

## *Esther Wynn's Love-Letters*

MY uncle, Joseph Norton, lived in a very old house. It was one of those many mansions in which that Father of all sleepers, George Washington, slept once for two nights. This, however, was before the house came into the possession of our family, and we seldom mentioned the fact.

The rooms were all square, and high; many of the walls were of solid wood, paneled from the floor to the ceiling, and with curious china tiles set in around the fire-places. In the room in which I always slept when I visited there, these wooden walls were of pale green; the tiles were of blue and white, and afforded me endless study and perplexity, being painted with a series of half-allegorical, half-historical, half-Scriptural representations which might well have puzzled an older head than mine. The parlors were white, with gold ornaments; the library was of solid oak, with mahogany wainscoting, and so were the two great central halls, upper and lower. The balustrade of the staircase was of apple-tree wood, more beautiful than all the rest, having fine red veins on its dark polished surface. These halls were lined with portraits of dead Nortons, men and women, who looked as much at home as if the grand old house had always borne their name. And well they might, for none of the owners who had gone before had been of so gentle blood as they; and now they would probably never be taken down from the walls, for my uncle had bought the house, and my uncle's son would inherit it; and it had never yet been known that a Norton of our branch of Nortons had lived wastefully or come to want.

My uncle had married very late in life: he was now a gray-haired man, with little children around his knee. It was said once in my presence, by someone who did not know I listened, that his heart had been broken when he was little more than a boy, by the faithlessness of a woman older than himself, and that he would never have married if he had not seen that another heart would be broken if he did not. Be that as it may, his bearing towards his wife was always of the most chivalrous and courteous devotion, so courteous as to perhaps confirm this interpretation of his marriage.

My aunt was an uninteresting woman, of whom one never thought if she were not in sight; but she had great strength of affection and much good sense in affairs. Her children loved her; her husband enjoyed the admirably ordered system of her management, and her house was a delightful one in which to visit. Although she did not contribute to the flavor of living, she never hindered or thwarted those who could. There was freedom in her presence, from the very fact that you forgot her, and she did not in the least object to being forgotten. Such people are of great use in the world, and create much comfort.

At the time when the strange incidents which I am about to tell occurred, she had been married twelve years, and had four children; three girls, Sarah, Hilda, and Agnes, and a baby boy, who had as yet no name. Sarah was called "Princess," and her real name was never heard. She was the oldest and was my uncle's inseparable companion. She was a child of uncommon thoughtfulness and tenderness. The other two were simply healthy, happy little creatures, who gave no promise of being any more individual than their serene, quiet mother.

I was spending the winter in the family, and attending school, and between my uncle and me there had grown up an intimate and confidential friendship such as is very rarely seen between a

man of fifty and a girl of fifteen. I understood him far better than his wife did; and his affection for me was so great and so caressing that he used often to say, laughingly, "Nell, my girl, you'll never have another lover like me!"

We were sitting at breakfast one morning when Princess came in, holding a small letter in her hand.

"Look, papa mia!" she said; "see this queer old letter I found on the cellar stairs. It looks as if it were a hundred years old."

My uncle glanced up, carelessly at first, but as soon as he saw the paper he stretched out his hand for it, and looked anxious and eager. It did indeed seem as if it were a hundred years old; yellow, crumpled, torn. It had been folded in the clumsy old way which was customary before the invention of envelopes; but the part of the page containing the address had been torn out. He read a few words, and the color mounted in his cheek.

"Where did you say you found it, Princess?" he said.

"On the cellar stairs, papa; I went down to find Fido, and he was playing with it."

"What is it, Joseph?" said Aunt Sarah, in tones a shade more eager than their wont.

"I do not know, my dear," replied my uncle; "it is very old," and he went on reading with a more and more sobered face.

"Robert," said he, turning to the waiter, "do you know where this paper could have come from? Have any old papers been carried down from the garret, to light the fire in the furnace?"

"No, sir," said Robert, "not that I know, sir."

"There are whole barrels of old papers under the eaves in the garret," said Aunt Sarah; "I have always meant to have them burned up; I dare say this came out of one of them, in some way;" and she resumed her habitual expression of nonchalance.

"Perhaps so," said Uncle Jo, folding up the paper and putting it in his vest pocket. "I will look, after breakfast."

She glanced up, again surprised, and said, "Why? is it of any importance?"

"Oh, no, no," said he hastily, with a shade of embarrassment in his voice, "it is only an old letter, but I thought there might be more from the same person."

"Who was it?" said Aunt Sarah, languidly.

"I don't know; only the first name is signed," said he evasively; and the placid lady asked no more. The children were busy with Fido, and breakfast went on, but I watched my uncle's face. I

had never seen it look just as it looked then. What could that old yellow letter have been? My magnetic sympathy with my uncle told me that he was deeply moved.

At dinner-time my uncle was late, and Aunt Sarah said, with a little less than her usual dignity, "I never did see such a man as Mr. Norton, when he takes a notion in his head. He's been all the morning rummaging in clouds of dust in the garret, to find more of those old letters."

"Who wrote it, Auntie?" said I.

"Heaven knows," said she; "some woman or other, fifty years ago. He says her name was Esther."

"Did you read it?" I asked tremblingly. Already I felt a shrinking sense of regard for the unknown Esther.

Aunt Sarah looked at me with almost amused surprise. "Read it, child? no, indeed! What do I care what that poor soul wrote half a century ago. But your uncle's half out of his head about her, and he's had all the servants up questioning them back and forth till they are nearly as mad as he is. Cook says she has found several of them on the cellar stairs in the last few weeks; but she saw they were so old she threw them into the fire, and never once looked at them; and when she said that, your uncle just groaned. I never did see such a man as he is when he gets a notion in his head,"—she repeated, hopelessly.

My uncle came in flushed and tired. Nothing was said about the letters till, just as dinner was over, he said suddenly:—

"Robert, if you find any more of these old papers anywhere, bring them to me at once. And give orders to all the servants that no piece of old paper with writing on it is to be destroyed without my seeing it."

"Yes, sir," said Robert, without changing a muscle; but I saw that he too was of Mrs. Norton's opinion as to his master's oddity when he once got a notion in his head.

"Who was the lady, papa," said Agnes. "Did you know her?"

"My dear, the letter is as old as papa is himself," said he. "I think the lady died when papa was a little baby."

"Then what makes you care so much, papa," persisted Agnes.

"I can't tell you, little one," said he, kissing her, and tossing her up in the air; but he looked at me.

In the early twilight that afternoon I found my uncle lying with closed eyes on the lounge in the library. He was very tired by his long forenoon's work in the garret. I sat down on the floor and stroked his dear old white hair.

“Pet,” he said, without opening his eyes, “that letter had the whole soul of a woman in it.”

“I thought so, dear,” said I, “by your face.”

After a long interval he said: “I could not find a word more of her writing; I might have known I should not;” and again, after a still longer silence, “Would you like to read it, Nell?”

“I am not sure, Uncle Jo,” I said. “It seems hardly right. I think she would not so much mind your having it, because you are a man; but another woman! no, uncle dear, I think the letter belongs to you.”

“Oh, you true woman-hearted darling,” he said, kissing me; “but someday I think I shall want you to read it with me. She would not mind your reading it if she knew you as I do.”

Just then Aunt Sarah came into the room, and we said no more.

Several days passed by, and the mysterious letter was forgotten by everybody except my uncle and me.

One bitterly cold night we were sitting around a blazing coal fire in the library. It was very late. Aunt Sarah was asleep in her chair; my uncle was reading. Suddenly the door opened and Robert came in, bringing a letter on his little silver tray: it was past eleven o’clock; the evening mail had been brought in long before.

“Why, what is that, Robert?” said Uncle Jo, starting up a little alarmed.

“One of them old letters, sir,” replied Robert; “I just got it on the cellar stairs, sir.”

My uncle took the letter hastily. Robert still stood as if he had more to say; and his honest, blank face looked stupefied with perplexity.

“If you please, sir,” he began, “it’s the queerest thing ever I saw. That letter’s been put on them stairs, sir, within the last five minutes.”

“Why, Robert, what do you mean?” said my uncle, thoroughly excited.

“Oh dear,” groaned Aunt Sarah, creeping out of her nap and chair, “if you are going into another catechism about those old letters, I am going to bed;” and she left the room, not staying long enough to understand that this was a new mystery, and not a vain rediscussing of the old one.

It seems that Robert had been down cellar to see that the furnace fire was in order for the night. As soon as he reached the top of the stairs, in coming up, he remembered that he had not turned the outside damper properly, and went back to do it.

“I wasn’t gone three minutes, sir, and when I came back there lay the letter, a right side up, square in the middle of the stairs; and I’d take my Bible oath, sir, as twan’t there when I went down.”

“Who was in the hall when you went down, Robert?” said my uncle sternly.

“Nobody, sir. Except servant in the house had gone to bed, except Jane” (my aunt’s maid), “and she was going up the stairs over my head, sir, when I first went down into the cellar. I know she was, sir, for she called through the stairs to me, and she says, ‘Master’ll hear you, Robert.’ You see, sir, Jane and me didn’t know as it was so late and we was frightened when we heard the clock strike half-past eleven.”

“That will do, Robert,” said Uncle Jo. “You can go,” and Robert disappeared, relieved but puzzled. There seemed no possible explanation of the appearance of the letter there and then, except that hands had placed it there during the brief interval of Robert’s being in the cellar. There were no human hands in the house which could have done it. Was a restless ghost wandering there, bent on betraying poor Esther’s secrets to strangers? What did it, what could it mean?

“Will you read this one with me, Nell?” said my uncle, turning it over reverently and opening it.

“No,” I said, “but I will watch you read it;” and I sat down on the floor at his feet.

The letter was very short; he read it twice without speaking; and then said, in an unsteady voice: “This is an earlier letter than the other, I think. This is a joyous one; poor Esther! I believe I know her whole story. But the mystery is inexplicable! I would take down these walls if I thought I could get at the secret.”

Long past midnight we sat and talked it all over; and racked our brains in vain to invent any theory to account for the appearance of the letters on that cellar stairway. My uncle’s tender interest in the poor dead Esther was fast being overshadowed by the perplexing mystery.

A few days after this, Mary the cook found another of the letters when she first went downstairs in the morning, and Robert placed it by my uncle’s plate, with the rest of his mail. It was the most singular one of all, for there was not a word of writing in it that could be read. It was a foreign letter; some fragments of the faded old stamps were still hanging where the address had been cut out on the back. The first page looked as if it had been written over with some sort of sympathetic ink; but not a word could be deciphered. Folded in a small piece of the thinnest of paper was a mouldy and crumbling flower, of a dull-brown color; on the paper was written:—

“Pomegranate blossom, from Jaffa,” and a few lines of poetry, of which we could make out only here and there a word.

Even Aunt Sarah was thoroughly aroused and excited now. Robert had been into the cellar very late on the previous night, and was sure that at that time no papers were on the stairs.

“I never go down them stairs, sir,” said Robert, “without looking—and listening too,” he added under his breath, with a furtive look back at the cook, who was standing in the second doorway of the butler’s pantry. The truth was, Robert had been afraid of the cellar ever since the finding of the second letter. And all the servants shared his uneasiness.

Between eleven at night and seven the next morning, this mute ghostly waif from Palestine, with the half-century old dust of a pomegranate flower in its keeping, had come up that dark stairway. It appeared now that the letters were always found on the fourth stair from the top. This fact had not before been elicited, but there seemed little doubt about it. Even little Princess said—

“Yes, papa, I am sure that the old I found was on that stair; for I now remember Fido came up with only just one or two bounds to the top, as soon as he saw me.”

We were very sober. The little children chattered on; it meant nothing to them, this breath from such a far past. But to hearts old enough to comprehend, there was something infinitely sad and suggestive in it. I already felt, though I had not read one word of her writing, that I loved the woman called Esther; as for my uncle, his very face was becoming changed by the thought of her, and the mystery of the appearance of the letters. He began to be annoyed also; for the servants were growing suspicious, and unwilling to go into the cellar. Mary the cook declared that on the morning when she found this last letter, something white brushed by her at the foot of the stairs; and Robert said that he had for a long time heard strange sounds from that staircase late at night.

Just after this, my aunt went away for a visit; and several days passed without any further discoveries on the stairs. My uncle and I spent long hours talking over the mystery, and he urged me to read, or to let him read to me, the two letters he had.

“Pet,” he said, “I will tell you something. One reason they move me so is, that they are strangely like words written by a woman whom I knew thirty years ago. I did not believe two such women had been on the earth.”

I kissed his hand when he said this; yet a strange unwillingness to read Esther’s letters withheld me. I felt that he had right, and I had not.

But the end of the mystery was near. And it was revealed, as it ought to have been, to my uncle himself.

One night I was awaked out of my first sleep by a very cautious tap at my door, and my uncle’s voice, saying—

“Nell—Nell, are you awake?”

I sprang to the door instantly.

“O uncle, are you ill?” (My aunt had not yet returned.)

“No, pet. But I want you downstairs. Dress yourself and come down into the library.”

My hands trembled with excitement as I dressed. Yet I was not afraid; I knew that it was in some ways connected with “Esther,” though my uncle had not mentioned her name.

I found him sitting before the library table, which was literally covered with old letters, such as we had before seen.

“O uncle!” I gasped as soon as I saw them.

“Yes, dear! I have got them all. There was no ghost!”

Then he told me in few words what had happened. It seemed that he had gone down himself into the cellar, partly to satisfy himself that all was right with the furnace, partly with a vague hope of finding another of the letters. He had found nothing, had examined the furnace, locked the door at the head of the cellar stairs, and gone up to his bedroom. While he was undressing, a strange impulse seized him to go back once more, and see whether it might not happen to him as it had to Robert, to find a letter on returning after a few moments interval.

He threw on his wrapper, took a candle, and went down. The first thing he saw, on opening the door, which he had himself locked only five minutes before, was a letter lying on the same fourth stair!

“I confess, Nell,” said he, “for a minute I felt as frightened as black Bob. But I sat down on the upper step, and resolved not to go away till I had discovered how that letter came there, if I stayed till daylight!”

Nearly an hour passed, he said; the cold wind from the cellar blew up and swayed the candle-flame to and fro. All sorts of strange sounds seemed to grow louder and louder, and still he sat, gazing helplessly in a sort of despair at that motionless letter, which he had not lifted from the stair. At last, purely by accident, he looked up to the staircase overhead—the front stairs, down which he had just come from his room. He jumped to his feet! There, way up among the dark cobwebbed shadows, he thought he saw something white. He held up the candle. It was, yes, it was a tiny corner of white paper wedged in a crack; by standing on the beam at the side he could just reach it. He touched it,—pulled it;—it came out slowly,—another of Esther’s letters. They were hid in the upper staircase! The boards had been worn and jarred a little away from each other, and the letters were gradually shaken through the opening; some heavier or quicker step than usual giving always the final impetus to a letter which had been for days slowly working down towards the fated outlet.

Stealthily as any burglar he had crept about his own house, had taken up the whole of the front staircase carpet, and had taken up the whole of the front staircase carpet, and had with trouble pried off one board of the stair in which the letters were hid. There had been a spring, he found, but it was rusted and would not slide. He had carefully replaced the carpet, carried the letters into the library, and come for me; it was now half-past one o’clock at night.

Dear, blessed Uncle Jo! I am an old woman now. Good men and strong men have given me love, and have shown me of their love for others; but never, no, never did I feel myself so in the living presence of incarnate love as I did that night, sitting with my white-haired uncle, face to face with the faded records of the love of Esther Wynn.

It was only from one note that we discovered her last name. This was written in the early days of her acquaintance with her lover, and while she was apparently little more than a child. It was evident that at first the relation was more like one of pupil and master. For some time the letters all commenced scrupulously "my dear friend," or "my most beloved friend." It was not until years had passed that the master became the lover; we fancied, Uncle Jo and I, as we went reverently over the beautiful pages, that Esther had grown and developed more and more, until she was the teacher, the helper, the inspirer. We felt sure, though we could not tell how, that she yearned often to lift up the man she loved to the freer heights on which her soul led its glorified existence.

It was strange how little we gathered which could give clue to her actual history or to his. The letters were almost never dated with the name of the place, only with the day and year, many of them with only the day. There was an absolute dearth of allusions to persons; it was as if these two had lived in a separate world of their own. When persons were mentioned at all, it was only by initials. It was plain that some cruel, inexorable bar separated her from the man she loved; a bar never alluded to,—whose nature we could only guess,—but one which her strong and pure nature felt itself free to triumph over in spirit, however submissive the external life might seem.

Their relation had lasted for many years; so many, that that fact alone seemed a holy seal and testimony to the purity and immortality of the bond which united them. Esther must have been a middle-aged woman when, as the saddened letters sadly revealed, her health failed and she was ordered by the physicians to go to Europe. The first letter which my uncle had read, the one which Princess found, was the letter in which she bade farewell to her lover. There was no record after that; only two letters which had come from abroad; one was the one that I have mentioned, which contained the pomegranate blossom from Jaffa, and a little poem which, after long hours of labor, Uncle Jo and I succeeded in deciphering. The other had two flowers in it—an Edelweiss which looked as white and pure and immortal as if it had come from Alpine snows only the day before; and a little crimson flower of the amaranth species, which was wrapped by itself, and marked "From Bethlehem of Judea." The only other words in this letter were, "I am better, darling, but I cannot write yet."

It was evident that there had been the deepest intellectual sympathy between them. Closely and fervently and passionately as their hearts must have loved, the letters were never, from first to last, simply lovers' letters. Keen interchange of comment and analysis, full revelation of strongly marked individual life, constant mutual stimulus to mental growth there must have been between these two. We were inclined to think, from the exquisitely phrased sentences and rare fancies in the letters, and from the graceful movement of some of the little poems, that Esther must have had ambition as a writer. And then, again, she seemed so wholly, simply, passionately a woman, to love and be loved, that all thought of anything else in her nature or life seemed incongruous.



“Oh,” groaned Uncle Jo, after reading one of the most glowing letters, “oh, was there really ever in any other man’s arms but mine a woman who could say such things as these between kisses? O Nell, Nell, thank God that you haven’t the dower of such a double fire in your veins as Esther had!”

All night we sat reading, and reading, and reading. When the great clock in the hall struck six, we started like guilty persons.

“Oh, my childie,” said Uncle Jo, “how wrong this has been in me! Poor little pale face, go to bed now, and remember, I forbid you to go to school today; and I forbid your getting up until noon. I promise you I will not look at another letter. I will lock them all up till tomorrow evening, and then we will finish them.”

I obeyed him silently. I was too exhausted to speak; but I was also too excited to sleep. Until noon I lay wide awake on the bed, in my darkened room, living over Esther Wynn’s life, marveling at the inexplicable revelation of it which had been put into our hands, and wondering, until the uncertainty seemed almost anguish, what was that end which we could never know. Did she die in the Holy Land? or did she come home well and strong? and did her lover die someday, leaving his secret treasure of letters behind him, and poor stricken Esther to go to her grave in fear lest unfriendly hands might, have gained possession of her heart’s records? Was he a married man, and had the wife whom he did not love paced up and down and up and down for years over these dumb witnesses to that of which she had never dreamed? The man himself when he came to die, did he writher, thinking of those silent, eloquent, precious letters which he must leave to time and chance to destroy or protect? Did they carry him, dead, down the very stairs in which he had so often knelt unseen and wafted kisses towards the hidden Esther?

All these conjectures and questions, and thousands more, hurried in wild confusion through my brain. In vain I closed my eyes, in vain I pressed my hands on their lids; countless faces, dark, light, beautiful, plain, happy, sad, threatening, imploring, seemed dancing in the air around my bed, and saying, “Esther, Esther!”

We knew she was fair; for there was in one of the letters a tiny curl of pale brown hair; but we believed from many expressions of hers that she had no beauty. Oh, if I could but have known how she looked!

At last I fell asleep, and slept heavily until after dark. This refreshed my overwrought nerves, and when at nine o’clock in the evening I joined my uncle in the library, I was calmer than he.

We said very few words. I sat on his knee, with one arm around his neck, and hand in hand we reverently lifted the frail, trembling sheets.

We learned nothing new; in fact, almost any one of the letters was a rounded revelation of Esther’s nature, and of the great love she bore—and there was little more to learn. There were more than a hundred of the letters, and they embraced a period of fifteen years. We arranged them in piles, each year by itself; for some years there were only two or three; we wondered whether during those years they had lived near each other, and so had not written, or whether the

letters had been destroyed. When the last letter was laid where it belonged, we looked at each other in silence, and we both sighed.

Uncle Jo spoke first.

“Childie, what shall we do with them?”

“I do not know, uncle,” I said. “I should feel very guilty if we did not make sure that no one else read them. I should feel very guilty myself, except that I have read them with you. They seem to me to belong to you, somehow.”

Uncle Jo kissed me, and we were silent again. Then he said, “There is but one way to make sure that no human being will ever read them—that is, to burn them; but it is as hard for me to do it as if they had been written to me.”

“Could you not put them back in the stair, and nail it up firmly?” said I.

It was a stormy night. The wind was blowing hard, and sleet and snow driving against the windows. At this instant a terrible gust rattled the icy branches of the syringa-bushes against the window, with a noise like the click of musketry, and above the howling of the wind there came a strange sound which sounded like a voice crying, “Burn, burn!”

Uncle Jo and I both heard it, and both sprang to our feet, white with a nervous terror. In a second he recovered himself, and said, laughing, “Pet, we are both a good deal shaken by this business. But I do think it will be safer to burn the letters. Poor, poor Esther. I hope she is safe with her lover now.”

“Oh, do you doubt it?” said I; “I do not.”

“No,” said he, “I do not, either. Thank God!”

“Uncle Jo,” said I, “do you think Esther would mind if I copied a few of these letters, and two or three of the poems? I so want to have them that it seems to me I cannot give them up; I love her so, I think she would be willing.”

The storm suddenly died away, and the painful silence around us was almost as startling as the fierce gust had been before. I took it as an omen that Esther did not refuse my wish, and I selected the four letters which I most desired to keep. I took also the pomegranate blossom, and the Edelweiss, and the crimson Amaranth from Bethlehem.

“I think Esther would rather that these should not be burned,” I said.

“Yes; I think so too,” replied Uncle Jo.

Then we laid the rest upon the fire. The generous hickory logs seemed to open their arms to them. In a few seconds great panting streams of fire leaped up and rushed out of our sight,

bearing with them all that was perishable of Esther Wynn's letters. Just as the crackling shadowy shapes were falling apart and turning black, my uncle sprang to an Indian cabinet which stood near, and seizing a little box of incense-powder which had been brought from China by his brother, he shook a few grains of it into the fire. A pale, fragrant film rose slowly in coiling wreaths and clods and his the last moments of the burning of the letters. When the incense smoke cleared away, nothing could be seen on the hearth but the bright hickory coals in their bed of white ashes.

"I shall make every effort," said Uncle Jo, "to find out who lived in this house during those years. I presume I can, by old records somewhere."

"Oh, uncle," I said, "don't. I think they would rather we did not know any more."

"You sweet woman child!" he exclaimed. "You are right. Your instinct is truer than mine. I am only a man, after all! I will never try to learn who it was that Esther loved."

"I am very glad," he added, "that this happened when your Aunt Sarah was away. It would have been a great weariness and annoyance to her to have read these letters."

Dear, courteous Uncle Jo! I respected his chivalrous little artifice of speech, and tried to look as if I believed he would have carried the letters to his wife if she had been there.

"And I think, dear," he hesitantly proceeded, "we would better not speak of this. It will be one sacred little secret that you and your old uncle will keep. As no more letters will be found on the stairs, the whole thing will be soon forgotten."

"Oh yes, uncle," replied I; "of course it would be terrible to tell. It isn't our secret, you know; it is dear Esther Wynn's."

I do not know why it was that I locked up those four letters of Esther Wynn's, and did not look at them for many months. I felt very guilty in keeping them; but a power I could not resist seemed to paralyze my very hand when I thought of opening the box in which they were. At last, long after I had left Uncle Jo's house, I took them out one day, and in the quiet and warmth of a summer noon I copied them slowly, carefully, word for word. Then I hid the originals in my bosom, and walked alone, without telling anyone whither I was going, to a wild spot I knew several miles away, where a little mountain stream came foaming and dashing down through a narrow gorge to empty into our broad and placid river. I sat down on a mossy granite boulder, and slowly tore the letters into minutest fragments. One by one I tossed the white and tiny shreds into the swift water, and watched them as far as I could see them. The brook lifted them and tossed them over and over, lodged them in mossy crevices, or on tree roots, then swept them all up and whirled them away in dark depths of the current from which they would never more come to the surface. It was a place which Esther would have loved, and I wondered, as I sat there hour after hour, whether it were really improbably—of course it was not impossible—that she knew just then what I was doing for her. I wondered, also, as I had often wondered before, if it might not have been by Esther's will that the sacred hoard of letters, which had lain undiscovered for so many years, should fall at last into the tender, chivalrous hands of my Uncle Jo. It was certainly a

strange thing that on the stormy night which I have described, when we were discussing what should be done with the letters, both Uncle Jo and I should have at the same instant fancied we heard the words “Burn, burn!”

The following letter is the earliest one which I copied. It is the one which Robert found so late at night and brought to us in the library:—

“FRIDAY EVE.

“SWEETEST—It is very light in my room tonight. The full moon tonight. The full moon and the thought of you! I see to write, but you would forbid me—you who would see only the moonlight and not the other. Oh, my darling! my darling!

“I have been all day in fields and on edges of woods. I have never seen just such a day: a June sun, and a September wind; clover and buttercups under foot, and a sparkling October sky overhead. I think the earth enjoyed it as a sort of masquerading frolic. The breeze was so strong that it took the butterflies half off their air-legs, and they fairly reeled about in the sun. As for me, I sat here and there, on hillocks and stones, among ferns, and white cornels, and honey-bees, and bobolinks. I was the only still thing in the fields. I waited so long in each spot, that it was like being transplanted when I moved myself to the north or the south. And I discovered a few things in each country in which I lived. For one thing, I observed that the little busy bee is not busy all the while; that he does a great amount of aimless, idle snuffing and tasting of all sorts of things besides flowers; especially he indulges in a running accompaniment of gymnastics among the grass-stalks, which cannot possibly have anything to do with honey. I watched one fellow today through a series of positive trapeze movements from top to bottom and bottom to top of a grass-tangle. When he got through he shook himself, and smoothed off his legs exactly as the circus-men do. Then he took a long pull at a clover well.

“Ah, the clover! Dearest! you should have seen how it swung today. The stupidest person I the world could not have helped thinking that it kept time to invisible band-playing, and was trying to catch hold of the butter-cups. I lay down at full length and looked off through the stems, and then I saw for the first time how close they were, and that they constantly swayed and touched, and sometimes locked fast together for a second. Stately as a minuet it looked, but joyous and loving and passionate as the wildest waltz I ever danced in your arms, my darling. Oh, how dare we presume to be so sure that the flowers are not glad as we are glad! On such a day as today I never doubt it; and I pick one as reverently and hesitatingly as I would ask the Queen of the Fairies home to tea if I met her in a wood.

“Laughing, are you, darling? Yes, I know it. Poor soul! You cannot help being a man, I suppose. Nor would I have you help it, my great, string, glorious one! How I adore the things which you do, which I could not do. Oh, my sweet master! Never fear that I do you less reverence than I should. All the same, I lie back on my ferny hillock, and look you in the eye, and ask you what you think would become of you if you had no little one of my kind to bring you honey! And when I say this—you—ah, my darling, now there are tears in my eyes, and the moonlight grows dim. I cannot bear the thinking what you would do when I said those words! Good night!

Perhaps in my sleep I will say them again, and you will be there to answer. In the morning I shall write out for you today's clover song.

“YOUR OWN”

The clover song was not in the letter. We found it afterward on a small piece of paper, so worn and broken in the folds that we knew it must have been carried for months in a pocket-book.

A SONG OF CLOVER

I wonder what the clover thinks?—  
Intimate friend of Bob-o-links,  
Lover of Daisies slim and white,  
Waltzer with butter-cups at night;  
Keeper of Inn for traveling Bees,  
Serving to them wine dregs and lees,  
Left by the Royal Humming-Birds,  
Who sip and pay with fine spun words;  
Fellow with all the lowliest,  
Peer of the gayest and the best;  
Comrade of winds, beloved of sun,  
Kissed by Dew-Drops, one by one;  
Prophet of Good Luck mystery  
By sign of four which few may see;  
Symbol of Nature's magic zone,  
One out of three, and three in one;  
Emblem of comfort in the speech  
Which poor men's babies early reach;  
Sweet by the roadsides, sweet by sills,  
Sweet in meadows, sweet on hills,  
Sweet in its white, sweet in its red,  
Oh, half its sweet cannot be said;  
Sweet in its every living breath,  
Sweetest, perhaps, at last, in death!  
Oh, who knows what the Clover thinks?  
No one! unless the Bob-o-links!

The lines which were written on the paper enclosing the pomegranate flower from Jaffa we deciphered with great trouble. The last verse we were not quite sure about, for there had been erasures. But I think we were right finally.

“Pomegranate blossom!” Heart of fire!  
I dare to be thy death,  
To slay thee while the summer sun  
Is quickening thy breath;  
To rob the autumn of thy wine;—  
Next year of all ripe seeds of thine,  
That thou mayest bear one kiss of mine  
To my dear love before my death.

For, Heart of fire, I too am robbed

Like thee! Like thee, I die,  
While yet my summer sun of love  
Is near, and warm, and high;  
The autumn will run red with wine;  
The autumn fruits will swing and shine;  
But in that little grave of mine  
I shall not see them where I lie.

Pomegranate blossom! Heart of fire!  
This kiss, so slow, so sweet,  
Thou bearest hence, and never lose  
Even in death its heat.  
Redder than autumns can run with wine,  
Warmer than summer suns can shine,  
Forever that dear love of mine  
Shall find thy sacred hidden sweet!

The next letter which I copied was one written five years after the first; it is not so much a letter as an allegory, and so beautiful, so weird, that we wondered Esther did not set it to tune as a poem.

“SUNDAY MORNING.

“MY DARLING—Even this blazing September sun looks dull to me this morning. I have come from such a riotous dream. All last night I walked in a realm of such golden splendor, that I think even in our fullest noon I shall only see enough light to grope by for days and days.

“I do not know how to tell you my dream. I think I must put it in shape of a story of two people; but you will know, darling, that in my dream it was you and I. and I honestly did dream it, sweet, every word just as I shall write it for you; only there are no words which so glow and light and blaze as did the chambers through which we walked. I had been reading about the wonderful gold mines of which everyone is talking now, and this led to my dream.

“You can laugh if you like, sweet master mine, but I think it is all true, and I call it

“THE MINE OF GOLD.

There I but one true mine of gold; and of it no man knows, and no woman, save those who go into it. Neither can they who go tell whether they sink into the earth’s heart or are caught up into the chambers of the air, or led to the outer pavilions of the sea. Suddenly they perceive that all around, above, below them is gold: rocks of gold higher than they can see; caves whose depths are bright with gold; lakes of gold which is molten and leaps of fire, but in which flowers can be dipped and not wither; sands of gold, soft and pleasant to touch; innumerable shapes of all things beautiful, which wave and change, but only from gold to gold; air which shines and shimmers like refiner’s gold; warmth which is like the glow of the red gold of Ophir; and everywhere golden silence!

“Hand in hand walk the two to whom it is given to enter here: of the gold, they may carry away only so much as can be hid in their bosoms; grains which are spilled, or are left on their garments, turn to ashes; only to each other may they speak of these mysteries; but all men perceive that they have riches, and that their faces shine as the faces of angels.

“Suddenly it comes to pass that one day a golden path leads them farther than they have ever gone before, and into a vast chamber, too vast to be measured. Its walls, although they are of gold, are also like crystal. This is a mystery. Only three sides are walled. The fourth side is the opening of a gallery which stretches away and away, golden like a broad sunbeam: from out the distance comes the sound of rushing waters; however far they walk in that gallery, still the golden sunbeam stretches before them; still the sound of the waters is no nearer: and so would the sunbeam and the sound of the waters be forever, for they are Eternity.

“But there is a fourth mystery. On the walls of crystal gold, on all sides, shine faces; not dead faces, not pictured faces; living faces—warm, smiling, reflected faces.

“Then it is revealed to the two who walk hand and hand that these are the faces of all who have ever entered in, as they, between the walls of crystal gold; flashing faces of the sons of God looking into eyes of earthly women;—these were the first; and after them, all in their generations, until today, the sons of men with the women they have loved. They men’s faces smile; but the faces of the women have in them a joy greater than a smile.

“Presently the two who walk hand in hand see their own faces added to the others, with the same smile, the same joy; and it is revealed to them that these faces are immortal. Through all eternity they will beam on the walls of crystal gold; and those who have once looked on them can never more see in each other change or loss of beauty.

“If as they walk there, in the broad sun-beam, an angel meets them, bearing the tokens of a golden bowl that is broken and a silver cord that is unloosed, they follow him without grief or fear, thinking on that chamber of crystal gold!

“Good-bye, darling!

“ESTHER.”

The third letter was written three years after this one. Sadness was beginning to cloud the free, joyous outpourings of Esther’s heart. Probably this sadness was one of the first symptoms of the failure of her health. It was from this letter chiefly—although there were expressions in others which corroborated the impression—that we inferred that her lover had endeavored to stimulate in her an intellectual ambition.

“WEDNESDAY EVENING.

“DEAR ONE—Your last letter gave me great pain. It breaks my heart to see you looking so earnestly and expectantly into my future. Beloved, because I have grown and developed so much in the last eight years is no proof that I can still keep on growing. If you understood, darling, you

would see that it is just the other way. I have grown year by year, hour by hour, because hour by hour I have loved you more. That is all! I have felt the growth. I know it, as clearly as you do. But I know the secret of it as you do not; and I know the limit of it, as you cannot. I *cannot* love you more, precious one! Neither would I if I could! One heart-beat more in a minute, and I should die! But all that you have so much loved and cared for, dear, calling it intellectual growth and expansion in me, has been only the clearing of atmosphere, the refining and stimulating of every faculty, every sense, by my love for you. When I have said or written a word which as please you thus, if there were any special fitness or eloquence in the word, it was only because I sought after what would best carry my thought to *you*, darling! What would be best frame, best setting, to keep the flowers or the sky which I had to see alone,—to keep them till you could see them too! Oh, dear one, do understand that there is nothing of me except my heart and my love! While they were wonderingly, tremblingly, rapturously growing within me, under the sweet warmth of your love, no wonder I changed day by day. But, precious one, it is at end. The whole solemn, steadfast woman within me recognizes it. Beloved master, in one sense you can teach me no more! I am content. I desire nothing. One moment of full consciousness of you, of life, or live, is more than all centuries of learning, all eternities of inspiration. I would rather at this moment, dear, lay my cheek on your hand, and sit in my old place by your knee, and feel myself the woman you have made me, that know all that God knows, and make a universe!

“Beloved, do not say such things to me anymore; and whenever you feel such ambition and hope stirring in your heart, read over this little verse, and be sure that your children knew what she said when she wrote it:—

#### THE END OF HARVEST

Oh, Love, who walkest slow among my sheaves,  
Smiling at tint and shape, thy smile of peace,  
But whispering of the next sweet year’s increase,—  
Oh, tender Love, thy loving hope but grieves  
My heart! I rue my harvest, if it leaves  
Thee vainly waiting after harvests cease,  
Like one who has been mocked by titled lease  
To barren fields.

Dear one, my word deceives  
Thee never. Hearts one summer have. Their grain  
“Is sown not that which shall be!”

Can new pain  
Teach me of pain? Or any ecstasy  
Be new, that I should speak its name again?  
My darling, all there was or is of me  
Is harvested for thine Eternity!

ESTHER.”

The fourth letter was the one which Princess had found, the first which my uncle had read—  
Esther’s farewell to her lover before going abroad. No wonder that it so moved him!



“MY DARLING—I implore you not to come. Have I not loved you enough, all these years long, for you to trust me, and believe that it is only because I love you so much that I cannot, cannot see you now? Dear, did I ever before ask you to forego your wish for mine? Even in hours crowded with all love’s sweetness, did I ever stay your hand, my darling? Ah, love, you know—oh, how well you know, that always, in every blissful moment we have spent together, my bliss has been shadowed by a little, interrupted by a little, because my soul was forever restlessly asking, seeking, longing, for *one* more joy, delight, rapture, to give to you!

“Now listen, darling. You say it is almost a year since we met; true, but if it were yesterday, would you remember it any more clearly? Why, my precious one, I can see over again at this moment each little movement which you made, each look your face wore; I can hear every word; I can feel every kiss; very solemn kisses they were too, love, as if we had known.

“You say we may never meet again. True. But if that is to be so, all the more I choose to leave with you the memory of the face you saw then, rather than of the one you would see today. Be compassionate, darling, and spare me the pain of seeing your pain at sight of my poor changed face. I hope it is not a weak vanity, love, which makes me feel this so strongly. Being so clearly and calmly conscious as I am that very possibly my earthly days are near their end, it does not seem as if mere vanity could linger in my soul. And you know you have always said, dearest, that I had none. I know I have always wondered unspeakably that you could find pleasure in my face, except occasionally, when I have felt, as it were, a great sudden glow and throb of love quicken and heat it under your gaze; then, as I have looked up in your eyes, I have sometimes had a flash of consciousness of a transformation in the very flesh of my face, just as I have a sense of rapturous strength sometimes in the very flesh and bone of my right hand, when I strike on the piano some of Beethoven’s chords. But I know that, except in the light of your presence, I have no beauty. I had not so much to lose by illness as other women. But, dear one, that little is gone. I can read in the pitying looks of all my friends how altered I am. Even if I did not see it with my own eyes, I should read it in theirs. And I cannot—Oh, I cannot read it in yours!

“If I knew any spell which could make you forget all except someone rare moment in which you said in your heart, ‘Oh, she never looked so lovely before!’ Oh, how firmly I would bind you by it! All the weary, indifferent, or unhappy looks, sweet, I would blot out from your memory, and have the thought of me raise but one picture in your mind. I would have it as if I had died, and left of my face no record on earth except one wonderful picture in your mind. I would have it as if I had died, and left of my face no record on earth except one wonderful picture by some great master, who had caught the whole beauty of the one rarest moment of my life. Sweet, if you look back, you will find that moment; for it must have been in your arms; and let Love by the master who will paint the immortal picture!

“As for this thin, pale, listless body, which just now answers to name of me, there is nothing in or about it which you know. Presently it will be carried like a half-lifeless thing on board a ship; the winds will blow roughly on it, and it will not care. If God wills, darling, I will come back to you well and strong. If I cannot come well and strong, I hope never to come at all.

“Don’t call me cruel. You would feel the same. I also should combat the resolve in you, as you do in me. But in my heart I should understand. I should sympathize, and I should yield.

“God bless you, darling. I believe He will, for the infinite goodness of your life. I thank Him daily that He has given it to me to bless you a little. If I had see you to say farewell, my beloved, I should not have kissed you many times, as has been our wont. That is for hours of joy. I should have kissed you three times—only three times—on your beautiful, strong, gentle lips, and each kiss would have been a separate sacrament, with a bond of its own. I send them to you here, love, and this is what they mean!

### THREE KISSES OF FAREWELL

Three, only three, my darling,  
Separate, solemn, slow;  
Not like the swift and joyous ones  
We used to know  
When we kissed because we loved each other  
Simply to taste love’s sweet,  
And lavished our kisses as the summer  
Lavishes heat,—  
But as they kiss whose hearts are wrung,  
When hope and fear are spent,  
And nothing is left to give, except  
A sacrament!

First of the three, my darling,  
Is sacred unto pain;  
We have hurt each other often;  
We shall again,  
When we pine because we miss each other,  
And do not understand  
How the written words are so much colder  
Than eye and hand.  
I kiss thee, dear, for all such pain  
Which we may give or take;  
Buried, forgiven, before it comes  
For our love’s sake!

The second kiss, my darling,  
Is full of joy’s sweet thrill;  
We have blessed each other always;  
We always will.  
We shall reach until we feel each other,  
Past all of time and space;  
We shall listen till we hear each other  
In every place;  
The earth is full of messengers,  
Which love sends to and fro;  
I kiss thee, darling, for all joy

Which we shall know!

The last kiss, oh, my darling,  
My love—I cannot see  
Through my tears, as I remember  
What it may be.  
We may die and never see each other,  
Die with no time to give  
Any sign that our hearts are faithful  
To die, as live.  
Token of what they will not see  
Who see our parting breath,  
This one last kiss, my darling, seals  
The seal of death!”

It was on my sixteenth birthday that I copied these letters and poems of Esther Wynn’s. I kept them, with a few other very precious things, in a curious little inlaid box, which came from Venice, and was so old that its sides were worm-eaten in many places. It was one of my choicest treasures, and I was never separated from it.

When I was twenty years old I had been for two years a happy wife, for one year a glad mother, and had for some time remembered Esther only in the vague, passing way in which happy souls recall old shadows of other hearts’ griefs. As my body entered on his second summer he began to droop a little, and the physician had recommended that we should take him to the sea-shore; so it came to pass that on the morning of my twentieth birthday I was sitting, with my baby in my arms, on a rocky sea-shore, in one of the well-known summer resorts of the New Hampshire coast. Near me sat a woman whose face had interested me strangely ever since my arrival. She seemed an invalid; but there was an atmosphere of overflowing vitality about her, in spite of her feebleness, which made her very presence stimulating and cheering to everyone. I had longed to speak with her, but as yet had not done so. While I sat watching her face, and my baby’s, and the face of the sea, she was joined by her husband, who had just come from a walk in the fields, and had brought her a large bouquet of red clover and feathery grasses. She took it eagerly with great delight, and exclaimed:

“I wonder what the clover thinks?  
Intimate friend of Bob-o-links!”

I could not control the sudden start with which I heard these words. Who was this that knew Esther Wynn’s verses by heart? I could hardly refrain from speaking to her at once, and betraying all. But I reflected instantly that I must be very cautious; it would be almost impossible to find out what I longed to know without revealing how my own acquaintance with the verses had come about. Days passed before I ventured to allude to the subject; but one evening, as we were walking together, she stooped and picked a clover-blossom, and said:

“I really think I love red clover better than any wild flower we have.”

“I thought so,” said I, “when I saw you take that big bunch your husband brought you the other morning. That was before I knew you: I felt almost rude, I watched you so, in spite of myself.”

“But I had watched you quite as much,” said she, smiling; “I thought then of giving you a part of the clover. Edward always brings me huge bouquets of it every day; he knows so well how I love it.”

“I heard you quote a charming little couplet of verse about it then,” said I, looking away from her, that she might not see my face: “I was so near you I could not help hearing what you said.

“Oh, yes,” said she,

“‘I wonder what the clover thinks?  
Intimate friend of Bob-o-links—’

“I do not know but that old clover-song is the real reason I love clover so. My mother taught it to me when I was a little child. It is all very quaint and sweet. Would you like to hear it?”

I felt myself color scarlet as a thief, but I replied:—

“Oh yes, pray repeat it.”

When she had repeated the verses she went on speaking, to my great relief, saving me from the necessity of saying anything.

“That was written a great many years ag, by an aunt of my mother’s. My mother has a little manuscript book bound in red morocco, very faded and worn, which my grandmother kept on her bureau till she died, last year; and it has in it this little clover-song and several others, with Aunt Esther’s diary while she was abroad. She died abroad; died in Jerusalem, and was buried there. There was something mysteriously sad in her life, I think: grandmother always sighed when she spoke of her, and used to read in the little red book every day. She was only her half-sister, but she said she loved her better than she did any sister of her own. Once I asked grandmamma to tell me about her, but she said, ‘There is nothing to tell, child. She was never married: she died the autumn before your mother was born, and your mother looked very much like her when she was young. She is like her, too, in many ways,’ and that was grandmamma would ever say. But we always called her Aunt Esther, and know all her verses by heart, and the diary was fascinating. It seems strange to read such vivid written records of people you never saw; don’t you think so?”

“Yes, it must, very,” said I.

She went on: “I always had a very special love for this old Aunt Esther, which I could hardly account for. Am to have the little red book when my mother dies; and”—she hesitated for a moment—“and I named my first baby for her, Esther Wynn. The baby only lived to be a few weeks old, and I often think, as I look at her little gravestone, of the one, so many thousand miles away, alone in a strange land, bearing the same name.”

On my way home I stopped for a few days’ visit at Uncle Jo’s. Late one night, sitting in my old place at his feet in the library, I told him this sequel to the romance of the letters.

“Oh, childie, how could you help showing that you knew about her?” said he. “You must have betrayed it.”

“No, I am sure I did not,” I said. “I never spoke about it after that day, and she was too absorbed herself in the reminiscences to observe my excitement.”

“What was your friend’s name?” said Uncle Jo.

I told him. He sprang from his chair, and walked rapidly away to the end of the library; presently he came back, and standing before me said:

“Nell! Nell! your friend’s mother is the woman of whom I once spoke to you! I might have known that the subtle kinship I felt between Esther Wynn and her was no chance resemblance. I never heard of the name ‘Wynn,’ however. But you said she was only a half-sister; that accounts for it. I might have known! I might have known!” he exclaimed, more to himself than to me and buried his face in his hands. I stole away quietly and left him; but I heard him saying under his breath, “Her aunt! I might have known!”

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