once an infolding and a release, — and by entering into great thoughts and hallowed aspirations, as the atmosphere in which it is his right to breathe.

The conditions and character of mill-labor are no doubt much changed since the period indicated ; but the spirit of



our national life remains the same. That any work by which mankind is benefited can degrade the worker seems an absurd idea to be met with in a Christian Republic, and whatever shadow of it lingers among us is due to the influence of that feudal half-civilization from which we have only partially emerged, and to which, through a morbid desire for wealth, show, and luxury, we are in danger of returning.

Labor, in itself, is neither elevating nor otherwise. It is the laborer's privilege to ennoble his work by the aim with which he undertakes it, and by the enthusiasm and faithfulness he puts into it.

In our country low associations and sacrifice of refinement are no necessities of the toiler's lot. Community of useful interests, in developing the stronger traits of character, gives depth to the attachments of friendship, and intensity to its higher sympathies.

Any needed industry, thoughtfully pursued, brings the laborer into harmony with the unceasing activities of the universe, and yet more closely into unison with the life of loving effort and self-sacrifice revealed through that Divine Person who has taught the race its noblest lessons of ministry and service.

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## AN IDYL OF WORK.

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### I.

**I**N latter April, earth one bud and leaf,  
Three girls looked downward from their window-  
perch :

Three maidens in their different maiden-bloom ;  
Three buds in their rough calyxes, — for sweet  
And rosebud-like is girlhood everywhere ;  
In culture or wild freedom, lovely still  
With promises of all the undawned years.

Three damsels at a casement in old time,  
In some high castle-turret, where they wrought  
Tapestry for royal mistresses, had been  
A picture for a painter, or a theme  
For a stray minstrel : full as worthy these.

Under the open window where they stood  
A river ran ; green farm-lands lay beyond,  
And forests, dark against the dreamy hills :

A river less romantic than the Rhine,  
Yet fringed with its unwritten histories, —  
New England's beautiful blue Merrimack.  
And they were idle as queens' ladies now, —  
Three girls in their work-aprons, gazing out  
Upon the swirling freshet ; for the stream  
Had risen to a flood, and made the factory-wheels  
Drag slow, and slower, till they almost stopped.  
The spindle scarcely turned, the thread ran slack,  
And lazily the shuttle crossed the web.

✓ Slight watching their work needed ; so they stood  
And gave free voice to thoughts and fantasies  
✓ That groaning shaft and ceaseless clattering loom  
Were wont to clamor down.

The room was dim

With April's rainy light, that here and there  
Came in through greenery of geranium leaves  
Grown lush and fragrant to the window-tops,  
Bringing a hint of gardens and thick woods.  
The light leaf-shadowings stole tenderly  
Over those three girl-figures in their nook, —  
Esther, and Eleanor, and Isabel.

Esther was tall and strong, with gold-brown hair  
That rippled sunshine to her feet, almost,

When she undid its coil ; and sunny light  
Seemed ever to stream outward from her mind,  
Large, fair, well ordered. Elder-sister-like  
Was she to Eleanor and Isabel,  
A little while ago two stranger-girls  
Adrift in this new city, seeking work ;  
A mother to the orphan Eleanor,  
Whose only heirloom from rich ancestors  
Was slow consumption, hers by sure entail.

“ Isabel, ” — it was Eleanor who spoke, —  
“ You should have been a lady ! Every turn  
Of shoulder, every poise of arm or foot,  
Reminds me of the graceful dames who stooped  
To pet me at my father's festivals.  
I never see you in that working-gown  
And coarse stuff apron, but I find myself  
Murmuring ‘ There 's Cinderella ! ’ ”

“ Where 's the shoe ?

O for a fairy-coach, a godmother ! ”  
Laughed Isabel ; “ for I, in honest truth,  
Have also dreamed of these things. ”

“ And the prince ? ”

Asked Esther. Why did foolish Isabel blush ?

"Perhaps I am a lady, Eleanor,"

She said, in haste, the sunset of her cheek

Fading along its oval, brown and rich,

And dying in deep dimples. "' Now sit still

And be a little lady, Isabel !'

My mother used to say, when company

Came to take tea with us, and she had fears

That I should be too much myself. And I,

Who had a lady painted on my brain

From English story-books, with folded hands

And puckered lips, sat picturing myself

Some proud earl's daughter. 'Lady!' Who defines  
That word correctly !"

"Who defines what word ?

Ask me, young woman."

And a gay moon-face,

With laughter pencillings about the eyes,

Round as two moons, and tresses crinkling brown

Over a forehead smooth as infancy's,

Shone in between the looms.

"Well, tell us, then,

What 'lady' means : for, Minta Summerfield,

They say I'm like one ; not the real thing !"

"Not know what 'lady' means, young Isabel,

Seeing me straight before you ? Esther Hale,

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The Lady Isabel doubts Lady Me!  
I've heard you called a walking dictionary, —  
Enlighten us, please!"

"'Lady' or 'girl' or 'woman,'

Whichever word you choose," said Esther, "each  
Means excellence and sweetness. 'Lady,' though,  
Can slip its true sense, leaving an outside  
Easy to imitate. At first it meant  
'Giver of loaves.' I've heard it rhymed, this way:—

#### THE LOAF-GIVER.

"Is there a lady yet  
Under the sun?"  
Dames of Olympus  
Called down, one by one.

"If a true lady  
Be left, of earth's race,  
Seats of the goddesses  
Offer her place."

Answer came slowly  
From hemispheres two:  
Dead seemed the Old World,  
And heedless the New.

"I am a lady, then !  
See ! for I wear  
Latest of bonnets,  
Last twist of hair ;  
French gloves and laces, —  
What more can I need ?"  
Laughed mighty Juno,  
"A lady, indeed !"

"I am a lady born !  
I have a name !  
An unbroken ancestry  
Settles my claim."  
"Weak !" said Minerva ;  
"Irrelevant too !  
Substitute ladyhood  
Never will do."

"I am a lady !  
No token of toil  
Is on my fine fingers, —  
Vulgarity's soil !  
I mix with no workfolk !"  
"Ah !" Venus exclaimed ;  
"I wedded a blacksmith,  
And was not ashamed.



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“What face, bright as Hebe's,  
Illumines yon street?  
That beautiful maiden  
Gives beggars their meat;  
Her graceful hand leads them  
To honor and peace.  
My sigh for lost ladies,”  
Said Venus, “I cease.”

“I too!” called Minerva;  
And pointed to where  
In a dreary log school-house,  
A girl, young and fair,  
Spent life, strength, and beauty. —  
“She scatters live seed!  
She works in wild thought-fields,  
The starved soul to feed.”

Cried Juno, “Yon farm-wife,  
With white arms like mine,  
Round, snowy loaves shaping,  
To me seems divine.  
She, moulded a goddess,  
Who yet can prefer  
To be useful and helpful, —  
What lady like her?”

AN IDYL OF WORK.

Nodded the sky-women,  
Glad, one by one.  
"Still there are ladies left  
Under the sun.

"Counterfeit creatures  
May borrow the name;  
But the deep-seeing heavens  
Accept not their claim."

"Lady is loaf-giver!"  
Echoed the three.  
"Who stays the world's hunger,  
True lady is she!"

"That suits me, Esther," Miuta said. "You know  
I am Minerva's lady half the year;  
That is to say, I deal out learning's pap  
To country babes, in District Number Three,  
Under Chocorua's shadow. In plain words,  
I am a schoolma'am in the summer-time,  
As now I am a Lady of the Loom.  
Come up and see me, girls! I'll give you bread  
White as that Juno-woman's in the song,

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Made with my own hands, too. And you may feast  
Your eyes on stones,—our mountain-peaks,—besides;  
All you down-country folks are fond of them."

"How beautiful!" said Esther. "If we could!"  
For Esther, born of Puritans by the sea  
That washes Plymouth Rock, within the curve  
Of the long arm that Cape Cod reaches out  
Toward Cape Ann's shoulder, never yet had seen  
The mountains, save in glamour of her dreams.

"Come, then, for Eleanor's sake! Her cheeks will  
bloom  
With pinks in place of lilies. Quite too much  
Of the fine-lady look her pale face wears  
For any working-girl. With yellow cream,  
Raspberries, brook-trout, and mountain-blackberries,  
We'll make a woman of her," Minta said.

"'Lady' again!" cried Isabel. "Now I know  
There's something more in it than feeding folks  
With bread or with ideas. Eleanor says  
I look a lady; you say she looks one.  
I think it's in the dress, the air, the gait —"

“Yes, there's a ladyish drawl and wriggle, too,  
Easy enough to catch; and furbelows—  
Made usually of silk or satin, though,”  
Said Minta, giving Isabel's gown a twitch  
Upon its fluttering ruffles, which betrayed  
Faint reminiscences of yesterday  
Among the looms, in sundry spots of grease.  
Strange! Eleanor, in her large coarse apron wrapped,  
Walked past the oily wheels immaculate,  
As saints have trodden on coals without a smirch;  
While Isabel groaned daily over stains  
Almost indelible.

With Isabel's face  
After her reddening like an angry cloud,  
Minta retreated; vanishing from sight  
In the room's farthest shadow.

Esther spoke,  
Half to herself, half to the other two:  
“Not long ago I read a doleful wail  
From some town-dame, that now even factory-girls  
Shine with gold watches, and you cannot tell,  
Therefore, who are the ladies. Well-a-day!  
If one could buy and hang about the neck

The ornament of a meek and quiet spirit,  
"T would make a bawble even of that."

"But say,

Esther, whom do you call a lady?"

"She,

Dear Isabel, who is so in her mind, —  
Harbors no millinery jealousies,  
Holds no conventional standards. She may wear  
Dainty kid gloves, or wear no gloves at all ;  
May work at wash-boards or embroidery-frames :  
This is her mark, — she lives not for herself.  
Our Lord has given us 'Service' for a badge. ✓  
True ladies, following him, seek not to be  
Ministered unto, but to minister."

Then all grew thoughtful ; whereat Eleanor,  
With gentle tact, called out, —

"A hymn ! a tune !

Let us sing, sisters, now the preaching's done !  
Look ! how the slanting sunbeams light the slope  
Across the river !"

And her voice arose

Clear as an oriole's, in a grand psalm-tune  
Married to one of Watts' old-fashioned hymns : —

“There everlasting spring abides,  
And never-withering flowers.  
Death, like a narrow sea, divides  
This heavenly land from ours.

“Sweet fields beyond the swelling flood  
Stand dressed in living green ;  
So to the Jews old Canaan stood,  
While Jordan rolled between.”

Then, as a spring becomes a rivulet,  
The notes grew light ; psalms bubbled into songs,  
Songs into ballads, — homely Scottish strains  
That vibrate on the heart-strings as no flight  
Or fall of operatic somerset  
Can ever. Eleanor’s unschooled notes fled on  
Through the swan-music of the “Land o’ the Leal,”  
“My ain Countree,” and tender “Auld Lang Syne,”  
Touched many an ancient border-melody,  
And slipped through carol, roundelay, and catch  
So liltngly, the others joined, perforce.

Meanwhile the river rose, and downward bore  
Strange booty, stolen from the upper farms, —

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A fence, a hen-coop, torn roots of old trees,  
And once a little cottage, half unroofed.  
That stopped the music, and the singers three  
Leaned out in wonder, while their thoughts went up  
To the stream's far-off sources.

And they talked,

While the slow day slid into afternoon,  
Of Minta's mountain-home ; of summits gray  
Rising from mist, or hiding in deep cloud ;  
Of the great land-slips ; and the placid lakes,  
Mirrors of haughty peaks ; of the strong flood  
Rushing below them, — how its infancy  
Lay cradled amid blue Franconia hills,  
Laughing up at the Old Man of the Notch,  
Whose stony face into far Nothing looks  
With all a mortal wise-head's gravity ;  
Of Conway intervalles, their carpets green  
Laid broad and soft before the vast rock-gate  
Into the sanctuary of the hills ;  
And of dark passes to that cloud-crowned peak  
Which bears the name the New World most reveres.  
And Esther, longing, said, "What think you, girls ?  
Can we afford to go ?"

Pale Eleanor

Looked up, her face moonlighted with a smile

Of pleasure at the thought ; while Isabel  
Grew serious, thinking of her empty purse,  
On which her ribbons flamed a commentary ;  
But said, —

“ O, I know mountains well enough !  
Hard-faced old neighbors in the wilds of Maine,  
Where I spent all my childhood. I will wait  
Here for my fairy prince and godmother,  
While you go browsing on the Granite Hills.”

Just then the overseer, passing by them, said,  
“ A holiday ! The river's will is up  
To stop the mills, and for a while you are free.”

It was a welcome word. The three glad girls  
Slipped off work-aprons, bonnets caught, and shawls,  
And went out for a walk among green trees,  
Like souls released from earth to Paradise.



II.

BESIDE the river one girl walked alone,  
While these sang from their window.

Wistful, grave,

Beneath a firm, large forehead bloomed her eyes,  
Two violets shadowed by a rock. A face  
Not beautiful, nor plain, that in you left  
A lingering wish to look on it again,  
And speak to the spirit behind it.

As she walked,

Her thoughts, in silence, talked among themselves :—

“ My Merrimack, I am a homesick girl  
To you I tell the secret, you alone.  
I think but as a hireling of my work,  
The work that looked like a romantic sport  
Ere I began it. Woof of poetry  
Through some coarse, homely warp forever runs !

Our farm-house 'mid the hills, — I see it now  
Framed in the fine gold of Romance.

“ Ah me !

✓ How can I like the clatter of the looms,  
The grime, the dust, the heat, the dizzy din,  
The many faces !

“ Hark ! some girls are glad !

I hear their happy songs above me. Light,  
And tinkling clear, as a harmonica,  
The music trickles through the evening red  
And ripples down the river. ‘ Bonnie Doon ’  
Dies on the air like an exhaling tear.  
And hush again ! ‘ Sweet Afton’s ’ lullaby  
Puts bird and leaf to sleep.

“ You comfort me,

Bright faces blooming out into the sky ;  
Seen through the wind-swayed tassels of the birch,  
You make me think of angels. And why not ?  
What of that dingy background ? So they go  
And come, across the moil and toil of earth ;  
And lend a hand to keep life’s weaving smooth.  
You and your work are but a little lower,  
To One who hears, your song may be as sweet.  
Out of that strange, confused machinery  
You bring white raiment for the forms of men,  
As angels may for souls.

“Fain, fain would I  
Be happy in my toil, with you! But sad  
I am, and loneliness awakens fear.  
What unknown grief awaits me? Tell me, Fate!”

She sat down on a mossy stump, where now  
The long, straight spears of sunset struck out gold  
From emerald intense. A letter, sealed,  
She held before her, studying the words  
Upon its face, as if the hand that wrote  
Were unfamiliar, yet well known. The seal  
She broke at last, slowly, unwillingly,  
But waited, sitting there as in a dream.

A girlish voice rang softly through the trees  
Beside the vesper-sparrow's. Eleanor,  
From her companions strayed a little way,  
Sang a low hymn among the violets.

THEY neither toil nor spin ;  
And yet their robes have won  
A splendor never seen within  
The courts of Solomon.

Tints that the cloud-rifts hold,  
And rainbow-gossamer,  
The violet's tender form enfold ;  
No queen is draped like her.

All heaven and earth and sea  
Have wrought with subtlest power  
That clothed in purple she might be, —  
This little fading flower.

We, who must toil and spin,  
What clothing shall we wear ?  
The glorious raiment we shall win  
Life shapes us everywhere.

God's inner heaven hath sun,  
And rain, and space of sky,  
Wherethrough for us his spindles run,  
His mighty shuttles fly.

His seamless vesture white  
He wraps our spirits in ;  
He weaves his finest webs of light  
For us, who toil and spin.

The silent girl, lost in her letter's fold,  
Heard hymn and bird-song as she heard the wind,  
Listening to none of them. Something she read  
Hurt her, as by a sudden, secret blow.  
It seemed to her as if a mist had fallen  
Among the trees ; the pallid river ran  
Receding in gray distance. " Is it death ?"  
She murmured. " If it be death, it is well."  
And sank in cold unconsciousness.

A step

Was on the turf beside her. Eleanor,  
Stooping to pluck a pale anemone, saw  
A paper fall, a hand as colorless  
Drop with it ; heard a woman's moan, and ran,  
Fluttered and awed, to lift the brow that lay,  
Whiter than marble, among flickering leaves.  
Esther and Isabel, farther down the bank,  
Returned at Eleanor's call. Before they came,  
The stranger's eyes half opened, closed again,  
Then opened wide, and looked around amazed.  
" Lean on me," Eleanor said ; " you must be ill."  
" Ill ? All is ill. I thought — I thought I died ;  
I thought I saw an angel, coming through  
The gates of pearl. The trees of heaven were green ;  
A river ran by. Alas ! it is the earth, —

A world I cannot live in." "We are friends,"  
Said Eleanor. "Trust us, dear." And as she spoke,  
With stealthy haste the open letter slipped  
Into the stranger's bosom, doubting not  
It held some bitter secret.

She, revived,  
Under the ministrings of the three,  
Arose, and, moaning thanks, would fain have gone,  
And left them there. But Esther, quietly  
Putting an arm about her, led her up  
In tender silence to the homeward road.  
The other two went slowly by themselves,  
Not seeing Esther more till evening fell.  
Then, in their room, — scant lodging had these three  
Among a weary house-full, twenty girls,  
Who ate and slept beneath one roof, — where they  
One small apartment shared, and called it home, —  
In their own room together, Esther told  
The stranger's name, Ruth Woodburn; and she said  
Her friendship would be gain to them: her words,  
Her every tone, showed culture. And besides,  
She seemed as one by trouble stupefied, —  
Was all alone in a strange house, with girls  
Of the ill-bred, hoydenish sort, and others, too,  
Of the small, peeping species, who delight

To pick and pry at sorrow's keyless lock.  
"She is next door to Minta Summerfield,  
But Minta has not met her, and I doubt  
If Minta's mirth would be good medicine  
For one like her. If I had but a home  
To give her mothering in !"

"But, Esther, dear,  
To us your heart is mother, shelter, home ;  
Let her, too, find it so," said Eleanor.  
"Will she not come to us ?"

And still the friends  
Murmured for the sad stranger gentle plans,  
Until the lights were out, and through their thoughts  
The stillness of the house stole in, with sleep.

III

NEXT morning's sun rose on a silent town.  
The swollen river noiselessly moved past  
The quiet mills, — less river now than lake.  
In the red dawn the drowsy girls awoke  
To the bell's usual clang, that summoned them  
From dreams to labor. At the stroke of five  
All laggards saw the gates against them swing.  
To-day, however, the great working-crowd  
Surged in and out awhile; free passage left  
For those who stayed to rub the steel-work bright,  
Or clean the dangerous wheels while they stood still.

Esther, alone, sought Ruth; and on the way  
Met Minta Summerfield, who seemed disturbed  
And strangely sobered.

“ Esther, some one's sick  
In the next house. I overheard the girls  
Talking about her; saying that she mopes,



And will not eat, nor tell them how she ails ;  
That when she speaks, 't is all in grand book-talk,  
Learned as college-folks ; they hinted, too,  
That she was some fine lady in disgrace,  
Come here to hide from sight.

“ O, girls can be  
So cruel to one another! I am vexed  
That I am one, sometimes! Do, Esther, do  
Go and look after her, or I shall rush  
At those girls like a whirlwind.”

Esther smiled ;  
With a brief whisper smoothed out Minta's frown,  
And disappeared.

Poor Ruth ! There was no need  
Of many words. To Esther's pleasant voice,  
She yielded, like a child, and let herself  
Be dressed, and led to Esther's room, and laid  
On Esther's bed, who sat beside her there,  
With kind pretence of book and sewing-work,  
Her two companions taking holiday  
In a long ramble up the river-side.

Ruth lightly dozed. Esther, intent to keep  
The slumberer undisturbed, let drop her work,  
And yielded herself partly to her book

rev  
girls mill  
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AN IDYL OF WORK.

(Poems of Wordsworth, Elcanor's New-Year's gift),  
And partly to the south-wind's tenderness,  
While memory led her back beside the sea,  
Where she had played with many little ones  
In childhood, on a sunny homestead-slope,  
The deep, eternal murmur of the waves  
Upbearing on its monotone the song  
Of bluebird, wren, and robin, blending all  
In a wild, sweet entanglement. Home-dreams,  
As in all womanly souls, made undertone  
To her life's music. But her hopes and plans  
And fancies were a garden builded in  
Behind great walls of duty. Her true work  
She sought the clew of, here 'mid endless threads  
Shaped from crude cotton into useful cloth.

Not always to be here among the looms, —  
Scarcely a girl she knew expected that ;  
Means to one end their labor was, — to put  
Gold nest-eggs in the bank, or to redeem  
A mortgaged homestead, or to pay the way  
Through classic years at some academy ;  
More commonly to lay a dowry by  
For future housekeeping.

But Esther's thought

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Was none of these ; unshaped and vague it lay, —  
A hope to spend herself for worthy ends.  
Aliens were in her childhood's home. No past  
Could be revived for her, and all her heart  
Went forth into the Future's harvest-field,  
A Ruth who never of a Boaz dreamed.  
Whatever work came, whoso crossed her path,  
Lonely as this pale stranger, wheresoe'er  
She saw herself a need, there should be home,  
Business, and family. She raised her eyes,  
As her soul said Amen to this resolve,  
And saw Ruth languidly peruse her face  
Through mists of thought ; who murmured, "Read  
aloud."

A smile from Esther answered. She began  
Where her eyes fell. Laodamia's tale  
It chanced to be, with its heroic thoughts  
Climbing sharp crags of sorrow to high faith.  
Ruth listened, musing, till she heard the words,  
"Learn by a mortal yearning to ascend,  
Seeking a higher object." Then she sobbed.  
"It is too hard, too hard ! Read something else ;  
A song, a ballad, anything !"

"Dear child,

The time will come for this too," Esther said ;  
" But now your nerves are strained, and you are ill ;  
Of that I was too thoughtless."

And she took  
Another volume from the hanging shelf,  
The three girls' library.

The one she chose  
Was a strange medley-book of prose and rhyme  
Cut from odd magazines, or pages dim  
Of yellow journals, long since out of print ;  
And pasted in against the faded ink  
Of an old log-book, relic of the sea,  
And mostly filled with legends of the shore  
That Esther loved, her home-shore of Cape Ann.  
" Here is a doggerel tale of witchcraft-time  
Some one has reeled off since they laid the rails  
From Boston eastward. Ruth, you need not try  
To hear it ; let it croon you off to sleep."

✓  
**PEGGY BLIGH'S VOYAGE.**

You may ride in an hour or two, if you will,  
From Halibut Point to Beacon Hill,  
With the sea beside you all the way,  
Through pleasant places that skirt the Bay ;

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By Gloucester Harbor and Beverly Beach,  
Salem's old stooples, Nahant's long reach,  
Blue-bordered Swampscott, and Cholsca's wide  
Marshes, laid bare to the drenching tide,  
With a glimpse of Saugus spire in the west,  
And Malden hills in their dreamy rest.

All this you watch idly, and more by far,  
From the cushioned seat of a railway-car.  
But in days of witchcraft it was not so ;  
City-bound travellers had to go  
Horseback over a blind, rough road,  
Or as part of a jolting wagon-load  
Of garden produce and household goods,  
Crossing the fords, half lost in the woods,  
By the fear of redskins haunted all day,  
And the roar of lions, some histories say.

If ever for Boston a craft set sail,  
Few to secure a passage would fail,  
Who had errands to do in the three-hilled town :  
And they *might* return ere the sun went down.  
So, one breezy midsummer dawn,  
Skipper Nash, of the schooner Fawn,

Sails away with a crowded deck.  
One of his passengers cranes her neck  
Out of her scarlet cloak, — an eye  
Like a smouldering coal had Peggy Bligh,—  
And looks at her townsmen, looks at the sea,  
At the crew and the skipper ; what can it be  
That hinders their flinging her bold glance back ?  
Many a wife hath an eye as black,  
And a cloak as scarlet. Ay, but she —  
Nobody covets her company !  
Nobody meets that strange look of hers  
But a nameless terror within him stirs,  
His heart-strings flutter, his nerves they twitch, —  
"T is an evil eye, — it will blight and bewitch.

Afraid to be silent, afraid to speak,  
The crew and the skipper, with half-oaths weak,  
Looked up dismayed when aboard she came,  
And the voyagers whispered around her name,  
And gazed askance, as apart she stood,  
Eying them under her scarlet hood.

A fair wind wafted them down the Bay ;  
By noon at the Boston wharves they lay.

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"We shall sail at three!" the skipper cried;  
Save Peggy, all were aware that he lied,  
For along the deck had been passed a word  
Which only speaker and listener heard, —  
How he meant to give the old crone the slip  
By an hour or so, on the homeward trip.

Errands all finished, and anchor weighed,  
Out of the harbor her way she made, —  
The schooner *Fawn*. But who hastens down  
To the water-side, with a shout and frown,  
Angrily stamps with her high-heeled shoe,  
Audibly curses the skipper and crew,  
Flutters her cloak and flames with her eye? —  
Who but the witch-woman, old *Peg Bligh*?

"We'll give her the go-by!" says Skipper *Nash*,  
And laughs at his schooner's scurry and dash;  
But here and there one muttered, "He's rash!"  
"As good right has *Peggy*," said one or two,  
"To a homeward passage as I or you;  
For what has the poor old beldam done  
That any man could lay finger on,  
Worse than living alone in a tumble-down hut,  
And speaking her mind when she chose to? But —"

The speaker stopped, to follow the stare  
Of his listeners up through the windy air.  
A monstrous gull bore down on the blast ;  
Once it poised on the schooner's mast ;  
Once it flapped in the skipper's face ;  
Scarcely it veered for a moment's space  
From the prow's white track in the seething brine ;  
Its sharp eye gleamed with a steel-cold shine,  
And one of the sailors averred that he saw  
A red strip dangle from beak and claw ;  
And all the voyagers shrank with fear  
To see that wild creature a-swoop so near.

As they hove in sight of Salem town  
A fog came up, and the breeze went down.  
They could almost hear the farm-folk speak,  
And smell the magnolias at Jeffrey's Creek.  
Abreast of the Half-way Rock once more,  
With the Misery Islands just off shore,  
The gull gave a shriek, and flew out of sight,  
And — there they lay in the fog all night.

They dared not stir until morn was red,  
And the sky showed a blue streak overhead ;  
Then glad on the clear wave sped the Fawn



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Homeward again through a breezy dawn,  
And the skipper shouted, "The vessel arrives  
In season for breakfast with your wives!"

But some one else had arrived before.  
Who is that, by the hut on the shore,  
Milking her cow with indifferent mien,  
As if no schooner were yet to be seen!  
By the side glance out of her small black eye,  
It must be — surely it is — Peg Bligh!

How she got there no mortal could tell,  
But crew and passengers knew right well  
That she had not set foot upon deck or hull,  
"Nor the mast?" About that you may ask the gull.

Well, the story goes on to say  
That Skipper Nash always rued the day  
When he left old Peg on the wharf behind,  
With her shrill cry drifting along the wind.  
For he lost his schooner, his children died,  
And his wife; and his cattle and sheep beside;  
And his old age found him alone, forlorn,  
Wishing, no doubt, he had never been born.

What Peggy Bligh had to do with his case  
It is hard to see, in our time and place.  
How things might have struck us, we do not know,  
Had we lived here two hundred years ago,  
When the thoughts of men took a weirder shape  
Than any mist that hangs round the Cape.  
But this moral 's a good one for all to mind :  
His own heart is the curse of a man unkind.

Ruth listened drowsily, as she was bid ;  
In gentle, wave-like trance she sank and rose,  
Gazing on wall and ceiling, as if there  
But by a dream's permission.

For the room

Showed legibly its inmates' daily life.  
Isabel's couch, a sofa-bedstead, worn  
And faded, stood against the whitewashed wall,  
The birds-of-paradise upon its chintz  
Dim-plumaged ; and — perhaps by accident —  
A red shawl, flung across the sofa's arm,  
Concealed its shabbiness. Above it hung  
A colored wood-cut, of an arch-faced girl  
Crossing a brook, barefooted, with a smirk  
Of half-coquettish fear. Near Esther's bed  
Raphael's Madonna from an oval gazed,

books in well of life

rooms

The Virgin with her Child alone, engraved  
In some old German town, a relic left  
From Eleanor's home. The bookshelf swung between  
Two simple prints, — the "Cotter's Saturday Night"  
And the "Last Supper," dear to Esther's heart,  
Though scarce true to Da Vinci. On the shelves  
Maria Edgeworth's "Helen" leaned against  
Thomas à Kempis. Bunyan's "Holy War"  
And "Pilgrim's Progress" stood up stiff between  
"Locke on the Understanding" and the Songs  
Of Robert Burns. The "Voices of the Night,"  
"Bridal of Pennacook," "Paradise Lost,"  
With Irving's "Sketch-Book," "Ivanhoe," Watts's  
Hymns,

Mingled in democratic neighborhood.  
Upon a small, white-napkin'd table lay  
Three Bibles, by themselves, — one almost new,  
The others showing usage. Little need  
To say the unworn one was Isabel's,  
Who boasted it her only property  
That was not worse for wear.

Ruth roused her thoughts  
As Esther ceased, saying, —

"Poor old Peggy Bligh!

Is it a woman's fault not to be young?

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To be left lonely? Men have held it so.  
They blame us for misfortunes more than sins,  
In their half-civilized instinct.

“But the sea!

Would I could rest myself on its unrest,  
Drown in its vast complaint my little moan!  
I never saw the sea.”

“Nor mountains I,”

Said Esther; “tell me of them.”

“Of myself

I'll tell you first; it is your due to know  
Something about me. Widowed now of him  
Whose love of books I have inherited,  
My mother keeps his farm at Holderness;  
Dear village, in whose ancient church I learned  
The Creed and Ten Commandments!

“Boys and books

Our house is full of; little else indeed.  
One baby sister blossoms like a rose  
Among her thorny brothers, all grown rough  
With farm-work, and yet all with scholar-tastes.  
Rich relatives I have. More doors than one  
Would open to me, if I would but be  
Adopted lady-daughter; but I choose  
A way more independent, and am here.”

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Then, silent for a moment, she sighed out,  
 "O, life is hard and cold! and God himself  
 Is hid in heaven. And I — why was I born!"

Then Esther softly asked, "Is not God near  
 In every kind thought of a human heart? )  
 Look on your pillow, Ruth!"

Turning her head,  
 With eyes tear-softened, the pale girl beheld  
 A knot of delicate flowers, — anemones,  
 Woven of wind and snow, and faintly flushed  
 As a babe's cheek; and violets blue, that breathed  
 A sweetness not of earth; and pale gold bells  
 Of uvularia; and a tuft or two  
 Of downy-stemmed rock-saxifrage, that brings  
 New England sea-crags their first hint of May;  
 And liverleaf, its satin-folded cups  
 Transparent, tinged with amethyst and rose.  
 All faintly colored, as our spring flowers are,  
 With fine, cool, elemental tints, — the light  
 Of pink and amber sunsets upon snow.

"How lovely! Were they dropped from heaven?"  
 asked Ruth;  
 For in her spasm of grief she heard no sound

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Of Eleanor's light footfall, fading out  
Soft as it entered. 'T was as if a breeze  
Brought in the blossoms.

"I am sure God writes  
In earthly hieroglyphics," Esther said,  
"Some of his plainest gospels. Love alone,  
Pure love, could paint in colors such as these.  
Believe it! He cares more for your soul's health  
Than any plant's."

Ruth's whispered prayer rose: "Thou  
Who lovest thy children, if a drop of dew,  
A sunbeam yet can reach me, bid me live!"

Then Esther kissed her brow. She, lying there,  
Gazed on the flowers as if they talked with her.  
Esther spoke not, for Heaven was in the room,  
And through the fragrant silence seemed to glide  
Light footsteps of invisible comforters.

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IV.

LIGHTLY across the fields tripped Isabel,  
With Eleanor close beside her. To the rocks  
They bent their footsteps, where Pawtucket Falls  
Broke in upon the river's quietness  
A mile or so, brawling between wide banks  
Crimson with columbines far on through May,  
And blue with nodding harebells until frost.  
There grew the painted cup, a living coal  
Upon the velvet sward ; and there were mats  
Of trailing twin-flower, sweet with memories  
Of Swedish Linnæus ; and a nameless wealth  
Of wild bloom tangled in with forest-green.  
Free rushed the rapid waters then, as free  
As in the days when Passaconaway  
Came hither with his warrior Pennacooks,  
Encamping in the bending birch-tree's shade ;  
Free as when gentle Wannalancet came,

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Trusting the Christians who betrayed him, till,  
His hunting-grounds all gone, his tribe despoiled  
And scattered, he turned northward his sad face,  
Sped up the river with his remnant chiefs,  
And hid himself behind the great White Hills.

Trim promenades and even rows of trees  
Then were not, but around were broken crags,  
With hemlocks leaning over, and green shelves  
And mossy nooks where children came to play.  
And here they found a group of little girls  
Watching the course of the mad stream.

Said one,

"I walked across to Dracut Side last year,  
Just where it runs the swiftest now."

And one, —

"I wish the freshet would keep on a week,  
And then we need not work, but every day  
Could play here by the river."

"Do you work,  
You little girls?"

"O yes, indeed we do!

We change the bobbins in the spinning-room.  
Our mothers need the money that we earn.  
Three months we go to school; the rest we work."  
"How old are you?" asked Eleanor.



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“Thirteen.

Ann is eleven. She is taller, though,  
Than I am ; stronger, mother says. Those girls —  
I do not know their ages. Ann and I, —  
Alice — are sisters. Those are neighbors' girls.”

“It is a pity !” Eleanor thought aloud.

“Are you not very tired sometimes ?”

“O yes !

But so is everybody. We must learn,  
While we are children, how to do hard things,  
And that will toughen us, so mother says ;  
And she has worked hard always. When I first  
Learned to doff bobbins, I just thought it play.  
But when you do the same thing twenty times, —  
A hundred times a day, — it is so dull !”

“But then,” spoke up the bashful Ann, “you know  
It is so nice between whiles, playing games,  
And guessing riddles in the window-seats.  
Sometimes the spinners are such pleasant girls, —  
They come and play with us. But some are cross,  
And some say dreadful words ; if mother knew,  
She would not let us work there. But we must,  
And so we do not tell her.”

While they talked,  
 Eleanor's mind went wandering opposite ways ;  
 Through the strange story of a little child  
 Earning its living, and to Esther's side,  
 Soothing a troubled soul.

"Dear Isabel,  
 If Esther could but see and smell the woods !  
 Handling these flowers, I touch the robes of May  
 Now close upon us. Stay here, while I run  
 Home with them to her."

Later, a half-hour,  
 Returning by the winding river-road,  
 A curve abrupt surprised her face to face  
 With two men, one her minister and friend,  
 A Christian gentleman, who cared for all  
 His brethren of God's family, nor asked  
 What creed they held, though strict his own.

The grace

To hold a firm opinion, yet unite  
 With men of differences as fixed, he had.  
 He knew that souls more truly meet in love  
 Than doctrine ; that to work in fellowship  
 Only with those whose thoughts link in with ours,  
 Is to put chain-gangs before angel-bands.  
 Like Chaucer's Parson, well he loved his books,

But better still Christ's lore, and Christ's dear flock.  
And he had chosen to watch these scattered lambs  
Gathered from all New England's pasturage  
Rather than tend an easier fold, and live  
With his compeers in taste and learning. Him  
Eleanor greeted, with a happy light  
Of recognition in her grateful eyes.

They went their separate ways. The pastor's friend  
Asked, musingly, "Where have I seen that face?"

"In vision, possibly; well worthy she  
To inspire a young man's dream, to haunt him with  
Life's noblest possibilities."

"But no!

Somewhere on earth those eyes and mine have met;  
She is too pale for health, though."

"Now you speak

Professionally, Doctor, as you should,  
A thoroughbred physician. Eleanor Gray —"

"Gray? Gray? If she were from Connecticut  
She might be — my third cousin."

"May be, — is.

That is her native State."

"Permit me, sir,

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To call upon her with you ; each must know  
The other's kindred, if we are not kin."

"You understand my guardianship, good friend,  
Of such young women ?— for at present she  
Is of my parish."

"Such young women, sir ?  
A face like that stands guardian for itself.  
Moreover, the reserve of thoughtfulness  
And culture stamp it visibly. The best  
Home-influences must be here."

"Have been, no doubt,  
But she is orphaned, and a factory-girl."

The young man started.

"How ? it cannot be !"  
Not strange was his surprise, first visiting  
To-day the youthful City of Work ; for rare  
In any town are countenances pure  
And fair as Eleanor's ; and all he knew  
Of factory working-girls had reached him through  
Traditions of Old England.

"Are there, sir,  
Many like her here ? Such a menial life  
Poorly befits her bearing. I should blush

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To see my sister drudging in these mills  
As in a prison-shop. More delicate  
This young girl looks than any sister of mine."

Good Pastor Alwyn smiled.

"Not many such  
As Eleanor Gray, perhaps, this side of heaven,  
Where she will be called early. You ascribe  
Strange magic to our spindles, let me say,  
Fancying their touch an injury to her  
Who tends them. [Character is not the stuff  
That circumstance can spoil,]— my gospel reads.  
And, if it were, inside those factory walls  
The daughters of our honest yeomanry,  
Children of tradesmen, teachers, clergymen,  
Their own condition make in mingling. True,  
The scum and dross are here, as everywhere,  
When human elements mix ; but like seeks like  
In all societies, and therefore here :  
New England women are what these girls are.  
— Yes, you shall call with me on Eleanor Gray  
And Esther Hale, and own yourself unjust."  
Eleanor, meanwhile, again had reached the Falls,  
Between whose rifts of sound a merry swell  
Of children's voices floated on the wind : —

WILL the fairy-folk come back,  
Such as haunt old stories,  
Sliding down the moonbeam's track,  
Hid in morning-glories ?  
Air is warp, and sun is west ;  
Is a rainbow spinner left ?

No ; not one. They never will !  
Streams they loved are busy  
Turning spindles in the mill ;  
Turning mill-folk dizzy.  
Toil is warp, and money west ;  
Not a fairy loom is left.

Noise has frightened them away  
From their greenwood places ;  
Never would they spend a day  
Among careworn faces.  
Gather up the warp and west :  
See if anything is left !

Merry days go dancing by ;  
Hard work comes, and tarries.  
Why, for that, wind sigh through sigh ?  
Children, we'll be fairies !

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Life is warp, and love is weft ;  
Children's hearts and hands are left.

After the song a pretty picture ! High  
Upon a swarded crag, a mimic throne  
Under a canopy of evergreen ;  
And, shrinking back into a heap of flowers,  
The timid Ann ! the goldenest of crowns  
The meadows could afford, upon her head.  
Her playmates all as waiting-maids adorned  
With coronals of sapphire, opal, pearl,  
As each had chosen her blossom's tint ; with lengths  
Of trailing ground-pine passed from hand to hand  
In a green network, weaving in and out  
Fantastic dance and chant : their downcast queen  
Flushed and abashed, her dimples curved with shame,  
And restive under dignities unsought.  
They called to Eleanor : " See, it is Queen Ann !  
We chained her up and put her on a throne.  
She wants to wander off and gather flowers ;  
But we are stronger : she must be our queen ! "

And then they played around her the old games  
Of Queen Anne sitting in the sun, to read  
Her royal lover's letters ; of King George

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And the two armies, marshalling to the tune  
Of "Oranges!" or "Lemons!" and quaint sports  
Brought in the May-Flower out of Mother-Land.  
Amid the frolic Isabel threw herself  
Into the children's ring.

"Look! look! a dog!"

Cried Alice, pointing to mid-stream. "O dear!  
He's drowning! no! now, see! he swims this way!  
Good dog! come here!"

The child unheedfully  
Reached forward, slipped. Black eddies swirled be-  
neath.

But Isabel caught her as she slid, and both  
Seemed for an instant doomed. A moment more,  
And both were safe. Then the dog leaped ashore,  
Whining towards Isabel.

The games broke up;  
The children led scared Alice home, and Ann  
Went sobbing, under her forgotten crown.  
Eleanor drew Isabel among the trees,  
Nerveless, herself, and trembling. Her gay friend  
Had wrenched her wrist, but that was all, she said,  
Smiling at her mishap.

"You risked your life!"

Cried Eleanor.





“Which was not a serious risk !  
Not much of a life : I think I 'd sell it cheap.  
What 's in your basket, Eleanor? I 'm faint ,  
With hunger, and you look as pale as death.”

They ate their simple lunch. The shaggy dog  
Lingered, and shared it with them. Slowly then  
They sauntered onward, over the long bridge,  
Where first the river makes its downward plunge,  
And spent some hours among the Dracut pines.

Crossing again, near dusk, they passed a group ;  
Ladies, and a young man, with cloak and cane  
Carried right gracefully. As Isabel turned  
He colored, so did she. The dog rushed up  
From some erratic search beneath the bridge,  
Following his master with a joyful bark.

Eleanor's eyes asked plainly, “Who?” No word  
Spoke Isabel, till they came in sight again  
Of the red boarding-houses ; then she said,  
“Don't mention this to Esther !” nothing more ;  
And Eleanor, in her shocked surprise, was dumb.

A stir was in the street. Not many doors  
From theirs, a group of men set down a hie

Whereon a drowned girl lay, whom they had found  
Above the locks, within a lonesome bend  
Of the canal.

“What? did she drown herself?”

“Was no one with her?” “Had she any friends?”  
Questioned the standers-by. A whisper, then,  
Started by some one, ran from mouth to mouth :  
“She was alone here. In her early days  
One slip she made, — you see she is not young ;  
For that she never could forgive herself,  
And she has toiled in silence ever since,  
Upright and honest, but too sad to care  
For friends or life. If death were accident  
Or purpose, none can tell.”

“O, pitiful!”

Cried Eleanor's heart, as on, with covered eyes,  
She drew the fascinated Isabel,  
Whose gaze was fixed upon the dripping hair  
And half-closed eyelids.

“O, too pitiful !

Why did not Esther know her ? Was there none  
To tell her she might put her weight of sin  
Behind her, and walk on with other girls  
In peaceful pathways, happy and forgiven ?  
Would we had helped her !”

Slowly Isabel moved,  
Still looking backward at those glassy eyes,  
Speaking no word until the house-door shut  
Behind them, then upon the stairway sank,  
And sobbed, as if she saw in that girl's fate  
Some dreadful possibility of her own.

V.

SABBATH upon the river and the hills !  
And Sabbath-rest among the weary wheels,  
That ceased their groaning with a conscious hush.  
Sabbath to lives unwound from labor's coil ;  
One welcome pause between dull sentences  
Of week-long prose.

That Sabbath in the air  
Which made New England as old Palestine, —  
An Olivet of every green ascent,  
With Kedron or Siloam flowing past,  
In windings of familiar streams, — how vast  
Its depth and height of stillness ! Every leaf  
Of every tree seemed whispering reverently  
Some Hebrew tale or parable. The sky  
Came close to earth, as bending to let down  
The glory of the New Jerusalem.  
That sweet, old-fashioned day has left us now,  
With inspirations and with presences

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Which never can return. It is a part  
Of our lost Puritan inheritance.  
Whatever better this new time has brought,  
Never again the land shall know that rest,  
That inexpressible calm.

Together walked,  
Under May's fragrant sunshine, Eleanor Gray  
And Esther Hale, amid the churchward crowd  
That filled brick-paven streets and sandy roads  
With pleasant color. Maidens robed in white,  
With gypsy-hats blue-ribboned ; maidens gay  
In silk attire ; and maidens Quaker-prim,  
With gingham gowns, straw bonnets, and smooth  
hair, —

Girl Baptists, Universalists, Methodists,  
Girl Unitarians and Orthodox, —  
Sought each their separate temple, while a few  
Entered the green enclosure of Saint Ann's,  
Still left, an oasis of vine-wreathed stones,  
Amid the city's dust.

Here, close on Ruth,  
Isabel followed, all in rosy haste,  
Saying, "Let me go with you to-day ; I like  
Your church, Ruth Woodburn," — though it was her  
wont

To sit with Eleanor in the singing-seats  
Where Pastor Alwyn preached ; a steeple-house,  
Barn-like, brick-red, and angular, and yet  
To those who worshipped there, a gate of heaven.  
For the good pastor's most unworldly soul,  
While all alive to solemn harmonies  
Of heavenly truth, quivered through every chord  
With sympathy intense : a tenderness  
As of some grief divine was in his voice,  
Picturing man's loss through sin ; but when his theme  
Was sin's immortal Conqueror, the Lord  
Of Love, the Life and Light of men,  
It was as if the Master had himself  
Entered in, with his beautiful " All Hail ! "  
And " I am with you alway." So the house  
Was like some common face irradiate  
With inward nobleness, fairer than fair.

And Pastor Alwyn's manly lineaments  
To-day caught radiance from his text, the words  
" As seeing Him who is invisible."

The sermon was as fresh as springtide air  
Whispering through trees in bloom outside. He held  
His Bible as a living book, not dry,

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Dead leaves of Judæan growth, whose preciousness  
Was in their sacred legendary scent,  
But a perennial plant, acclimated  
Wherever any flower of heaven can breathe.  
And words like these he spoke, remembered well  
By more than two girls into after years.

“As seeing Thee! And must we turn from earth  
To find Thee, Lord? ‘No,’ Thou dost answer us  
From Cana, where thy touch of miracle  
Made marriage-mirth flow free with the new wine.  
‘No,’ from the inn-seat, where thou joinedst in talk  
With loitering fisherman and publican.  
‘No,’ from the market-place, where children danced  
And piped amid their elders’ wearier game  
Of usury and barter. Thou didst blame,  
More than all other sin, the Pharisee’s,  
Shutting his sanctimonious eyelids close  
In on himself, a whited sepulchre.  
Opaque, that hid from sight the present God,  
Made manifest by little children’s lips,  
And bird-songs, and the speechless lily’s breath.

“Dear Lord, the nearer we approach to Thee,  
We find that thou wert with us all the while

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In common things ; for every innocent sport,  
The blameless thought that bubbles in a laugh,  
No less than visions awful and sublime,  
Thine image and thy superscription wear.  
How shall we ever know thee, knowing not  
Thou dwellest with us in clay tabernacles,  
And beckonest upward through beseeching eyes  
Of men who struggle and aspire toward thee ?

“ ‘Blessed are the pure in heart ; they shall see  
God.’

And as thou clearest our soul’s sight, we behold  
The Infinite where we little thought him hid.  
The clod a diamond flashes. Our dim earth  
Holds the sun’s elements, and by a touch  
Like that which swung it forth in space, might  
be  
Transmuted into pure, impalpable light.  
Empty of thee is nothing thou hast made.

“ This, Lord, is life : to know thee in thy gifts,  
And in thy messengers ; to recognize  
In all things visible, thee, the Invisible God,  
The Soul that lives in human souls, the Friend  
Whose hint and shadow earthly friendship is.

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“ And have we dreamed the Christ of God could die  
When the man Jesus passed from sight? He lives,  
Eternal as the Father. Through all years  
The Love which is both human and divine  
Stoops to our scarred, sick race, to lift it up  
Unto the stature of the Perfect Man.  
His breath is in us, as the breath of May  
Is in the happy flowers. Sin is sole death.  
If our life bloom, it is because He lives  
Who is the Resurrection and the Life.”

Then, with a prayer which gathered into one  
All hearts, and laid them on the Eternal Heart;  
With the doxology, all voices blent  
In grand “ Old Hundred’s ” firm uplift of praise;  
The benediction, “ Peace be with you all,  
Now and forever, ” — forth into the air,  
Sweet as Eve’s garden breathed, the people passed.

And is there any climate, any land,  
More beautiful than our New England is,  
This blossom-week of May, when east-winds pause,  
Relenting, dying down to whispers light  
As Zephyr’s own, along the rosy leagues  
Of orchard-skirting roads, through village lanes

And over cottage gardens? Can the air  
Have wandered with as delicate a breath  
Through famed Hesperides? In rose-lined flakes  
The apple-petals dropped, as Eleanor Gray  
And Esther lengthened out their homeward walk, —  
A perfumed snow-fall; and from Eleanor's lips  
There fell a gentle, rhythmic murmuring: —

APPLE-BLOSSOMS, budding, blowing,  
In the soft May air:  
Cups with sunshine overflowing, —  
Flakes of fragrance, — drifting, snowing,  
Showering everywhere!

Fairy promises, outgushing  
From the happy trees!  
White souls into love-light blushing, —  
Love and joy to utterance rushing, —  
Are ye not like these?

Such an overflow of sweetness  
Needs the heart of spring;  
In her wealth of bloom is meetness,  
Though to the ripe fruit's completeness  
All she may not bring.

Words are more than idle seeming, —  
    Blossoms of good-will.  
What she would do, Love is dreaming ;  
What she can, ashamed of scheming,  
    Cramped and stinted still.

Apple-blossoms, billowy brightness  
    On the tide of May,  
O, to wear your rose-touched whiteness !  
Flushing into bloom, with lightness  
    To give life away !

“ Isabel, Isabel ! Oh, where have you been ?  
The sermon was like poetry.”

“ Poh ! child ! ”

I 'm glad I did not hear it, then ; I like  
Plain prose much better ! Truth is, Eleanor,  
I 'm sick of Sunday doings.” And she threw  
Gay scarf and veil and parasol aside,  
And yawned : “ You know I am a heathen, dear,  
And good folks bore me. Esther now, and you,  
I can endure ; I know your weaknesses ;  
You are not saints yet, will not be, while I  
Am here to thorn you ! ”

“ Now, dear Isabel,  
What has gone wrong ? ”

“ Ah, well ! not anything  
Except myself, a ‘ wretched child of wrath,’  
So Sister Sterne says. She has called me names  
All the way home ; she must ‘ take up her cross,’  
She told me, — and she made me cross enough !  
I ‘ d rather be a Patagonian  
Than such a Christian ! ”

“ Well, but at Saint Ann’s  
Nobody vexed you ? ”

“ No ; the ups and downs  
Just suit my restlessness. The prayer-book place, —  
That bothers me, though ! ”

“ Ah, now, Isabel,  
Who was the gentleman that handed you  
His velvet prayer-book over the pow back ?  
I thought he knew you — ”

Ruth looked up dismayed  
At Isabel’s gesture.

“ Why should you think that ?  
Any one finds the place, and hands the book,  
In your church, Ruth. ”

Then, seeing Eleanor  
Gaze at her with sad wonder, turned at bay,

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And asked, "Hem! Eleanor, was young Doctor Mann  
In the pastor's pew to-day? And did he look  
Impressed as usual, at you in the choir?  
If he called on you once when you were out,  
I think he'll call again; don't you?"

They laughed, —

All the girls now; for Esther had come in  
With Minta Summerfield, and to fling hints  
At Eleanor about sweethearts, seemed absurd  
As striking matches in a lily's cup.

With the new-comers the talk changed, for this  
Was Esther's hour, the after-service hour,  
When each spoke her free word, her deepest thought  
Or lightest doubt, and Esther, as she could,  
Suggested answer.

O, what questionings  
Of fate and freedom, of how evil came,  
And what death is, and what the life to come,  
Passed to and fro among these girls! For all  
But Ruth and Minta were from childhood bred  
On the tough meat of Calvin's doctrines; food  
For logical digestion, given to babes  
By Pilgrim nursing-fathers.

Now their speech

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Was of a lecture heard the bygone week  
By Esther and by Minta; a grand theme, —  
“Law,” — and its treatment philosophical,  
By a great thinker. When he boldly said,  
“What use in prayer? No beggar shall change Law, —  
Law, which is God himself made known to man.  
What use in prayer? Are not the laws of God,  
Even as His nature is, unalterable?”  
The two girls exchanged glances with amaze;  
And Minta said, at closing, “Esther Hale,  
Tell us, next Sunday, what you think of this.”  
So now again she spoke: “Esther, you know  
I am a Methodist, and praying is  
Two thirds of our religion; yet I felt  
Stirred strangely, half convinced by that man’s words.  
Our preacher spoke of them to-day; declared  
Philosophy is of the Devil; but that —  
My own sect I may judge — is ignorance.”

“Your sect!” said Isabel, breaking in, with heat.  
“I wish it were a little more polite,  
Less noisy, too. What right has Sister Sterne  
To quiz me all about my ‘state of mind,’  
Ask if I read my Bible, if I pray,  
If I am fit for heaven? — no! not for hers,

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Nor would be, if I could! The other day  
She held a meeting, when the looms were still,  
Just before bell-time, in the window-seat.  
O, how they sung and shouted! I cried out, —  
I had a dreadful headache, — ‘Do, do be  
A little quieter!’ Then Sister Sterne  
Groaned, ‘Isabel! if you ever get to heaven,  
You’ll have to hear a much worse noise than this!’”

“Now, now!” cried Eleanor, “such a Methodist  
Is no fair specimen. Does Minta stun  
Us with her shouts? And Pastor Alwyn says  
He thanks God for John Wesley, and would like  
To cry ‘Amen!’ to every earnest prayer.”

“Enough!” laughed Minta. “Now I’ll hold my tongue  
About the stiff-necked, straight-laced Orthodox, —  
My dearest friends, for all that! But I wish —  
Esther, what paper is that in your hand?  
I’ve seen you scribbling something all the week  
On torn leaves, wrappings, — here, there, everywhere!  
Is it not something for us?”

“Yes, it is.

That lecture sent me back through all the years  
That I have lived. I know I have believed

God listens for our thoughts, and answers us ;  
But how much asking is sincere, and what  
The real prayer is, and what it seeks and finds,  
I have been querying. Now shall I read  
What I have written ?”

Then even Isabel  
Settled herself against the sofa's arm  
In listening posture ; and the other girls  
Cried eagerly, “Do !” and this is what she read :—

It was a meeting-going world wherein  
My childhood found itself. The Sabbath sun  
Warmed palsied footsteps up the windy slope,  
Where rosy weanlings toddled breathlessly  
In prints of patriarchal feet. It shone  
Through lattice-work of apple-boughs in spring  
Stained with pink glory of bloom, on silver hair  
And flaxen baby-ringlets, on the heads  
Of youngsters awkward with strange consciousness  
Of smoothness, and on brows demure  
Of arch girls Sunday-prim.

The sun himself  
Lost in the pews the look of every day, —  
His frolic look, — was cool, sedate, and blank.



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In the tall pulpit rose the minister,  
And talked of dispensations and decrees,  
Of covenants, purposes, and ordinances,  
Saints' perseverance, the church-militant,  
Till to my vague child-thought the way to heaven  
Seemed somehow built of sounding sentences  
That went up through the roof, and shaped themselves  
Like rafters, beams, and rafters, endlessly.  
Alas! I knew I should lose footing there!  
The men and women, with grown minds, could climb;  
But I, poor fledgling, fallen on the pew-floor  
Helpless and weak, the sky so very far,  
And all that Babel-staging raised between, —  
What would become of me?

(Nay, do not laugh!

To me all this was real.)

My young thoughts caught,  
From tone and gesture, something earnest meant  
For all of us; there would be some mishap,  
Unless we all did something. Restlessly  
My small life fluttered in its vast, bare cage,  
Yet feared the terror hinted at outside.

And then they sung a hymn, that sometimes was  
Squared to the preaching, like a scaffold-stair;

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But sometimes lifted up my baby-soul,  
And took it heavenward through the apple-bloom,  
With birds and winds, and all the free, glad things  
That worshipped in unconscious unrestraint, —  
As in Thorwaldsen's sculpture, where the babes  
Are borne through kingdoms of the Night and Day,  
In mighty, motherly embrace.

But when

The words came, "Let us pray!" something in me  
Awoke, and understood, and said, "Amen!"  
But O the weary failure! That long prayer  
Was like a toilsome journey round the world,  
By Cathay and the Mountains of the Moon,  
To come at our own door-stone, where He stood  
Waiting to speak to us, the Father dear,  
Who is not far from any one of us.

And yet, though baby-feet flagged in the way,  
The hard, cold way of prayer those stern men chose,  
Not for one moment did one thought in me  
Doubt that there was a way, some path of prayer  
By which I, too, could reach Him. And perhaps  
The men and women standing up so straight,  
With set, unwinking eyes, perhaps their thoughts  
Stumbled like mine, sometimes. How could they go,

Step after measured step, as they were led,  
Shaping their asking to the preacher's plan,  
Without a side-flight of their own ?

God hears

The prayer the good man means, the soul's desire,  
Under whatever rubbish of vain speech.  
And prayer is, must be, each man's deepest word.  
He who denies its power still uses it  
Whenever he names God or thinks of Him.

If there be Better, — and the dream of it,  
The longing for it, shows that there must be, —  
It is not in ourselves ; it is the God  
Beyond, whom our souls seek ; the search is prayer.  
More life we ask, of Him who is the Life :  
The reason why we pray is this : we must.

Therefore the breeze of memory brings to me  
No sweeter echo than that Sabbath word  
From pew and pulpit hid by apple-boughs  
Among the years of childhood, " Let us pray !"  
And therefore, though Philosophy forbid, —  
Philosophy, the soul of whose germ-thought  
Is God, the thought-inspirer ; — therefore, though  
Science forbid, closing the inward eye

To make the outward keener ; putting Law,  
God's vast, revealing shadow, for himself, —  
Still let the instinct of his presence speak,  
That will take no denial ; still let heart  
Respond to heart, — deep calling unto deep,  
The voice of many waters, — " Let us pray ! "

VI.

WEEKS passed : and cheerful mornings dawned on Ruth  
Out of her girl-friends' eyes. To hearts like hers,  
Sick for a little kindness, just the sound  
Of sympathetic voices brings relief.

Some strangers came one day into the mills, —  
Among them English travellers, — led on  
Through the great labyrinth of dust and noise  
By the good Superintendent, — a grave man,  
Kindly and manly, and esteemed of all.

They paused awhile among the balsam-flowers  
And pinks and marigolds about the gate ;  
Then peered with curious eyes through every door  
Along the winding stair. The carding-room  
They gave one glance, with its great groaning wheels,  
Its earthquake rumblings, and its mingled smells  
Of oily suffocation ; and passed on

Into another room's cool spaciousness  
Of long clean alleys, where the spinners paced  
Silently up and down, and pieced their threads,  
The spindles buzzing like ten thousand bees.

Two bright-faced little girls looked up and smiled,  
Swinging a bobbin-box between them. These  
Were Ann and Alice, who, in April, played  
Beside Pawtucket Falls. One stranger said, —

“Now, sir, this should not be! You're copying  
Our British faults too closely, when a child  
Toils in close air, like this.” But carelessly  
The children laughed, still turning work to play,  
As children will, nor hardship's meaning guessed.

The next great door swung in upon a room  
Where the long threads were wound from beam to beam,  
And glazed, and then fanned dry in breathless heat.  
Here lithe forms reached across wide webs, or stooped  
To disentangle broken threads, or climbed  
To where their countenances glistened pale  
Among swift belts and pulleys, which appeared  
To glow with eyes, like the mysterious wheels

Seen of Ezekiel once, by Chebar's brook.  
Ruth Woodburn's earnest, too unsmiling face  
Was one of these, arresting soon the gaze  
Of those who entered.

“That 's a striking brow ;  
An intellectual girl, you may be sure,”  
One to another said. “Who is she, sir ?”

“I knew her father well, — a man of gifts,  
But not of faculty ; dead now. She 's here  
To save the homestead, and help educate  
Brothers and sisters. She will do it, too.  
She is continually anxious for more work,  
More than her strength will bear, I fear. But then  
These young girls every day astonish me  
By some such aim's accomplishment.”

“I wish  
She had an easier life : she looks too sad  
And grave and worn-out, — homesick, I am sure ;  
And this room's heat must undermine her strength.”

The good man's brow grew serious. “If, being  
here,  
I needs must solve all problems of these lives, —  
A hopeless task, — perplexed I must withdraw

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And seek a wiser man to fill my place.  
But work 's a blessed curse, and some of these  
Would wonder at our pity; smile, perhaps."  
And so he led them to the weaving-room.

The door, swung in on iron hinges, showed  
A hundred girls who hurried to and fro,  
With hands and eyes following the shuttle's flight,  
Threading it, watching for the scarlet mark  
That came up in the web, to show how fast  
Their work was speeding. Clatter went the looms,  
Click-clack the shuttles. Gossamery notes  
Thickened the sunbeams into golden bars,  
And in a misty maze those girlish forms,  
Arms, hands, and heads, moved with the moving  
looms,

That closed them in as if all were one shape,  
One motion. For the most part tidy they,  
And comely; wholesome-looking country girls.  
But now and then a stolid face, an eye  
That held a covetous glint, a close, cold mouth,  
Made emphasis for itself. And now and then  
A countenance eloquent with quiet thought  
And noble aspiration, shone out clear,  
A sun amid the cloud-like nebulae.

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Here Esther, Eleanor, and Isabel  
Worked in a sunlit corner, side by side,  
That looked down towards the river.

Eleanor's plants, —

Roses, and one great oleander-tree, —  
Blooming against the panes, intensified  
The whiteness of her face. Across to her  
Leaned Isabel with a startled look.

“ My looms, —

Tend them five minutes, will you ?” And she slipped  
Behind some piled-up webs, and, crouching there,  
With bowed head, seemed intent upon a heap  
Of untrimmed cloth ; there lingering, until  
The strangers disappeared. Then she returned,  
Resuming work in silence ; not unmissed.

The Superintendent had drawn near, and said  
Aside, to one guest, “ I will show you now  
A maiden worthy of Murillo's brush.  
But no ! she is not here. That pale-faced girl  
Does double work for her. However, there  
Is Esther Halo ; a soul more generous  
I know not among women. She will work  
All day, and watch beside the sick all night,  
If need be, and she covers the mistakes

Of clumsy learners, till they mend. Indeed,  
Her virtues lean toward faults sometimes, for she  
Is quite too careless of her own health, goes  
To meeting in all weathers, has a class  
Of children at the Sunday school, and finds,  
Somehow or other, time to visit them,  
And know them well. I own that I have felt  
Like scolding her, when I have seen her give  
Her bank-notes to build churches, or perhaps  
Fill up the missionary-box. She well  
Deserves to wed a Prince — or President.”

“Or choose a better portion; with Saint Paul,  
And be a woman-saint.” The lady spoke,  
Scarce knowing that she did; whereat all laughed,  
And so went out.

A sunbeam at the door  
Fixed one man's face an instant: Eleanor knew  
That face; it was the stranger's at the bridge!  
Was it from his eyes Isabel hid herself?  
Who was he? And what meant this mystery  
Of conscious looks and blushes? Isabel  
She could not question; Esther was forbidden.  
But into Eleanor's soul there came a sense  
Of anxious guardianship.

“I shall be shown  
The way to help her, if she needs my help,”  
She told herself, yet resolutely set  
Her thoughts to seeking clues ; for much she feared  
Some snare was near the footsteps of her friend.

The shuttles clattered on. The red rose leaned  
Out toward the wonder of the open sky ;  
And Eleanor leaned out too, and longed for light  
That souls might see by. Bending then again  
Over her work, she spread a little book  
Open, beneath a warp-fringe from her loom, —  
A book of hymns she loved ; and as she toiled,  
Her voice made music, hid within the noise, —  
A bird's note in a thicket ; and her heart  
Rose, with her voice, in singing that was prayer.

HEAVENLY Helper, Friend divine,  
Friend of all men, therefore mine,  
Let my heart as thy heart be !  
Breathe thy living breath through me !

Only at thy love's pure tide  
Human thirst is satisfied.  
He who fills his chalice there  
Fills, with thirstier souls to share

Undeiled One, who dost win  
All thine own from paths of sin,  
Never let me dread to go  
Where is guilt, or want, or woe !

If another lose the way,  
My feet also go astray.  
Sleepless Watcher, lead us back,  
Safe into the homeward track !

As a bird unto its nest,  
Flies the tired soul to thy breast.  
Let not one an alien be !  
Lord, we have no home but Thee !

VII.

RUTH WOODBURN sat alone in her own room ;  
A most unusual privilege, — her own, —  
Hers only, — seven feet square ! With Esther Hale  
For house-companion, she was well content.

It was midsummer now : the crickets chirped  
Along green-fringed canals and through trim yards ;  
And one had somehow climbed the bricks, and hid  
His black limbs somewhere, just to sing to her.

And Ruth could sing herself, with pen and ink.  
She soothed her heartaches so, sometimes ; though  
close  
She hid her old portfolio full of verse, —  
All sentiment, she knew ; but only thus  
Would grief translate the blurred text of chained  
books  
In her heart's crypt.

'T is no good place for songs,  
Dungeoned in self. Birds in a darkened cage  
Stop singing: a true hymn is born of light.  
Still Ruth won some poor comfort from her grief,  
Humming it over to herself alone,  
Half hopeful of its taking wing at last.

CAN you do without me ?  
Is the summer just as sweet  
With its grass untroubled  
By my once familiar feet ?  
Does the west-wind never  
Stir the woodland with a sigh  
For a presence missing,  
Once the dearest that drew nigh ?

Can you do without me ?  
Is it all the same to be  
Living with a silence,  
Gulf-like, stretched from you to me ?  
If you can, so be it !  
God has weighed our mutual need :  
He appoints our places ;  
Sways the thought, permits the deed.

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You can do without me,  
And without you I live on,  
Wedded to grave duty ;  
Feet must walk, when wings are gone.  
Lost the cup's aroma,  
All that freshens and uplifts ;  
Faded out, the vision  
From the gray horizon drifts.

If I loved a phantom, —  
If it filled my atmosphere  
With a dream's illusion, —  
In the unrevealed, so near,  
Dreams may be made real :  
There the true soul I may know,  
Yours has but foreshadowed :  
So God bless you, as you go !

A step was on the stair ; and Esther's hand  
Touched now the latch. Ruth laid the paper by,  
But its thought lingered in her eyes, and ran  
Into her words, despite herself.

“ Sit here,  
Where you can see the tree-tops and the sky,

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So many yards of sheeny blue, all mine!  
I never say my prayers but I thank God  
That I have this, instead of staring rows  
Of windows in brick walls. Only to think  
Of a time come to me when loneliness  
And that one sky-strip seem like luxury!  
But I have room-mates plenty : crowds of thoughts,  
Not always kind or smiling.

“ Esther dear,  
I never told, you never asked of me, —  
For that I thank you, — what the trouble is  
Which I have worn, like mourning, over since  
A stranger, sick, you found and took me in.  
Have you the patience now to hear of it ? ”

“ Aught that concerns you, Ruth, comes home to me ;  
But telling may be too great pain. ”

“ Relief,  
Dear friend, it will be now, though once I hoped  
To hide me with my sorrow in the grave.  
But you will think me foolish, to have cared  
For one man so that memory of him  
Clouds life all over. Think me so ! I am.  
Owing it folly, I can talk of it.



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If I can make a weary story brief,  
I 'll tell you of a teacher that I had.  
Winter on winter, when the frozen hills  
Were white ghost-giants round us, when the snow  
Buried us up like Laplanders, he came,  
And with old Virgil, made an Italy  
Of cold New Hampshire. I, beyond the rest,  
Prizing the Latin lore, we studied much  
Together, in long evenings, by ourselves.  
And all the bright vacations, side by side,  
We wandered with the west-wind through the hills.

“To me he told his plans. His college years  
Once finished, he would settle at the West,  
As rovers settle, — teach, or preach, perhaps ;  
‘ Might I not join him, some time ? ’ And it seemed,  
At last, the only natural thing to dream  
That we should have one future.

“So I lived,  
Of that great garden-desert picturing  
A home for us two.

“When my father died,  
New cares fell on me. With her mortgaged farm  
And her large family, my mother’s head,  
Never too clear, seemed utterly confused.

I shelved my books. I set the boys to work,  
And kept a strict account of costs.

“In vain!

The two ends would not meet. Friends offered help  
I was too proud to take. I heard of those  
Who here had found the wherewithal to lift  
Loads heavier than mine. So I came, too,  
Full of my Eden-visions about work,  
With the curse lifted off, and full of hope  
For Ambrose and our prairie-paradise :  
Not his, not mine, but ours !

“Well, he I loved —

And love still, with a difference — had gone  
Part way upon his journey, sending words  
Of old accustomed tenderness to me. —  
I think he meant them ; men are very strange. —  
He met my cousin somewhere on the road,  
Whom he had never seen, sweet Zillah Wray,  
Bewitching as May dawns or mountain-brooks.  
They talked of me. ‘She was so fond of me,  
I was so good, so true, so lovable,  
And knew so much, withal !’ O, I can hear  
Just how she said it, with an innocent air  
Of self-depreciation ! ‘What was she  
But a mere ignoramus ?’ And the word

Rounded her lips so prettily, one sighed  
To kiss them. 'Still, she never had been taught  
As Ruth had. Did he think that she could learn?'

"So Ambrose, lingering in her native town,  
Called on her often, — for my sake, he said ;  
And taught her — not so much as she taught him.  
He learned to love her ; and he wrote to me,  
Making confession. 'Could they help their fate,  
Their mutual fault? Could I forgive them both?  
He doubted — Zillah was so different,  
Seemed so much fonder of him — if I cared  
Greatly to share his wandering destinies.'

"That was the penalty of reticence !  
Love, I had thought, was treasure men should seek,  
And prize the more, being hid. It is not so !—  
Foolish Cordelia should have answered Lear !—  
Man likes the false wind's wooing, wants bold flowers  
To bring him incense ; so much trouble saved !

"Though crushed, I was not wholly unprepared,  
For I remembered Zillah. Like a dress,  
Becoming, and so kept in wearing trim,  
Was this unconscious show of artlessness.

Her guileful guilelessness seemed natural  
 As life itself. Yet Ambrose, I supposed,  
 Had penetration to read her and me.  
 It was like death to me, untwisting all  
 The fibres of my life from his, and still  
 In memory painful. But he is not mine,  
 Or she could not have won him. I have tried  
 To think with gratitude of her bright ways,  
 And how she will adorn his life; and yet  
 He seemed to need me, as I needed him.  
 And Zillah loves — perhaps I do her wrong —  
 Herself reflected in the heart she wins,  
 More than the man she won."

"And," Esther said,

"Perhaps your Ambrose also loves himself  
 Glassed in her admiration. Wisest men  
 Lose all their wisdom when a silly girl  
 Cobwebs their ears with flattery. To my mind,  
 'T is fancy's glamour, both sides; never love."

"So I have almost thought, else were my past  
 With him I loved a sealed-up sepulchre  
 Wet by no tear of memory. But sometimes  
 I dream of him bewildered, shaken off  
 By Zillah, when she scents superior game,

Conscious of his mistake, and missing me ;  
Or, wedding her, hindered in all his best  
For want of wifely help, and missing me.  
Try as I will, the thought of him comes back,  
With Zillah or without her, missing me,  
Who never can return."

"How never, Ruth?

May not all rents be mended?"

"Not of souls.

Mine, surely, will not wear a patched-up love,  
Nor such as can be worn by me or her,  
At change of the giver's fancy. Even now  
I dimly see why disappointment came,  
To lead me upward to some grander height  
Of hope and labor. Still the grinding wheels  
Crush on, the red drops ooze. The Juggernaut,  
Experience, never heeds its victim's cry."

"Your Ambrose was not worthy of you, Ruth."

"Nay, that I do not know. Men cannot help  
Being drawn aside by beauty."

"Can they not?

Poor weaklings! Why do women call them 'lords,'  
Who are not their own masters? I should scorn  
The man mere pretty faces could enslave."

“You know not what you talk of, Esther dear !  
A woman’s heart is as perversely fixed  
As man’s is wavering. Some day, for yourself  
You may see how it is : I hope not soon.”

“Never ! My thoughts are shut fast, marriage-ward.  
There is much else to live for ; full as much  
For woman as for man, in separateness :  
Although my dream is, that the two, made one  
In mutual faith, show Paradise as yet  
An earthly possibility. But then  
You say, dear Ruth, you never can return  
To Ambrose, yet must love him. That is strange !”

“Yes, it is strange ; and sad as it is strange,  
And true as strange and sad. I think of him  
As a wife death has summoned, who may look  
Backward from heaven, and love her husband still  
For the last smile he gave her, though his smiles  
Are now another woman’s sunshine. She  
Whom he has seen safe through the gates of pearl,  
Cannot go back with him across the gulf  
His thoughts make, widening towards new marriage.

“Well !

My story told, let’s find some cheerier talk !”

---

And here came Isabel's rosy, roguish face  
Half through the doorway: "Esther, there are  
    guests  
Waiting to see you, — gentlemen": and ran,  
Without another word, they knew not where.

Esther had on her working-dress, a print  
Somewhat the dimmer for much washing, still  
Tidy enough. She only smoothed her hair  
By Ruth's six-square-inch mirror, then went  
    down;

And who should wait there in the dining-room,  
Which served for evening sittings, — sewing, talk,  
And reading going on among the girls,  
A dozen of them, scattered round the room,  
At the bare tables, — who but Doctor Mann  
And Pastor Alwyn, with them Eleanor,  
Serene and ladylike, in easy chat?

Somewhat constrained, vexed that she was abashed  
To meet a cultured stranger in the place  
Where her lot fell, so different from his, —  
Esther talked rapidly, unlike herself,  
While Eleanor and her physician-friend  
Went rambling through long genealogies.

A pedlar came in while they stayed, whose wares  
The girls sat cheapening. A phrenologist  
Displaced the pedlar, and a tide of mirth  
Flowed in around the tables, as he read  
The cranial character of each to each.

The guests arose to go, one much annoyed, —  
The kindly Pastor, who had seldom found  
Things so untoward, even in a boarding-house.  
But Eleanor and young Doctor Mann had gone  
Back under haunted boughs of family-trees,  
Nor heard near voices. Dim shapes of the past,  
Moving before them, all at hand obscured ;  
And he remembered but her gentle face.

Esther escaped to her third-story room,  
Glad that her mates were absent, — sought the nook  
She called her own, a space between the bed  
And window, wide enough to hold one chair,  
Where she could see the stars, unjustled, move  
Across the open sky-fields. Room ! more room !  
Her thoughts cried out for. So to live, so cramped  
As not to hear your nearest neighbor's voice  
Through the surrounding jargon, was it life ?  
But here she was, — must make the best of it,



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Till a new door should open. Even now  
It swung upon its hinges, all unheard  
By her. If we could watch the bursting gates  
Of Destiny, should we not shrink back, awed  
By their vast shadow, dazed with light beyond?  
Man's eye suits his horizon. As that spreads,  
Vision grows telescopic, till, beside  
The throne of God, it sweeps eternity.

Meanwhile Ruth Woodburn sat uncomforted  
Beneath the thickening stars; nor could she guess  
That her young hopes, now beaten down like grass  
Under a furious rain, would rise again  
With greener vigor for that cleansing storm.

God made not any human life to rest  
Only upon another human life:  
Love means some better thing than that. And she  
Who so had leaned upon a man she loved,  
Found her dependence weakness, and not need,  
Ere autumn waned. Before her heart wore off  
Its rust of sorrow, and long afterward,  
Through its vibrations, chords like this awoke:—

ONCE 't was my saddest thought,  
Ere I began to doubt you,

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That some time I must learn,  
Perhaps, to do without you.  
For Death parts dearest friends ;  
From him there 's no escaping ;  
And partings worse than death  
Our fears are ever shaping.

Now with new dawns of hope  
No thought of you is blended ;  
Day deepens evermore,  
Though morning dreams are ended.  
And now the saddest thought  
That haunts my heart about you  
Is this, — that I have learned,  
At last, to do without you.

VIII.

"Good by, girls! I am homeward bound. To-night  
I shall nod back Chocorua's welcome. Girls,  
They talk of strikes, — they say that half the looms  
Must stop, or wages be reduced. A muss  
Of some kind will be stirring. So get leave  
To come, and, till it settles, rest with me.  
Come! I'm in earnest."

Minta Summerfield

Stood in her cottage-bonnet and bright shawl  
Outside the door, just as the bell rang in  
The girls from half-hour breakfasting. They gave  
Hurried replies, half-promises. The coach  
Rolled out of sight. The summer seemed to go  
With Minta's breezy laughter from their side;  
Might they not follow?

Eleanor demurred,

Because of Isabel left behind. "But Ruth,

Ruth will be with her ; each will care for each ;  
And Isabel loves Ruth, and Ruth is kind."

So Esther, in her cheerful way, went on  
Planning the journey ; and before aware,  
They found themselves inhaling the fresh breath  
Of the hill-country, from the stage-coach top.

O that first burst of beauty from the shore  
Of Winnepesaukee, where the mountains lay  
Floating, a chain of ever-varying pearls  
In shifting light and shadow ! It was like  
The Book of Revelation, Esther said ;  
The vision of a new heaven and new earth ;  
Gleams of the Bride's celestial jewelry,  
From the white City of God. But Eleanor  
Sat still, as one entranced, her dove-like eyes  
Filled with unutterable light.

They stayed  
An evening and a morning by the Lake,  
Among the tangled sweet-briers of the steep,  
Where, sitting upon fern-wreathed rocks, they saw  
The low sun redden against Ossipee,  
The white moon's shadow drift like a canoe  
Among innumerable islands green ;

And all the water's glory, fading, blend  
At last into one wavering spectacle,  
Commingling islands, billows, hills, and sky.

Then, after next day's noon-glare, they went up  
For nearer greeting of the hills; and saw,  
Through veils of rain, green summits come and go;  
And saw a lucent rainbow, laid against  
A mountain's purple slope, clear and intense  
With unadulterate color; and at last  
The landscape was all mountains. The whole range  
Rose near and dark, its grand horizon-lines  
Cut on the northern sky from east to west,  
Like the long swell of an oncoming wave  
Stiffened to granite ere it broke. Vast clouds  
Moving to eastward in slow cavalcade  
Now hid and now revealed one lofty peak  
Whose white head, worn and haggard with the storms  
Of æons, held its mighty symmetry  
Amid surrounding chaos.

The two girls,  
Who best knew mountains glimpsed among the leaves  
Of the Old Testament, seemed to behold  
The glooms of Sinai! Esther told her thought  
To Eleanor, who whispered back, "The Lord

Is in His holy temple ; let us keep  
Silence before Him." So they fared along  
To a broad, well-tilled upland, whence the hills  
More smiling looked, amid brown pasture-lands  
And pleasant farm-enclosures, neighborly  
As sentinels who keep no dangerous watch.

The coach stopped. From a roadside cottage-porch,  
Wreathed with convolvulus, out flew a form  
Familiar. "Welcome!" Minta Summerfield  
Called, with a clap of hands. "Come in! come in!  
You are not used to rough-and-tumble roads.  
Poor wayfarers! I hope your bones are sound!"

The days that followed, in and out of doors,  
With best home-cheer, and still fresh pages turned  
Of wonder and of beauty, everywhere  
The sun could lay his finger, — light of light  
On the receding and advancing hills,  
The sweet air like a flagon of new wine  
Freshening their senses, wakening fantasies  
That heretofore slept dreamless, making life  
Seem nobler, better, dearer than itself, —  
Those days were treasure which no flimsy wealth  
Of words could represent. To some new world  
They seemed translated.

Here was Minta's home

With her tall farmer-brother, Clement, who,  
Had won a wife as sweet as he deserved,  
A steady-natured and wise-hearted one,  
Who toiled with him, not holding work the end  
Of their joint life, but kept a margin clear  
For studious thought, for books, for all that helped  
The mother and the woman to be true ;  
So broadening, as she could, their rustic lot.

Sisters in love as well as law, the two,  
Mercy and Minta, homely labors shared,  
And simple joys, and cheerfulness of health.  
And pleasant was the long ride home from school  
Over the windings of the Tamworth hills,  
After each week of absence, when they came,  
Clement and Mercy, with two sunburnt boys, —  
Cupids in bronze, till winter showed fair brows  
And rosy apple-checks by fireside light,  
Like Raphael's cherubs, — when the happy four  
Came in the old farm-wagon, the white horse  
Jogging on slowly for the landscape's sake,  
Or the good company he bore, and took  
Minta's gay presence back with them, to bloom  
Into their Sabbath-Siloam of peace.

The schoolhouse door was closed now, and the girls  
Drove the white Wizard anywhere they would,  
The faithful beast by Esther named, because  
He bore them always through enchanted ground ;  
So seemed the mountains to her fancy, bred  
Beside the gray-blue level of the sea,  
And grassy borders of the Merrimack.

One day they reached an inn upon a knoll  
At noontide, hungering and tired, and there  
For the good Wizard's welfare and their own,  
They rested. In the low-ceiled dining-room,  
Among the lingerers of the summer, sat  
A lovely gray-haired woman, whose mild eyes  
Looked welcome, and who led them with kind words,  
After their meal, out under sheltering elms,  
Where they could see strange peaks, invisible  
From the home-cottage, ten good miles away.

In that sweet woman-stranger's heart sprang up  
For Eleanor a secret tenderness.  
Her she besought to stay, so pale she looked,  
So long the journey home. And Esther, too,  
Blaming herself for Eleanor's fatigue,  
Added her urging. Eleanor yielded then,



And let the Wizard bear her friends away,  
Looking and listening till his distant hoofs  
Fell light as raindrops; then, half homesick, moaned.

But she was met by thoughtfulness too kind  
To be resisted. Miriam Willoughby,  
A single woman with a mother's heart  
Such as too many a child cries after, mocked  
By the empty mother-name, knew just what word  
To whisper, what soft silence to enfold  
About the maid, and she was comforted.

And when, at dawn, slow vapors climbed the hills  
Before the pleasant hostelry, and left  
Craggs of dark green contrasted with pure blue,  
These new-made friends beheld the mountains play  
Like dolphins in their sun-bath, with the clouds  
That clung to them, or slipped off unaware  
Into a sea of azure, drenching them  
With half-concealing sheen. And presently  
The elder woman called, "Look! Eleanor, look!"  
And where her finger pointed, where the mists  
Had fallen again, and left the whole world gray  
As if with coming rain, far, far beyond  
The wave-like outline of the mountain-range,

A sun-touched summit glistened, a great pearl  
Held in a cup-like hollow of near hills  
Dark with contrasted glory.

“O, too fair!

Too delicate to gaze or breathe upon!  
Is it not heaven itself?” And Eleanor’s eyes  
Grew luminous as she looked.

A veil came down

Upon the vision. Miriam Willoughby  
Took Eleanor’s hand, and said, “’T was but a hill  
Like these around us, but a little higher, —  
Although crowned monarch of New England peaks.  
And may not heaven itself be common life  
In uttermost perfection? Such a glimpse  
Comes now and then to us from human souls,  
Lit with divine ideas and purposes.  
Is not man as the angels, only made  
A little lower? And who knows what shall be  
Revealed in him, shone on by other suns?”

The mist became a rainfall, and that day  
No Esther came, so the two women sat  
And wound their friendship firm with genial talk  
Each of the other’s welfare, and of things  
Wherein they found their aspirations blend.

For though this Miriam Willoughby had place  
In high society, nor toiled nor spun  
More than the lilies, with her lily hands  
Still as unwrinkled as her face, while snows  
Of threescore years had whitened on her head,  
Her heart and brain hold a whole lifetime full  
Of sympathy and generous help, nor once  
Allowed the thought that fortune, gifts, or birth,  
Privileged arrogance, or permitted scorn  
Of any toiler in the human hive.

The years had dwelt with her most peacefully,  
Each one a guest more welcome than the last ;  
And why the ripening of her days should be  
Clouded with vain regrets for blossom-time,  
As with some women, she had seen no cause,  
With autumn in her heart surpassing spring  
In subtle fragrance and perennial bloom.  
Yet motherhood, a fountain sealed within,  
Sometimes made lonesome music, and she longed  
For those who needed her caress, her close  
And separate overwatch of yearning care.

All orphanage awoke her love ; but now  
This Eleanor, who toiled for daily bread,

In her pale beauty, fragile unto pain,  
Seemed to glide in and fill the emptiest nook  
Of her warm heart, that echoed, "Mine! my child!"

A feeling near akin to jealousy  
She recognized when Esther came at last,  
So waited for by Eleanor; but, ashamed  
Before itself, her heart gave room to both;  
And days and days she kept them at her side,  
Growing to them most dear. The roadside inn  
Was homelike, and the three friends went and came,  
Together or alone, free as the breeze  
That rippled Bearcamp Water.

As she watched  
The two girls wandering down the meadow-road,  
One golden morning, Miriam Willoughby  
Sat at her window, and, in pauses, wrote  
To one who shared her passion for the hills: —

"Dear Nephew Ralph, it often seems to me  
As if we should change places. 'T is not fair  
That you should toil in the metropolis  
At stifling office-work, at my affairs  
More than your own, I fear, while I enjoy  
Perpetual leisure, drinking peace and health

Out of the mountain chalices. For you  
'T is hard, who Nature as a mother love,  
As you do me, your old,rom antic aunt,  
Whose heart remains a girl's in loving you,  
Her squire and champion. We 'll lot business go,  
While I write of these hills, at your desire, —  
The friendly hills, that, while I am away  
From all I love, must take the place of friends.

“ This mountain-group, before my window ranged,  
Is noble company to have in sight,  
To sit down with at any hour of day, —  
To meet their faces looking toward the east  
At the sunrising, wrapped in soft noon-mist,  
Or outlined keen upon the auroral night,  
Or sinking into sunset deeps of heaven,  
Unutterably glorious. Yet sometimes,  
As one may weary of too great a throng  
Of noble guests, and call them each apart  
For closer confernce, I move my seat  
Little by little, so that only one  
Is for the time in sight.

“ Green Ossipee,  
With Bearcamp River singing at its base,  
A vast, long-torraced wall of fir and pine,

Shuts in our southern meadows. Where that ends,  
Just where the sun sets in October days,  
Mount Israel stands and guards his villages,  
And hides the secret of a windy pass  
To Thornton, and the Haystacks of the Notch.

“ Then the eye rests upon Black Mountain's top  
Of sombre velvet, highest of these hills,  
That gathers the rich purple and deep gold  
Of fine late light into his vesture's folds,  
Yet, in his rounded symmetry, appears  
Less grand than Whiteface, his next-neighbor peak,  
Looking, sharp-cut and gray, out of the north,  
With outreach of bare shoulder ; in his side  
A gash deep-hollowed, where the sun at noon  
Pours clearest oil and wine.

“ Some sonneteer,

Travelling this way, has hung a little web  
Of misty melody about his brow.  
Travelling this way, he must have wandered on  
Over steep roads of Sandwich, when he wrote  
Of Whiteface as a monarch whom the clouds  
Gather toward, wingéd daughters of the sky, —  
For of this vale Chocorua is king.

CLOUDS ON WHITEFACE.

So lovingly the clouds caress his head, —  
The mountain-monarch ; he, severe and hard,  
With white face set like flint horizon-ward ;  
They weaving softest fiece of gold and red,  
And gossamor of airicst silver thread,  
To wrap his form, wind-beaten, thunder-scarred.  
They linger tenderly, and fain would stay,  
Since he, earth-rooted, may not float away.  
Ho upward looks, but moves not ; wears their hues ;  
Draws them unto himself ; their beauty shares ;  
And sometimes his own semblance seems to lose,  
His grandeur and their grace so intorfuse ;  
And when his angels leave him unawares,  
A sullen rock, his brow to heaven he bares.

“T is curious, Ralph, the naming of these hills, —  
Black Mountain from his dark pine-growth ; and this  
From his vast, perpendicular front of quartz  
Cutting the sky, a wedge of adamant.  
‘White,’ ‘Black,’ ‘Green,’ ‘Blue,’ were obviously con-  
ferred  
Out of the settlers’ poverty ; worse taste

Was theirs who threw pell-mell on Agiochook  
A shower of Presidential surnames. Yet,  
Why nickname all this grandeur? 'Ragged,' 'Bald,'  
'Toad,' 'Snout,' and 'Hunchback,'—so you hear them  
called

Among the farmers roundabout.

“One day

We went out on a christening-tour, two girls  
And I; we said the red man should receive  
His own again, and with Chocorus  
And Passaconaway, should Paugus stand.  
That crouching shape, a headless heap afar,  
Glittering as if with barbarous ornaments,  
Suits well the sachem whose wild howl resounds  
Through history like the war-whoop of the wind.  
And all that craggy chaos at his side  
Shall be the Wahwa Hills, for the grim chief  
Who after Paugus trails uncertainty  
Of blood-stained memory, in dim ruin lost.  
And that bright cone of perfect emerald  
Whose trout-streams flow through birchen intervals,—  
An angler's Paradise,—that shall be called  
For Wannalancet, peacefullest of all  
The forest sagamores, the one who loved  
The white man best, found him most treacherous.



"The mighty name of Passaconaway,  
Honored of all his tribe, and honored too  
Of pioneers, with whom he held firm truce,  
Life-long, rests fitly on yon pyramid  
Of stately greenness. Were he sorcerer  
Or not, he is a cloud-compeller still.

"Beside him leans Chocorua from his hold,  
With the curse stiffened on his silent lips,  
Gazing upon the shadow of himself  
In his lake-mirror. Nobly picturesque  
Is ragged, legend-wrapped Chocorua,  
Leader of this long file of mountain-shapes,  
Most human-seeming in his sharp contours.

Here is a picture of him, from the same  
Stray rhymers' pencil, showing possible moods  
Of this most moody mountain-sagamore,  
Who, savage as he is, knows how to smile.

✓ CHOCORUA.

THE pioneer of a great company  
That wait behind him, gazing toward the east, —  
Mighty ones all, down to the nameless least, —

Though after him none dares to press, where he  
With bent head listens to the minstrelsy  
Of far waves chanting to the moon, their priest.  
What phantom rises up from winds deceased ?  
What whiteness of the unapproachable sea ?  
Hoary Chocorua guards his mystery well :  
He pushes back his fellows, lest they hear  
The haunting secret he apart must tell  
To his lone self, in the sky-silence clear.  
A shadowy, cloud-cloaked wraith, with shoulders bowed,  
He steals, conspicuous, from the mountain-crowd.

“ Yet, Ralph, the noblest landscape was but meant  
To be a background for humanity.  
And these two girls, — you need not be afraid  
(I know the shyness of your bachelor-heart)  
Of two young mill-girls, — ladies, both of them,  
As I translate the word, — will go away,  
Only too soon, will leave me quite alone ;  
And loneliness after good company  
Is not the bearable sort.

“ Do not forget  
To speak of Rodney when you write. Poor boy !  
Brother so unlike you ! If he could feel

The baptism of one work-day's honest sweat,  
Happy for him! To wear his idleness  
As gracefully as the last cut of coat  
Seems his life's end and purpose.

“Nephew Ralph,

Be idle just one week yourself! for here  
I and the mountains wait and hope for you!”

IX.

SOME faces stand for twilight, or the shade  
Of web-like dog-day mist, which does but wrap  
Summer-flushed earth in a becoming veil ;  
These have a fascination of their own :  
But when a face which is the sun itself  
Wears an eclipse, sad for the world it lights !

Something was strange at Clement Summerfield's,  
And that was Minta's countenance, now vexed  
With knots, and puzzling twists of lip and brow ;  
Now gazing vague defiance into air ;  
And now at war with tears, but conquering.

Her guests seemed her chief pleasure, and they knew  
It was no sorrow to her that their stay  
Caused rarer visits from a farmer's son  
Bred just across the mountain, who had found  
Excuse of trade, or work exchanged, to come

---

Often to Clement's cottage, and stay long ;  
Minta's " Perhaps," — the household cognomen  
When he was out of hearing ; and in months  
Gone by, referred to as " The Probable."  
But Solon Dale, whatever he had been  
To Minta, was not now what he would be, —  
Accepted suitor, — yet was unconvinced  
That hence their paths inevitably diverged,  
And never could make one road, — that being his.

It was a first-love fallacy, perceived  
As such by Minta, every day made clear  
By her whole nature's undisguised revolt  
From his accustomed mastery of will,  
And narrow, obstinate plan, that tethered her  
To the obsolete letter of a promise dead.

Moreover, mountain-high he piled the wall  
Betwixt them, scoffing at her taste for books,  
Which spoilt her for a housewife. Well enough  
For those two white-faced friends of hers, he said, —  
Spinsters elect ; but what a farmer's wife  
Wanted of more than just to read and write,  
And cipher through the Long Division rules,  
He could not see ! To teach the district school

No more was needed. Learned she could not be, —  
It was not in her.

“Which last may be true,  
But I reserve right to be my own judge,”  
Thought Minta; and grew sure that Solon’s self  
Would be the one most uninteresting book  
To take for life-long conning. Yet sometimes  
Memories of ancient fondness would awake  
And counterfeit love’s claim. And so things stood  
When Esther went to Eleanor at the inn.  
And Esther, wishing much, for Minta’s peace,  
That she would say the unavoidable “No”  
For once and always in their absence, stayed  
To give her solitude and unbiassed thought.

Letters from Ruth came often. Isabel  
And she were quiet, ’mid continual stir  
Of work-and-wages questions. There had been  
Meetings, conventions; now and then a girl  
Spoke on the rostrum for herself, and such  
As felt aggrieved. Ruth did not like that course,  
Nor “strikes,” that ever threatened. “Why should

we,

Battling oppression, tyrants be ourselves,  
Forcing mere brief concession to our wish?

Are not employers human as employed ?  
Are not our interests common ? If they grind  
And cheat as brethren should not, let us go  
Back to the music of the spinning-wheel,  
And clothe ourselves at hand-looms of our own,  
As did our grandmothers. The very name  
Of 'strike' has so unwomanly a sound,  
If not inhuman, savoring of old feuds  
And savage conflicts ! If indeed there is  
Injustice, — if the rule of selfishness  
Must be, invariably, mill-owners' law,  
As the dissatisfied say, — if evermore  
The laborer's hire tends downward, then we all  
Must elsewhere turn ; for nobody should toil  
Just to add wealth to men already rich. | +  
Only a drudge will toil on, with no hope  
Widening from well-paid labor."

So Ruth thought  
And wrote to Esther. And of Isabel, —  
For Eleanor's anxious fears would not be hid,  
And Ruth had been close questioned, —

" Isabel.

Seemed never happier ; no, nor handsomer !  
She is so like the fragrant blush-rose buds  
That looked in from the garden, when the days

Were long in June, and I was at my book  
Or sewing in my favorite doorway-seat,  
My father still alive, and all things glad !  
I love her for her beauty, and she seems  
To bring back the lost perfume of my youth."

And Miriam Willoughby, let in to all  
The interests of these two, persuaded them,  
Now that her Ralph sent word, of new delays  
And complications not to be escaped,  
To be her guests awhile, and they explored  
Together the hill-country.

Lakes that held  
Great mountain-mysteries in their bosoms, stilled  
With wonder, or moved quietly at times  
With ripples as with thoughts, drew their charmed  
feet

To white, sequestered beaches. And sometimes  
A steady oarsman rowed them down the curves  
Of Bearcamp Water to Lake Ossipee,  
Whence they returned with spoil of autumn woods,  
With trailing streamers, orange, crimson, gold,  
Splashing the sombre shadows of the hills  
Gloomed in clear crystal ; and their little boat  
Laden with pine-cones for an evening fire,



Now often welcome, — and with curious flints,  
Stone-arrows, dropped by savage Pennacook  
Returning on his war-path by the lake,  
To the stronghold of Paugus, which they saw  
Rise like a dome among the farther hills.

And Miriam told them, sitting side by side  
On Ossipee's steep crags, the higher range  
Stretching in panorama east and west  
Beyond green Bearcamp Valley at their feet, —  
No lovelier was Tempe to the Greek, —  
Told them how once upon Pequawket's slope  
She lingered, as the summer sun went down,  
Her fellow-pilgrims vanishing from sight,  
Bounding like chamois up into the mists  
Of the veiled summit : all the world below,  
Path, mountain-forest, changed to one gray blank ;  
And she alone there in a vapor-rift,  
That left one lichened crag, one blasted tree  
Above her head, and one vast mountain-gap  
Brimmed with a cloudy sunset's awful red.  
That lurid gorge seemed widening vast and far  
As an eternity : it was like death,  
The silence, and the weight of weariness  
That bound her there, immovable ; — when, hark !

An accent almost human overhead, —  
Was it indeed a bird? —

“Here, heavenward!

O, here, traveller! heavenward!” —

It sounded as a voice might, dropped to earth  
By an ascending seraph. And she said,  
“Children, when people talk of nightingales  
And skylarks of Old England, you may say  
One songster haunts our mountain-solitudes  
Whose voice is like a spirit’s, never heard  
Except as floating from invisible height: —  
Though but a sparrow with a snowy throat,  
To me it was as if the mountain’s heart  
Uttered heaven’s invitation.

“Yet that night  
Was ghostly, more than heavenly; for we stayed  
Till dawn upon Pequawket’s hidden top,  
Hidden from eyes below, that only saw  
Our camp-fire as a star above the cloud.  
We to ourselves were shipwrecked mariners  
In a great sea of pallid mist, that surged  
And curled up to our feet. We stood on rocks  
Floating in vapor. Dim isles loomed around  
Out of the fog, an archipelago  
Of desolation. We were cast adrift

'Mid unsubstantial guesses of a world  
Such as old Chaos in his slumber shaped.  
And some one said, 'We are philosophers !  
Life is illusion : we and fogs are real.'  
And then another, — with him I agreed, —  
'Who climbs to isolation from mankind,  
There thinking to find wisdom, is a fool.'"

And then, by magic of her vivid words,  
She set their feet among the loftier hills  
Peopling the cloudy north. They heard the roar  
Of Ammonoosuc ; Fabyan's breezy horn,  
Wakening the mountain-echoes ; saw the trail  
Of Ethan Crawford's snow-shoes on the track  
Of catamount or bear ; and felt the slide  
Of the awful avalanche that swept away  
The Willey children out of summer sleep,  
Through agony of storm and flood, to death,  
Knelled by the midnight thunder.

Esther said :

"Better to stay away from those grim heights !  
Are not these lower hills more beautiful, —  
And grand enough, and terrible enough,  
When storms shake their foundations ?

"I have learned,

Watching him from the Sandwich upland-fields,  
To reverence Whiteface, like a patriarch  
Standing up, a head taller than his sons,  
Covering them with his mantle. We were housed  
At Summerfield Farm one rainy day, a blank  
Where once the mountains stood. O, how we longed  
To see their faces! All my losses came  
Back to me then. Life seemed a sterile plain,  
Here and hereafter. Eyes that have climbed steeps  
Learn to hate levels. We both sung for joy  
When back through a great sunburst came the hills!"

"How grand it was!" said Eleanor. "I have kept  
A picture of that mountain-burial  
And resurrection; though, Miss Willoughby,  
The lines are not my own; I cannot rhyme:—

He stood there, a shape Titanic  
In the midst of the shining range;  
Moment by moment his features  
Beamed with some wonderful change:

For the clouds came down out of heaven;  
With light he was robed and crowned,

Till glory exceeded glory  
On the gathering storm around.

They melted to mists of silver ;  
That slid like a winding-sheet,  
In swathings of shroud-like whiteness,  
From his forehead to his feet.

And then he was seen no longer ;  
With the sound of a sobbing rain  
The hills withdrew under blackness, —  
A mourning funeral-train.

And amid the vanished mountains  
We sat, through an autumn day,  
Remembering the trusted spirits  
Who had passed from sight away ;

And knew that their resurrection  
Would be but a veil let down  
To show them still in their places,  
Unchangeable, and our own ;

And knew that the living who love us,  
Love on, though the mists of doubt

---

May level our grand horizon,  
And beauty and joy shut out.

And knew — O comforting wonder! —  
That the mightiest Love of all,  
Perceived not, is round about us  
Like an everlasting wall.

So, amid invisible summits,  
We wrapped us in calms of thought.  
Faith lulled us to slumber; and morning  
To life the dead mountains brought.

X.

THE colors of the far hills came and went,  
Flushing to rosy purple through soft gray,  
As if they heard the voice of Elcanor  
And would reply. The gentle girl spoke on :  
“ I shall not have one memory of pain  
To carry hence. That mountain-range is now  
Woven, dyed into the texture of my mind ;  
And, standing at my loom, I shall behold  
Its changes making tapestry of the web  
My shuttle flies across, so beautiful !  
I scarce can call these hills by common names.  
They seem like human beings ; not dull earth.”

“ Earth under heavenly veils, transfigured earth,”  
Responded Miriam ; “ God’s great messengers,  
Prophets anointed, uttering His word.  
Draw near to sage or poet, he is man,  
Differing from others but in breadth and height,

---

And power of strange withdrawal into heaven  
To win refreshment for the common fields  
He lives in, which are life of his own life.  
Mountains *are* human, friendly, personal,  
And that is why we love them, — fear them, too ;  
For loftiest human nature holds untamed  
Caverns of isolation.”

“ I shall read  
My Wordsworth better now,” said Esther ; “ he,  
The poet of the mountains, whom I liked  
Least in his long Excursion, hitherto.  
It has its flowerless, barren stretches, like  
Any bleak mountain-road ; but the surprise  
Of sunlit peak or crag makes up for aught  
Tedious in either ; and along the way  
Echoes from the deep forests welcome us.”

Then Eleanor : “ I wish there were no rule  
Against our reading in the mills. Sometimes  
A line of poetry is such a lift  
From the monotonous clatter.”

“ To the praise  
Of mill-girls be the need of such a rule,”  
Said Miriam Willoughby. “ Far be the time  
When no one shall have reason to forbid



reading in ...

Fruit now desired. And yet I wonder much  
How you could be obedient."

Esther smiled :

" We are not ; we rebel ; at least, evade.  
Few girls but keep some volume hid away  
For stealthy reading. Some tear out the leaves  
Of an old Bible, and so get the whole ;  
For books, not leaves, are tabooed. Others paste  
The window-sills with poem, story, skotch :  
No one objects to papering bare walls.  
I have a memory-book well filled so. There 's  
The minstrel of the Merrimack, who sings  
For freedom, and is every toiler's friend :  
He walks our streets sometimes, and we all know  
His ' Yankee Girl,' ' Angel of Patience,' too.  
There 's Bryant's ' Thanatopsis,' ' Death of the Flowers,'  
Hood's ' Bridge of Sighs,' likewise his ' Song of the  
Shirt,'  
With Shelley's ' Skylark,' Coleridge's ' Mont Blanc.'  
These, and more waifs of lovely verse, I 've learned  
Between my window and my shuttle's flight.  
As well forbid us Yankee girls to breathe  
As read ; we cannot help it."

Eleanor smiled :

" One of your favorites, Esther, I 've recalled

Often, among these farms, — about a girl  
Who liked a farmer better than a fop, —  
And what girl would not? But this poem read  
As if the girl had looked down from some height  
On working-men, before. Miss Willoughby,  
Somehow it vexed our Isabel. And, to stir  
Her face into odd, nettled prettiness, —  
Pretty even when she's cross, Esther sometimes  
Would make her listen. Esther, say it now!"

✓  
**HER CHOICE.**

STRANGE, strange to herself it seemed for a moment's  
time, — no more, —  
As he turned to smile from his plough in sight of the  
cottage door,  
And she smiled back, and went in under the woodbine  
leaves,  
And sang at her work with the bird that wove a nest  
in the eaves.  
  
It was not the man of her dreams, out there in his  
coarse farm-frock,  
Sturdy and firm on the earth as a tree or a lichened  
rock,

With an eye sun-clear in its health, and a cheek red-  
bronzed with tan! —

No; that shadow shrank into mist, and fled from this  
living man.

She had shaped a pretty ideal, as a child might fash-  
ion a doll;

She had clothed him with such perfection as never  
Heaven let fall

On the shoulders of mortal wight; but slowly, one  
after one,

From her idol fluttered away the shreds by fantasy  
spun.

And what of him then was left? There seemed to  
scatter in air

An eyebrow's curve, a weak mouth with a delicate  
fringe of hair,

And a town-bred curl of contempt for the boors who till  
the land. —

She shuddered, to think how empty sometimes is a  
wedded hand!

Yet once she had pictured herself that pitiful strip-  
ling's bride;

Would have laid her heart on a shrine of a puppet  
doified!

---

For the first commands of the ten all maidens are prone  
to break,  
In bowing down to such gods as their own crude  
fancies make.

And this had been her first love ! To her forehead  
rushed a flame  
As memory taunted and laughed, —the blush of a  
matron's shame  
At her girlhood's shallowness. Ah ! the poets falsely  
sing  
That the loveliest blossoms of all are gathered in early  
spring.

Many a May-day past she had found under leafless  
trees  
A crowfoot, perhaps, or a tuft of pallid anemones ;  
Could these compare with the rose, grown shapely in  
summer's heat,  
Or the lily's late-brimmed cup, or the spice of the  
meadow-sweet ?

The high sun deepens the scent and color of slow-blown  
flowers ;  
Intense with the white warmth of heaven, glows earth,  
in her mid-noon hours.

The more life, richer the love, else life itself is a lie ;  
And aspiration and faith on the gusts of April die.

And — there the furrow he turned, — her husband,  
whose cheerful years  
Looked out of his eyes with a light that conquered her  
foolish fears  
Of the coming loneliness, when the world would be  
chill with rime ;  
Stanch friends and honest were he and his elder field-  
mate, Time.

And Time, laying by his scythe at their hearth, in the  
evenings long,  
Would read from his ancient scroll, would charm them  
with noble song.  
And life would mellow with love, and the future would  
open fair  
And grand, as the silver of age fell softly upon their  
hair.

For she had not wedded a clod, whose heart was earthy,  
of earth,  
Whose cattle and acres and crops were the measure of  
his worth.

---

He knew the ring of a truth, and the shape of a royal  
thought,  
And how at integrity's mint the wealth of a land is  
wrought.

He labored with mind and strength, and yet he could  
wisely rest ;  
He toiled for his daily bread, and ate it with whole-  
some zest  
At the world-wide human board, the brother and friend  
of all  
With whom he could share a hope, on whom let a  
blessing fall.

She had chosen a working-man ; never idler at heart  
was she ;  
And her possible fate had been the fate of a homesick  
bee  
In a butterfly's leash, driven on amid scentless and  
useless bloom, —  
What drudgery were not bliss to inanities of that doom ?

Woman's lot at the best is hard ; but hardest of all to  
share  
No growth into larger thought, no struggle, burden,  
or prayer.

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And again she caught his smile, and silently, proudly  
said :

“This man, with the love of my heart and the life of  
my soul, I wed.”

“A sensible choice ! But farm-life has two sides,”  
Said Miriam, “and the wife must share the worst.  
Woman’s toil is too hard here : she grows old  
Before her time. Life’s afternoon means rest :  
She cannot take it. This ought not to be.  
Labor is beautiful : but not too much ;  
For that kills beauty in the laborer.”

“But labor is not always beautiful.  
Too much that is distasteful we ’re compelled  
By circumstances. For our daily bread,  
We, who must earn it, have to suffocate  
The cry of conscience, sometimes.

“When I ’ve thought,  
Miss Willoughby, what soil the cotton-plant  
We weave, is rooted in, what waters it, —  
The blood of souls in bondage, — I have felt  
That I was sinning against light, to stay  
And turn the accursed fibre into cloth

For human wearing. I have hailed one name,  
 You know it — 'Garrison' — as a slave might hail  
 His soul's deliverer. Am not I enslaved  
 In finishing what slavery has begun?"

"And I, dear Esther Hale, in wearing cloth  
 So rooted, and so woven, am as wrong  
 As you are. We all share the nation's sin.  
 The time may come, when with our dearest blood  
 This blood must be repaid."

"Some other work,"

Said Esther, "many times I've meant to try:  
 Housework, for instance: but I could not earn  
 In that way, aught for others; nor could have  
 My first wish answered — freedom for my books,  
 Freedom of my own movements. Every one,  
 Not wife or daughter, in a land like ours,  
 Who does much thinking, must prefer to be  
 Mistress of her own plans; no housemaid can."

"No housemaid, Esther, but the old-time 'help,'—  
 In our Republic, service means just that,  
 And all house-masters and house-mistresses  
 Should hold to that idea, — 'help,' that came  
 Into a family of ample wealth



And not luxurious tastes, or into one  
Less favored, bringing kindness, conscience, strength,  
Would be given leisure, would find sympathy,  
Also abundant freedom. This has been, —  
May be once more—in the millennium !”

The theme drew on their thoughts, and as they talked  
They were descending, plucking here and there  
A lady-fern, an everlasting-flower,  
Or stopping where a rock invited them  
To rest, and watch the changes of the hills.  
And now they passed into a grove of pines,  
Through which the winds wore singing.

Up the road

Came Minta and the Wizard. Seeing them,  
She left the weary roadster tied, and drew  
Into their covert.

“ Esther, by your looks,  
There’s preaching or exhorting going on,  
And I need talking to. What is it, pray ?”

“ We spoke of work,” said Esther.

“ Oh ! of work !

I’m wiser on that subject than you all, —  
A farmer’s daughter, taught to cook and churn

As soon as I could toddle. But, indeed,  
 I came to agitate this very theme, —  
 What labor I 'm best fit for. I 'm possessed  
 By some old Indian's restless ghost, I think.  
 I long for — what I know not! — to strike out  
 For something new, — to learn what's in me. Work?  
 As well as quit living as quit work, and yet  
 Heads like to be employed, as well as hands;  
 Is there no way to give each a fair chance?"

"Why, yes," said Miriam. "Have you never heard  
 Of the Brook Farm experiment, now being tried?  
 A well-born friend of mine was there, for weeks,  
 Doing her share of menial work, to give  
 Others free hours for study: and she learned,  
 In that community, to reverence hands  
 Hardened by useful toil, no less than brows  
 Bent with the weight of thought."

"But there's no home

For any one, in everybody's home;  
 And home's the very best of selfish things  
 In all this selfish world," said Eleanor.  
 "'In families He sots the solitary';  
 'In phalansteries,' Fourier would say.

Esther, and our one little room, is more  
To me than ten Brook Farms."

"And, on the whole,  
Miss Willoughby, I'd rather struggle on,  
And puzzle out my problem by myself,"  
Said Minta; "'t is the simplest thing to do;  
I will ask no man's help or blessing. Laugh!  
And laugh you will; but I am bound to be  
A scholar or a writer, if I can!"

Frowning and smiling in her earnestness,  
Fresh from defying Solon the Unwise,  
Minta went on:

"If I had but your gifts,  
Esther! — for do you know, Miss Willoughby,  
She studies History, and German, too,  
And Moral Science, somehow, between work;  
And — do not mind her threatening shake of head —  
She can write prose and poetry; I've seen both  
In the 'Offering,' — you know the magazine  
That the girls publish. Esther, I won't tell  
Whether you're 'Blanche' or 'Stella'!

"Evening schools .  
We have, Miss Willoughby, and I have known

Girls to keep up with their Academy class  
By studying on, while earning at the mills  
Their graduating dresses ; why not I ?  
I might, perhaps, go to Mount Holyoke School  
And work my way through, by and by. We have  
Our evenings, seven to ten, — that 's three hours  
clear,

For study. And you know a spinner's work,  
Esther, is not the kind that pins one close  
As yours, a weaver's. There are hours and hours,  
When the warp spins well, I just sit and think,  
And do sums in my head, build air-castles,  
Or take the world to pieces ; and I might  
Learn the whole algebra and geometry  
By snatches, so ; and puzzle through the rules  
Of Latin Grammar. Now Ruth Woodburn 's there,  
Who 'd ask a better teacher ?

“ I 'vo a plan,

Esther ! Do you and she set up a school,  
And take me in, and Eleanor, to assist.  
She can do beautiful fine sewing ; girls  
Ought to be proud to learn of her. And I  
Will run the home-department, make the bread,  
And teach girls how. We 'll have all ages in,  
And show the elder, while they 're growing up,

---

How to be mothers to the younger. Why,  
Esther, I more than half believe I've found  
Old Archimedes' secret! Only now  
Give me a money-lever, and I'll move  
The world into a new thought about girls  
And schools to train them in.

“Alas! alas!

Instead of money, because names are cheap,  
Our parents give us country girls grand names:  
Mine, now, is Araminta Summerfield,  
Written out, full? But in this school of ours,  
We'll work up to our names or over them.  
My hands in dough, my thoughts upon my books,  
I'll come out with you wise ones, in the end.”

And Miriam, listening, though amused, was moved  
By thoughts new-wakened. On the working-side  
She had not stood, with working-girls, before.  
She asked herself if she, in girlhood's dawn,  
Would have striven through such hindrances, if she  
Would not have yielded to despair, and drudged,  
And only drudged, her daily fourteen hours, —  
Their work-day's length, nor ever touched a book,  
Or nursed an aspiration.

Miriam shared

With all New-Englanders an honest pride  
In the provincial energy and sense ;  
But this was waste, — this woman-faculty  
Tied to machinery, part of the machine  
That wove cloth, when it might be clothing hearts  
And minds with qucenly raiment. She foresaw  
The time must come when mind itself would yield  
To the machine, or leave the work to hands  
Which were hands only.

Just to think of it !

Minta, so full of health, ability,  
And right aspirings ; Esther, whom she felt  
At least an intellectual equal ; and —  
This most unfit of all — sweet Eleanor,  
A flower of delicate birth and saintly-pure ; —  
These counted but as “ hands ! ” named such !

No ! no !

It must not be at all ; or else their toil  
Must be made easier, larger its roward !  
These girls, too, from their talk, were not so far  
Above the rest. Here was a problem, then,  
For the political theorist : how to save  
Mind from machinery's clutches. And, meanwhile,  
She would help out of their entanglements,  
Into such freedom as she could, these girls.

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Jogging on with the white horse, by this time  
 They reached the Inn. Strangers about the door  
 Were loitering as they entered. "Can it be!"  
 Eleanor whispered. "It is Doctor Mann!"  
 He grasped her hand. "Now," Minta said, aside,  
 To Esther, roguishly, "I'll only take  
 You home with me, although I came for both."  
 But Miriam overheard, just bringing up  
 Another new-arrived, her nephew Ralph.  
 "Not one goes back to-night! Wizard and all  
 Must stay; to-morrow will be time enough,  
 And better time than this."

She had her way,

Esther demurring, for to her it seemed  
 As if Fate's messenger had surely come,  
 Shaped as a young physician, to bear off  
 Her more than sister, Eleanor. Shutting back  
 Her jealous thoughts, she joined the company  
 Around the maple-blaze on the wide hearth,  
 And heard these guests retrace their journeyings.

The young physician had been following up  
 The Pemigewassot's windings, and had seen  
 A sunrise from the fields of Bethlehem,  
 A sunset on the Saco meadows; while

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The stranger, Ralph, had travelled from the east  
Among gigantic mountain-majesties  
Skirting the Androscoggin. They had met  
Under Moat Mountain's shadow ; had grown friends  
Tossing together in the stage-coach, through  
Oak-barren sands, from Conway to the Inn ;  
And, like two meeting streams, they seemed to bring  
Freshness of unimagined distances  
About the little group, where laughter rose,  
Rippled, and billowed, only eddying down  
At some long repetition of the hour  
From the old timepiece underneath the stairs.  
Hearing which warning, one by one dropped out,  
Till Miriam and her nephew Ralph were left  
Alone beside the smouldering ember-glow.



XI.

Up through the morning mist a horseman came,  
Before the guests were stirring at the Inn,  
Save Minta, who ran down the hill to meet  
Her brother, recognized far off.

“See here!

A letter! 't is for Esther, marked ‘In haste!’  
I hurried over with it.”

Haste, indeed!

It was Ruth's hand, and but a word or two:  
“Esther, come back! on Isabel's account.  
Leave Eleanor with Minta, if you can!”  
No more. But Esther felt a heavy weight  
Of fear condensed therein, and told her dread  
To Miriam Willoughby, while yet asleep  
Lay Eleanor. “Leave her here with me,” she said,  
“And go with Minta and her brother. I  
Will soften your departure. Dear! I love  
Eleanor well as you do.”

With a pang  
Of inward protest, Esther heard, but thanked  
Her friend, and turned away. And ere the sun  
Had passed meridian, Clement Summerfield  
Stood with her at the lake-side, where the boat,  
Puffing and panting, waited. Passengers  
Were crossing to the deck. Farewells were said.  
Esther, absorbed and lonely, stepped on board,  
When some one called her name.

“Why, Doctor Mann!

I thought you meant to stay awhile. I thought,  
With Eleanor there —”

What was she speaking of?

She stopped herself, and added: “Eleanor  
I had to leave behind; and so was glad —  
She is so delicate — that you would stay;  
Her friend, and a physician.”

“But indeed

She sent me word — she had not left her room  
When the coach started — to look after you,  
As you might need my help. I pray you then,  
If trouble should be,” — and her anxious face  
Revealed its presence plainly, — “take my aid,  
Just as you would a brother’s.”

“And I will,”

Responded Esther, for a brother's name  
Was dearer than all others to her dreams ;  
And then, if Eleanor cared for Doctor Mann,  
As he for her, as everybody must —  
To know her was to love her — by and by,  
Perhaps — but there she broke her musings off  
At her companion's voice, recalling her  
To the fair vision of receding hills,  
Now known as friends. She named them, one by  
    one,  
Black Mountain, Whiteface, Passaconaway ;  
And their snow patches seemed like kerchiefs waved  
After her from afar. Chocorua,  
Bending his crown of pearl, almost drew tears  
Into her eyes : " He guards my Eleanor,"  
Her heart said, with a grateful homesickness.

No railway-whistle then its discords mixed  
With echoes of the hills ; and they must wait  
The morning stage-coach. Esther would have given  
Worlds for the legendary tapestry  
Of the Arabian Nights, to travel on  
Without delay ; and grudged the lovely hours  
Of harvest-moonlight on the tinted woods  
And dark pine-islands ; the blue, rippling lake

Seemed whispering low forebodings and regrets ;  
And she was glad, upon the morrow morn,  
Of every lumbering jolt that hurried her  
On through her journey.

Wayside travellers

Dropped in and out again ; among them, two  
Who roused her from her anxious reveries, —  
A prettily dressed girl, with wandering eyes,  
And movements of the studied picturesque,  
Followed by an unwilling squire, who bore  
Shawls and umbrellas, and appealing looks,  
Petulant or pathetic, with the same  
Tired, uninterested air. “Bride or betrothed,”  
Thought Esther, “she is baggage all the same,  
Which he would gladly drop.” The stranger talked  
With Doctor Mann, talked well. The beauty sat  
Pouting beside him, trying now and then  
To attract both from dull topics to herself,  
Sometimes successfully ; then her eyes shone  
Through all their shallows ; voluble nonsense poured  
From her bright lips, while her companion blushed.

They left the coach, and Esther heard her say,  
In tones most unendearing, “Ambrose, dear !”  
Thinking herself unheard. The name flashed back

Ruth's story on her memory. This was he  
Through whose desertion shipwreck had wellnigh  
Come to her friend! She almost pitied him,  
False as he was. With that vexatious bark  
Always in tow, what harbor could he gain?  
Were this indeed his bride, Ruth was avenged  
In his ridiculously hopeless fate.

At last the travellers heard the river rush  
Over the rocks at Amoskeag; and close  
Winding along the widening Merrimack,  
As the coach rumbled on, the Doctor told  
Strange Western stories. Prairie-grasses waved,  
And great lakes glistened through his talk; mounds  
    rose,  
Wondrous with handiwork of tribes unknown:  
The fading trail of tawny races died  
Along the Mississippi's turbid sweep,  
And over white sierras, into haze  
Of the Pacific. New horizons grew  
On Esther's thought, and almost a surprise  
Came to her, in the line of factory-lights  
Shimmering up from the river to the stars,  
Lengths of reflected jewels.

At the door

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Opening familiar in the long brick row,  
Ruth met her, smileless.

“Where is Isabel?”

“O Esther, hush! I know not.”

Doctor Mann

Saw fear dissolve in anguish on the face  
Of Esther Hale, and hastened, without pause,  
To Pastor Alwyn.

Meanwhile, everything

Ruth had to tell was of the Monday past,  
When Isabel, for a headache, left her work,  
And never had returned; had taken all  
Her little wardrobe, too.

Looking far back,

The two girls called up memories now, which meant  
Much pain, as fear translated them; and blame  
Took Esther to herself for hints let slip:  
And, self-reproved for all the happy days  
Spent out of sight of Isabel, she said,  
“Whoever dares to entertain a joy  
Does it at risk of letting sorrow in,  
And a whole rabble of regrets. My fault  
It is, my fault! my poor lost Isabel!  
I should have stayed with her, and I must go  
To the ends of the earth to find her.”

Now there came

A timid rap ; two little girls peeped in :  
" We saw her go, — that pretty Isabel, —  
We saw her in a chaise ; a gentleman  
Was driving fast. 'T was up the Boston road,  
Where they are building the great railway-arch ;  
And Ann and I were gathering ferns and leaves  
To trim the grammar-school room, where we've been  
All summer, for examination-day.  
The gentleman got out to fix the reins  
And then drove off quick ; but he dropped this card."  
And Alice laid in Esther's hand the name  
Of Rodney Willoughby.

" Why, Ruth ! why, Ruth !

The very name of our dear lady-friend  
Up under Ossipee Mountains, where I left  
Our Eleanor ! Scarcely could kin of hers  
A villain be ; but this may prove a clew."

The little messengers had slipped away,  
And now came Pastor Alwyn.

All being told,

He said : " Take heart ! Give me this card, and soon  
Tidings will come to you. Do not despair  
Of her who wanders ! followed by our prayers,

And by the All-Loving Heart, she must be saved " :—  
Divulging not who waited to depart  
In quest of Isabel.

The sleepless night  
Passed by at last, and Esther said to Ruth :  
"To stay here is impossible ; I must track  
Isabel's footsteps. While a penny lasts  
I 'll spend it looking for her. 'T is the fault  
Of my self-confidence, if she has strayed.  
I never thought a girl could be beguiled  
Easily as men say. Beauty like hers  
Is its own dreadful snare, I learn too late.  
No! not too late! It shall not be too late!"

Before the day closed Esther found herself  
Sheltered in Boston, underneath the roof  
Of a kind work-mate's mother, an old house  
Which had seen better days, though now reduced  
To a cheap lodging-place for sewing-girls,  
Shop-tenders, tailoresses, milliners ;—  
A tall, quaint building of Colonial date,  
Upon the western slope of Beacon Hill,  
In an irregular street, where clean-patched clothes  
And stiff brocades found jostling neighborhood.



The chat of the house-inmates wearied much  
The soul of Esther, — idle prattle, all  
Of fashions, scandal, good looks, stylish beaux :  
She wondered at it greatly ; used, herself,  
To talk that held some meaning. Could it be  
That much toil on the outside shows of things  
Deadened the deeper faculties ? Her room  
Became the refuge of her restless heart,  
High in the attic-eaves, whence she could look  
Over the city ; and, in wakefulness,  
She watched the twinkling lights that went and came,  
Blooming and fading out like golden flowers  
In gardens of the Night. Souls of her dead,  
Mother, friends, sisters, in that starry hush  
Appeared, and disappeared, and reappeared  
Through memory's dusk. The mystery of Death  
Had approached Esther in her earliest years.  
Familiar with his lincaments undefined,  
Ever a friendly Awe seemed waiting near,  
Under whose shadowy cloak her best-beloved  
Were shielded from earth's harm.

Extinguished light,

She could not think one heart's love had become  
Which had enkindled steady flame in hers,  
Flame that illumed the untrodden wilderness

Of the Unknown, the vast Beyond of life.  
This was her heart's unburdening in such hours :—

✓  
THE CITY LIGHTS.

UNDERNEATH the stars the houses are awake ;  
Upward comes no sound my silent watch to break.  
Night has hid the street, with all its motley sights ;  
Miles around, afar, shine out the city lights.

Stars that softly glimmer in a lower sky,  
Dearer than the glories unexplored on high ;  
Home-stars, that, like eyes, are glistening through the  
dark,  
With a human tremor wavers every spark.

Glittering lamps above and twinkling lamps below ;  
The remote, strange splendor, the familiar glow, —  
One Eye, looking downward from creation's dome,  
Sees in both his children's window-lights of home.

Who have dwellings there, in avenues of space ?  
Whose clear torches kindle through the vague sky-  
place ?

Are they holding tapers, us, astray, to guide, —  
Spirit-pioneers, who lately left our side ?

Never drops an answer from those worlds unknown.  
Yet no ray is shining for itself alone.  
Hints of Heaven gleam upward, through our earthly  
    nights ;  
Tremulous with pathos are the city lights : —

Tremulous with pathos of a half-told tale :  
Though therein hope flickers, burning low and pale,  
It shall win completeness perfect as the sun :  
Broken rays shall mingle, earth and heaven be one.

But every hour of daylight Esther spent  
Searching hotel-books and stage-offices ;  
Met, oftentimes, by insult or rebuff :  
She cared not. And through streets unfrequented  
By maid or matron, she went, sorrowful,  
Undaunted by coarse look or muttered sneer  
Of masculine unmanliness. She saw  
Vanishing in blind alleys, through dim doors,  
Faces that thrilled her with a horrible hint  
Of likeness to the wanderer. Womanhood,

Sunk to its lowest, scoffed at the pure eyes  
Looking with questioning pity into theirs ;  
For the dark secret of their straying still  
Bewildered Esther, and the atmosphere  
Poisoned her, with its stench of unclean souls.  
Daily her heart grew humbler, at the sight  
Of misery and despair ; her ignorance  
Of life's bad possibilities appalled her. "This,  
This is the second death !" she said, "and these  
Are spirits in prison ! What deeper hell can be ?"

O, what relief, after a day like this,  
To snatch from one hour's sleep a heavenly dream  
Of the clear mountain-heights and Eleanor !

And one day, watching an arriving coach  
With anxious eagerness, lo ! Eleanor !  
And Miriam Willoughby, and a man, — yes, Ralph,  
Lifting out Eleanor ! The face beloved  
Was paler than its wont. With words of joy  
Broken by sobbing questions, Esther caught  
Her darling's hand.

"Esther, control yourself !"  
Said Miriam, gently. Strange that such reproof  
Esther, the staid, sedate, should need ! Her will

Had borne her over-wearied heart too long,  
Which cried out, as a babe a nurse lets fall.  
"Esther, control yourself! for she is ill,  
Our Eleanor. Here must we rest to-night.  
Stay with us! We have much to tell and hear!"

But Esther, entering, glanced back, and saw  
A beckoning eye. "Miss, if you please!" one said,  
In tones respectful, reaching out to her  
A paper slip. "News of the wanderer;  
Good news!" — no more; in handwriting unknown.

Back Esther's self-reliance surged. She kissed  
Eleanor, resting in a quiet room;  
Promised Miss Willoughby to come to her  
To-morrow, in her quiet country-seat,  
Westward, beyond the Charles, and then returned  
To her own lodging. A note waited her  
In the same unknown hand. "In such a street,  
At such a number, look for her you seek."

She found the place, well kept, respectable,  
A dining-room with girl-attendants. She,  
Seating herself, yet veiled, saw one approach,  
Let her come close, then took her hand, and said,

"Isabel!" softly. Isabel would have fled,  
But that a warm grasp held her, close as heaven's;  
She dropped into a chair, pale, still as death.

Esther said, "Isabel, come! go home with me!"  
She whispered back, "But you must hear me,  
first."

And, asking leave, withdrew with her. The two  
Paced the long gravel-paths beneath the elms  
Of Boston Common, while the gold leaves blew  
About them, in the chilly sunset-light.

Isabel's sorrow, her pent-up remorse,  
Burst through its flood-gates now.

"I've been a fool

— Esther, a fool! unworthy of such love  
As yours, — yet not so wicked as I seem;  
Though I deceived you, and deceived the man  
Who has forsaken me. We never met  
Except on Sundays, between services;  
Never but once, last April, by the Falls  
He passed me, following some friends of his;  
But loitered with his silly flatteries  
Till Eleanor came in sight. Those Sunday noons  
You used to think me lingering with the girls,

I walked with him, but never let him come  
Near the mills with me. Telling half the truth,  
I wove romances for him. He believed  
I was an orphan seamstress, who was born  
To wealth and luxury. Of my factory life  
I never hinted, thinking by and by  
To be his lady-bride, and, far away,  
Lose every memory of my working days.

“ I thought I loved him ; and he said enough  
Of loving me at first sight, and all that,  
To turn my silly head ; then suddenly,  
In a five-minutes' talk, the Sunday noon  
Before I came away, said all was planned :  
We to be wedded the next day ; his ship  
To sail on Tuesday ; business hurrying him  
Out of the country. On his grand estates  
I should live like a princess. Time to think  
He would not give me. Here we drove, post-haste.  
He left me, on arriving at an inn,  
Bonneted, waiting his return. Since then  
I have not seen him. That some accident  
Kept him, I feared. But the landlady laughed  
At such a hint, with knowing looks. My tears  
Awoke her pity, and she found me work.

It was so dreadful, that uncertainty,  
Waiting for him I trusted, all whose words  
Had sounded honorable, — left alone  
And penniless, — life looked so black with fears !  
Yet I must live, — I would earn honest bread ;  
I begged for any drudgery.

“ Back to you  
I was ashamed to come. But O the hard,  
The hideous whispers men and women, too,  
Have made me listen to, have meant for me !  
I have risked my good name ! What shall I do ?  
You all must hate me ! Eleanor I 've killed,  
Perhaps. I wish I could but kill myself ! —  
And yet, except in wanderings of my heart,  
I am an innocent girl.”

It was not strange  
That, next day, under Miriam Willoughby's roof  
Isabel found a refuge. It was like  
Her Christian, womanly heart, — this Miriam,  
Who called not anything she had her own,  
Not even the stones of her ancestral hearth,  
That echoed proud traditions. Human need,  
With her, drowned out aristocratic claims,  
And under her calm, helpful eyes, these girls  
Sat down to look new futures in the face.



She was not spared her pang. A message came  
From Ralph, returned to business. "Dearest aunt,  
Rodney has disappeared. Embezzlements  
Are known. They must be his. He has escaped  
Arrest, and I shall cover his disgrace  
By payment. Doubtless he has crossed the sea."

The criminal was her nephew! All the more  
Would Miriam shield the girl whom he had left  
Exposed to ruin. Yet she could but feel  
How the great body of humanity  
Shares every member's stain. One loss  
The misery, meanness, and disease! One hope  
Breaking through heavenly vistas on mankind!

Isabel's hands were deft, and work for them  
Found Miriam; kept her at white sewing-work  
By Eleanor's bedside, who had rallied now,  
Though restless with the wanderer out of sight;  
So restless, Isabel said, through tears and smiles, —

"You are severe with me as Sister Sterne, —  
The blessed, cross old thing! Upon my knees  
I'd fall before her, if I could! I know  
She always meant my good. You both are saints,

Though so unlike ; saintly antipodes.  
O Eleanor, I laugh, when I should weep !  
But will you never trust me, never more ?”

For Isabel would not stray again. Her life  
Bared now its firm foundations, overgrown  
Before with falsehoods, that she pruned away  
As she perceived them ; and so beautiful  
She grew, self-conquering, strangers, seeing her,  
Wondered about her, as at fairy tales.

But Isabel now beheld not her own face  
With any pleasure. From her glass a ghost,  
Refusing to be laid, looked out at her  
With her own eyes, — such as hers might have been,  
Hope’s light extinguished, pure tears burned away.  
If Rodney Willoughby had truly meant  
What he had promised, she had walked ashamed  
Beside him, as a banished felon’s wife,  
Arrayed in thiovery’s spoil. With that vile fate  
Compared, a menial’s lot were Paradise.

Esther watched Eleanor’s pale loveliness,  
And marvelled at it, too. If Doctor Mann  
Could see her now ! Thinking of him, she said :  
“ Once, Eleanor, I liked not this your friend.

He seemed to patronize us working-girls,  
As some strange, pitiable phenomena, —  
*Lusus naturæ* to all well-bred folk.

But either I mistook him, or he found  
Himself mistaken ; for more deferent  
Or manlier courtesy never have I met,  
Nor wiser thinking listened to than his.  
On your account I should dislike him still,  
For I believe he loves you. But I've grown  
Magnanimous. God bless him !”

A strange look,

A far-off smile, came into Eleanor's eyes :  
“ Esther, — yes, he is good. But do you know,  
I have a lovely secret of my own,  
And I shall wed another. By and by  
I 'll tell you all about it.”

That same night  
Came the young Doctor, with kind messages  
From Pastor Alwyn ; spent a brief half-hour  
In low, calm talk with Eleanor alone, —  
For Eleanor loved him with a cousinly trust,  
And she to him was like own kith and kin ;  
Truly his cousin, by a few removes, —  
Then asked for Esther Hale.

The house was hushed

When he departed ; not so Esther's heart,  
Astonished at itself and at his words,  
Disturbed with a new presence, hopes and fears  
Never before admitted. All the while  
It had been Esther his soul bowed before, —  
Her warm heart, her illumining intellect,  
Her charity, blent with stainless rectitude ;  
He felt himself grow manlier, loving her.

And in their short acquaintance she had seen  
Great depths of an unconscious nobleness  
Glimpsed by his words and actions. He it was  
Who found out Isabel, Esther kept in sight,  
Plunging into foul places for a pearl  
Counted as lost.

If now he sought to join  
This strong, pure woman's heart to his, to go  
Through the sick world beside her, carrying health  
And hope, as in an overflowing cup, —  
The cup of love the hands of two hold, —  
What then ? and why not so ?

But Esther stood  
Dismayed at revelations of herself,  
Weak where she had seemed strong, and shrinking back

From visions that reality might spoil.  
Disloyalty to Eleanor? to her own  
Half-builde plans and purposes? No, no!  
She could not choose her own lot. God knew best!  
And with this prayer at last she closed her eyes:—

A PRAYER is in my thoughts to-night  
I hardly dare to say:  
“Lord, put my wishes all to flight,  
Nor let me have my way!”

I dare not say it, Lord, for fear  
My heart I may mistake;  
So many earthly things are dear,  
Perhaps, for earth's own sake.

Nor can I think that thou art glad  
In life despoiled of bloom,  
Since for all joy the worlds have had  
Thyself hast opened room.

And yet the poison-plant, so fair,  
So like the wholesome grows,  
To pluck my flower I will not dare,  
But trust His hand who knows.

And this, indeed, is life's best thing :  
To take sweet gifts from thee.  
If thou some dark, sealed bud shouldst bring,  
It must hold light for me.

In sadness I withheld my prayer,  
Hid under trembling fear ;  
In praise it blossoms, unaware,  
Because the sun is near.

My heart thou wilt not crush or chill.  
"Lead into thine my way !  
Through all my wishes breathe thy will !"  
This prayer to-night I say.

XII.

AN autumn day beside the Merrimack,  
Deepening its color betwixt rocky steeps  
Dyed rich with crimson oak and purple ash,  
And stray flakes of the maple's airier red ;  
With clouds of asters on the turf, and flames  
Of golden-rod just fading out above,  
Against cool rocks and sky. Below, three girls  
Upon a knoll reclining. Two were fair ;  
And all three faces frank and lovable.

Far up the bank a merry picnic-group,  
In story-telling, sports, and songs, forgot  
Absence of these three, — Esther, Minta, Ruth.  
Together once more for a little while,  
They talked as girls do, by themselves ; and turned  
Thoughts, wishes, troubles, inside out. Each laughed  
At each, — sweet, loving laughter ; now and then  
Almost pathetic, for it held farewells.

---

Changes had come. Hope's pretty cob-houses  
Fate had demolished ; Minta so complained.  
That Esther Hale should form a partnership  
With Doctor Archibald Mann, and emigrate,  
As now seemed likely, — that was hard to bear ;  
But Ruth to leave her also, — 't was too much !

Where was Ruth going ? A rich lady friend  
Of Miriam Willoughby's, soon to cross the sea  
With growing daughters, for long residence,  
A teacher sought ; and Eleanor made Ruth known,  
Her gifts and her acquirements ; these were all  
The lady asked, who gladly gave, in turn,  
Thrice the mill-fces. The one enthusiasm  
Of Ruth was study of the Old-World ways,  
Languages, histories. She surprised herself  
With eager, girlish freshness of delight  
She never had expected. Lives like hers  
Get cheated out of youth sometimes ; but now  
Minta seemed scarcely younger : and indeed,  
Minta was grave to-day ; though, for all that,  
Her eyes laughed — they did always — while she drew  
Pictures of Esther as the Doctor's wife  
Visiting ague-patients at his side  
Out in the unknown Somewhere of the West :—



"You, firmest old maid of us all! Just think!  
You, who have painted single blessedness  
So bright, you drew us into league with you  
Against mankind and for our liberties;  
O Esther, you, of all girls!

"And you, Ruth,  
Whom I had counted on to teach me all  
I want to know, and more, — you must steer off  
Among your countesses and duchesses,  
And by and by be one yourself, perhaps;  
For stranger things have happened. There's a girl  
I used to know, who went to Mexico  
When cotton-mills were built there, and is now  
Wife of some ruling officer, and at home  
In halls of the Montezumas. That sounds grand,  
Although she may not be so comfortable  
As in a well-chinked log-house."

"O," said Ruth,  
"I take my democratic heart with me,  
And mean to bring it back, whole. Rather, far,  
I'd weave cloth here my life long, than lose that!  
Woman can climb no higher than womanhood,  
Whatever be her title."

"I confess,"  
Said Esther, "disappointment at myself,

---

Dear Minta, — for I meant to honor it,  
 Blessed old-maidhood ! as my chosen lot.  
 We do not choose ; our way is all mapped out  
 By the unknown Wisdom ! No one more surprised  
 Than I, at my own present happiness !  
 I never dreamed of aught so beautiful  
 As life looks now before me.

“ The old maid,  
 Who makes the name disgrace, you cannot be,  
 Minta, with all your deep unselfishness,  
 Your glad health, bounding fancy, and light heart.  
 I think the sweetest women I have known  
 Have lived on single, happy to the end,  
 And happiness-creators.”

“ I ’m consoled ! ”

Laughed Minta, “ and accept the inevitable  
 With a good grace, since worse was possible, —  
 You know I might have married Solon Dale !  
 Now hearken to my plans and theories !  
 I mean to learn ; and then I mean to teach  
 Girls to be thorough women, wives or maids.  
 Health of soul, mind, and body, but without  
 Self-coddling, shall be first ; and after that,  
 All wisdom, all accomplishments desired.  
 It is my firm faith that the alphabet

Was meant for woman's use as much as man's.  
Devotion to it no more injures her  
Than sacrifice at stove-and-kitchen shrines,  
Or bowing down before the deity  
Enthroned on ruffles, plumes, and furbelows.  
Neat dress is good, and so is housewifery ;  
But there is something in the spelling-book  
More valuable than either. Human beings  
God made us, then he added womanhood ;  
And never does he add to mar his work  
Or lower its greatness. An intelligence  
Is woman, or a failure."

"Even so !"

Said Ruth ; "and presently I shall return  
And in your school take my professorship,  
Unless a wiser Solon finds you out,  
And you slip off, as Esther has."

"Dear girls,"

Joined Esther, "bright have been our working-days  
Together ; and yet happier times will be  
Than all our happiest here. Yes, by and by,  
When Ruth returns, you both must come to me,  
And at my Western fireside we will read  
Our life's continued story.

"Eleanor, too.

---

What think you? Is it possible that she  
And Ralph should love each other? Just a hint  
She dropped once, before ever Archibald Mann  
Was anything to me more than to her.  
And Isabel, — I want her so with me  
In my new home! but Miriam Willoughby  
Claims her, claims both of them.

“The fairy prince

She used to laugh about may find her yet,  
Ere Miriam thinks of it; may come disguised  
Like a young carpenter I've lately seen  
Working at Willoughby Place. I've watched his  
look

When she has passed; a timid, earnest gaze,  
I've learned to understand. But Isabel  
Will not too easily trust any man,  
After the dangerous risk she ran with one.  
Still, when I overheard her hum these words  
The other day, they seemed significant:—

WHAT trade shall with his compete?  
What honor can earth confer  
Like this, — to be found at the feet  
Of the Son of the carpenter?

Around hammer and chisel, the hand  
Of Christ leaves a halo grand.

"O Esther ! Ruth !" cried Minta ; "after all,  
'T is work we love, and work we long to do ;  
But always better work, and better still :  
Is not that right ambition ? The good God,  
Letting us labor, makes us like himself, —  
Creator, glad in his accomplished work,  
Ever beginning, perfect evermore !"

"If we could work like Him !" said Ruth. "We hold  
Our single thread, and that one broken thread  
Can make such mischief with the web ! I've seen  
One thread drop down through the long films of warp  
Winding themselves around the dresser's beam,  
And catch, and tangle, and make such a snarl  
As hours could not undo. And after all  
Mending attempted, with the woof filled in,  
'T was marked 'Imperfect' ; doomed to some cheap  
use."

Then Minta : "And the spinner of that thread, —  
I might have been the one, — careless of oil,  
Or band, or spindle, was responsible ;

---

Not you who dressed, or she who wove. So back  
To their beginnings good and evil go,  
One wretched blunder spoiling a whole life ;  
And yet — we all are blunderers.”

“Not quite all ;

At least, not so to me. Though some pick flaws  
In Pastor Alwyn, through him we have learned  
That ‘minister’ is no unmeaning word.  
His character and sermons harmonize,  
So winning us to sympathy with truth,  
We are led unaware, and all as one,  
✓ In search of it. And Miriam Willoughby,  
The busiest weaver of us all, — our lives  
Have gathered strength beneath her touch ; and yet  
I’ve heard her styled ‘lofty aristocrat,’  
Because of her fine manners,” Esther said.

“And that is what I call vulgarity,”  
Cried Minta ; “not to know the genuine ring,  
Or glimmer of pure gold from counterfeit.  
True ladies are true women, poor or rich ;  
Yet human nature needs to be refined,  
Like gold and silver.”

“Girls, dear girls,” said Ruth,

“You guess not what good work you’ve done for me,

Since I have known you! Sentimental, weak,  
A baby crying for lost playthings, I  
Seem to myself to have been; to say 'am'  
I can refuse with honesty, thank Heaven  
And you! I've seen you sacrifice so much  
For others, — seen you full of cheerfulness  
When I could only mope, I've been ashamed  
Before you, in my thoughts. Why, how absurd  
To think, one moment, that a human soul  
Was set here just to gratify itself,  
However innocently! There's no loss  
For any one of us. God takes away  
The things we do not need, and fills our hands  
With useful implements, bidding us work out  
Our own salvation, and our neighbor's, too;  
And nothing else is living."

And Ruth's voice  
Died softly into reverie, while her heart  
Kept time to this inaudible undertone:—

✓ No burden ever had I  
That I would not have had,  
Though times there were when I thought never again  
To look up to Heaven and be glad.

---

For, groaning and struggling on  
With the throngs that laden go,  
I saw, by the pack on my neighbor's back,  
That mine was the lighter woe.

Unladen, heedless, unbent,  
I never had known  
That the fardel borne by each wight forlorn  
Held something that was my own, —  
Something he bore for me  
With a patient ignorance,  
While my footsteps lay as a blur on his way,  
And hindered his soul's advance.

Just it was that on me  
Some sorrow should fall ;  
No trouble alone is the trouble of one,  
But each has a share in all.  
And if on my aching neck  
Another his burden laid,  
Strength given for his day then he threw away,  
Wherewith I was stronger made.

I know that we are not here  
For our selfish ease ;



The kingliest One that the earth has known  
Lived not himself to please.  
And they who have learned of him  
How a burden can give rest,  
And joyfully share the great human care,—  
They have learned life's secret best.

But now late afternoon had changed to gold  
The rippling silver of the Merrimack,  
And the gay company, in twos and threes,  
Gathered around the girls for parting. This,  
A holiday of love and of regret,  
A score or two had taken, the intimates  
Of one or all.

Turn forward, leaves of fate !  
There's one will go among the Cherokees,  
A mission-teacher. At the Capitol  
One will be seen, bride of a Senator.  
A country and a city parsonage  
Await those grave-eyed sisters. Alice, there,  
Will sail with her proud Captain round the globe,  
While little Ann paints pictures with her pen.  
That broad-browed, delicate girl will carve, at Rome,  
Faces in marble, classic as her own.

And this, a millionaire's wife, will regret  
Her dear old factory-nook, and the clear gold  
The sunshine coined there, bringing her no care.  
Some will wear out in schools their faithful lives;  
And most be happy wives, in thrifty homes,  
Mothers of men and women.

Like the sea  
Must the work-populations ebb and flow,  
So only fresh with healthful New-World life.  
If high rewards no longer stimulate toil,  
And mill-folk settle to a stagnant class,  
As in old civilizations, then farewell  
To the Republic's hope! What differ we  
From other foudalisms? Like ocean-waves  
Work-populations change. No rich, no poor,  
No learned, and no ignorant class or caste  
The true republic tolerates; interfused,  
Like the sea's salt, the life of each through all.

In that third decade past, thoughts grave as these  
Could scarcely visit the young toiler's mind,  
Who knew her labor transient; who at will  
Took up or dropped her shuttle, well assured  
That life had various need of her two hands.  
Mill-work meant then a fresh society

Of eager, active youth, long held apart  
In rustic hamlets ; that, like flint and steel,  
Meeting, struck light from faculties unknown.

And all around, the rough idyllic strength  
Of old New England lay ;— the morning keen  
Upon the sharp-cut hills ; the steel-blue sea  
Binding the brawny continent, that kept  
The secret of its power untold. That hour  
Can never be repeated. Whoso toils  
To-day toils in a different atmosphere.  
The chariot-wheels of Progress fill the air  
With dust. — Yes, it was something to be born  
While this gray Mother Century was young.

The group dispersed. Good wishes and good byes  
Filled the crisp autumn air. The Merrimack  
Whispered a parting from its hollow bed ;  
And, with that nightfall, Ruth and Esther, too,  
Beheld the close of their mill-working days.

Not many evenings later, Esther sat  
By Eleanor, in her room at Willoughby Place,  
That looked across the blue breadth of the Charles

To the old Trimountain City, fading back  
In twilight shadow, its gray State House dome  
Touched with a dusky crimson from the west,  
Where the sun sank, a red, distended orb ;—  
Yet stayed, unwilling to lose sight of earth.

Eleanor, reclined in a carved Indian chair,  
Leaned back on pillows, white-robed, her soft eyes,  
Under dark hair smooth-parted, shining out  
From her Madonna forehead ; a pink glow  
Like the last tint of sunset in her cheek :  
So beautiful, the faces at the door,  
Isabel's, Miriam's, ere they disappeared,  
Turned back and gazed again. She seemed a part  
Of the suffusing harmony of light  
In which the world lay tranced ; and Esther looked,  
And breathed no word, for fulness of her heart.

But Eleanor spoke at last : —

“ Esther, I said  
I had a secret, once. Have you not guessed,  
By this time, what it is ? ”

The name of Ralph  
Arose through Esther's thoughts, — Ralph, who had  
sent

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Messages, offerings of fruit and flowers  
 To the sweet invalid often, — Ralph, the one  
 Whom, of all others, for his tenderness,  
 His probity, his manhood, she would trust  
 With her beloved one, now she knew so well  
 The joy of being loved and loving back.  
 Ralph, one of the strong souls born to protect,  
 Might well revivify a drooping life,  
 Delicate as her friend's ; or, failing that,  
 Beautify its decline. Half musingly  
 She sighed, —

“ O Eleanor, a lovelier bride  
 Than you I cannot picture.”

Eleanor,  
 With a faint wonder fading from her eyes,  
 Said softly, —

“ I? a bride? Yes, Esther, yes!  
 And in an unknown country I shall find  
 Such love! and such a home! You look toward yours  
 In the far, wonderful West; mine from the East  
 Dawns on me. There's a City of whose streets  
 We've read together; there my Bridegroom lives.  
 Land of true health, where no inhabitant  
 Says ever, ' I am sick.' ”

Now Esther, hushed

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Before the dissolution of her dream  
 For Eleanor, — in the blindness of her love,  
 Painting a double marriage, two in white,  
 Eleanor, herself ; and Pastor Alwyn's voice  
 Blessing two happy brides, — though Ralph indeed  
 Loved Eleanor but with far-off reverence,  
 As seraph might love saint, — wept silently  
 With bowed head, at the long-evaded truth.

But Eleanor's hand lay on her brow, no pain  
 Thrilling its flower-like touch : —

“ For both of us

'T is but a journey ; more life and more love  
 For both of us.”

Still, Esther could not raise  
 Her tearful eyes, till Eleanor besought :  
 “ Esther, dear sister, look up ! let us feel  
 Together this most lovely close of day, —  
 This evening, which is like a shutting flower  
 That opens with the sun !

“ I do not die !

I fold my petals for immortal dawn !”

And in that twilight hush God drew their hearts  
 Indissolubly close. For what is love

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But His most perfect weaving, — intertwine  
Of the soul's deathless fibres, threading in  
Our human lives, one weft with the Divine ?

There leave them, looking forth into fair realms  
Of untried being ; into opening heavens  
Radiant with invitation. East and West  
Life beckons. Nothing satisfies the soul  
But opportunity for nobler work,  
And glimpses of illimitable fields.

THE END.

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Cambridge : Electrotyped and Printed by Welch, Bigelow, & Co.

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