

МАРГАРЕТ ОЛИФАНТ

THE LITTLE PILGRIM:
FURTHER EXPERIENCES

Маргарет Олифант

**The Little Pilgrim:
Further Experiences**

«Public Domain»

Олифант М. У.

The Little Pilgrim: Further Experiences / М. У. Олифант — «Public Domain»,

© Олифант М. У.
© Public Domain

Содержание

I.	5
II.	16
Конец ознакомительного фрагмента.	18

Mrs. Oliphant

The Little Pilgrim: Further Experiences. /

Stories of the Seen and the Unseen

I.

THE LITTLE PILGRIM IN THE SEEN AND UNSEEN

The little Pilgrim, whose story has been told in another place, and who had arrived but lately on the other side, among those who know trouble and sorrow no more, was one whose heart was always full of pity for the suffering. And after the first rapture of her arrival, and of the blessed work which had been given to her to do, and all the wonderful things she had learned of the new life, there returned to her in the midst of her happiness so many questions and longing thoughts that they were touched by them who have the care of the younger brethren, the simple ones of heaven. These questions did not disturb her peace or joy, for she knew that which is so often veiled on earth,—that all is accomplished by the will of the Father, and that nothing can happen but according to His appointment and under His care. And she was also aware that the end is as the beginning to Him who knows all, and that nothing is lost that is in His hand. But though she would herself have willingly borne the sufferings of earth ten times over for the sake of all that was now hers, yet it pierced her soul to think of those who were struggling in darkness, and whose hearts were stifled within them by all the bitterness of the mortal life. Sometimes she would be ready to cry out with wonder that the Lord did not hasten His steps and go down again upon the earth to make all plain; or how the Father himself could restrain His power, and did not send down ten legions of angels to make all that was wrong right, and turn all that was mournful into joy.

'It is but for a little time,' said her companions. 'When we have reached this place we remember no more the anguish.' 'But to them in their trouble it does not seem a little time,' the Pilgrim said. And in her heart there rose a great longing. Oh that He would send me! that I might tell my brethren,—not like the poor man in the land of darkness, of the gloom and misery of that distant place, but a happier message, of the light and brightness of this, and how soon all pain would be over. She would not put this into a prayer, for she knew that to refuse a prayer is pain to the Father, if in His great glory any pain can be. And then she reasoned with herself and said, 'What can I tell them, except that all will soon be well? and this they know, for our Lord has said it; but I am like them, and I do not understand.'

One fair morning while she turned over these thoughts in her mind there suddenly came towards her one whom she knew as a sage, of the number of those who know many mysteries and search into the deep things of the Father. For a moment she wondered if perhaps he came to reprove her for too many questionings, and rose up and advanced a little towards him with folded hands and a thankful heart, to receive the reproof if it should be so,—for whether it were praise or whether it were blame, it was from the Father, and a great honor and happiness to receive. But as he came towards her he smiled and bade her not to fear. 'I am come,' he said, 'to tell you some things you long to know, and to show you some things that are hidden to most. Little sister, you are not to be charged with any mission—'

'Oh, no,' she said, 'oh, no. I was not so presuming—'

'It is not presuming to wish to carry comfort to any soul; but it is permitted to me to open up to you, so far as I may, some of the secrets. The secrets of the Father are all beautiful, but there is sorrow in them as well as joy; and Pain, you know, is one of the great angels at the door.'

'Is his name Pain? and I took him for Consolation!' the little Pilgrim said.

'He is not Consolation; he is the schoolmaster whose face is often stern. But I did not come to tell you of him whom you know; I am going to take you—back,' the wise man said.

'Back!' She knew what this meant, and a great pleasure, yet mingled with fear, came into her mind. She hesitated, and looked at him, and did not know how to accept, though she longed to do so, for at the same time she was afraid. He smiled when he saw the alarm in her face.

'Do you think,' he said, 'that you are to go this journey on your own charges? Had you insisted, as some do, to go at all hazards, you might indeed have feared. And even now I cannot promise that you will not feel the thorns of the earth as you pass; but you will be cared for, so that no harm can come.'

'Ah,' she said wistfully, 'it is not for harm—' and could say nothing more.

He laid his hand upon her arm, and he said, 'Do not fear; though they see you not, it is yet sweet for a moment to be there, and as you pass, it brings thoughts of you to their minds.'

For these two understood each other, and knew that to see and yet not be seen is only a pleasure for those who are most like the Father, and can love without thought of love in return.

When he touched her, it seemed to the little Pilgrim suddenly that everything changed round her, and that she was no longer in her own place, but walking along a weary length of road. It was narrow and rough, and the skies were dim; and as she went on by the side of her guide she saw houses and gardens which were to her like the houses that children build, and the little gardens in which they sow seeds and plant flowers, and take them up again to see if they are growing. She turned to the Sage, saying, 'What are—?' and then stopped and gazed again, and burst out into something that was between laughing and tears. 'For it is home,' she cried, 'and I did not know it! dear home!' Her heart was remorseful, as if she had wounded the little diminished place.

'This is what happens with those who have been living in the king's palaces,' he said with a smile.

'But I love it dearly, I love it dearly!' the little Pilgrim said, stretching out her hands as if for pardon. He smiled at her, consoling her; and then his face changed and grew very grave.

'Little sister,' he said, 'you have come not to see happiness but pain. We want no explanation of the joy, for that flows freely from the heart of the Father, and all is clear between us and Him; but that which you desire to know is why trouble should be. Therefore you must think of Him and be strong, for here is what will rend your heart.'

The little Pilgrim was seized once more with mortal fear. 'O friend,' she cried, 'I have done with pain. Must I go and see others suffering and do nothing for them?'

'If anything comes into your heart to do or say, it will be well for them,' the Sage replied: and he took her by the hand and led her into a house she knew. She began to know them all now, as her vision became accustomed to the atmosphere of the earth. She perceived that the sun was shining, though it had appeared so dim, and that it was a clear summer morning, very early, with still the colors of the dawn in the east. When she went indoors, at first she saw nothing, for the room was darkened, the windows all closed, and a miserable watch-light only burning. In the bed there lay a child whom she knew. She knew them all,—the mother at the bedside, the father near the door, even the nurse who was flitting about disturbing the silence. Her heart gave a great throb when she recognized them all; and though she had been glad for the first moment to think that she had come just in time to give welcome to a little brother stepping out of earth into the better country, a shadow of trouble and pain enveloped her when she saw the others and remembered and knew. For he was their beloved child; on all the earth there was nothing they held so dear. They would have given up their home and all they possessed, and become poor and homeless and wanderers with joy, if God, as they said, would have but spared their child. She saw into their hearts and read all this there; and knowing them, she knew it without even that insight. Everything they would have given up and rejoiced, if but they might have kept him. And there he lay, and was about to die. The little Pilgrim forgot all but the pity of it, and their hearts that were breaking, and the vacant place that was soon to be. She cried out aloud upon the Father with a great cry. She forgot that it was a grief to Him in His great glory to refuse.

There came no reply; but the room grew light as with a reflection out of heaven, and the child in the bed, who had been moving restlessly in the weariness of ending life, turned his head towards her,

and his eyes opened wide, and he saw her where she stood. He cried out, 'Look! mother, mother!' The mother, who was on her knees by the bedside, lifted her head and cried, 'What is it, what is it, O my darling?' and the father, who had turned away his face not to see the child die, came nearer to the bed, hoping they knew not what. Their faces were paler than the face of the dying, upon which there was light; but no light came to them out of the hidden heaven. 'Look! she has come for me,' he said; but his voice was so weak they could not hear him, nor take any comfort. At this the little Pilgrim put out her arms to him, forgetting in her joy the poor people who were mourning, and cried out, 'Oh, but I must go with him! I must take him home!' For this was her own work, and she thought of her wonderings and her questions no more.

Some one touched her on the shoulder, and she looked round; and behind her was a great company of the dear children from the better country, whom the Father had sent, and not her,—lest he should grieve for those he had left behind,—to come for the child and show him the way. She paused for a moment, scarcely willing to give him up; but then her companion touched her and pointed to the other side. Ah, that was different! The mother lay by the side of the bed, her face turned only to the little white body which her child had dropped from him as he came out of his sickness,—her eyes wild with misery, without tears; her feverish mouth open, but no cry in it. The sword of the angel had gone through and through her. She did not even writhe upon it, but lay motionless, cut down, dumb with anguish. The father had turned round again and leaned his head upon the wall. All was over,—all over! The love and the hope of a dozen lovely years, the little sweet companion, the daily joy, the future trust—all—over—as if a child had never been born. Then there rose in the stillness a great and exceeding bitter cry, 'God!' that was all, pealing up to heaven, to the Father, whom they could not see in their anguish, accusing Him, reproaching Him who had done it. Was He their enemy that He had done it? No man was ever so wicked, ever so cruel but he would have spared them their boy,—taken everything and spared them their boy; but God, God! The little Pilgrim stood by and wept. She could do nothing but weep, weep, her heart aching with the pity and the anguish. How were they to be told that it was not God, but the Father; that God was only His common name, His name in law, and that He was the Father. This was all she could think of; she had not a word to say. And the boy had shaken his little bright soul out of the sickness and the weakness with such a look of delight! He knew in a moment! But they—oh, when, when would they know?

Presently she sat outside in the soft breathing airs and little morning breezes, and dried her aching eyes. And the Sage who was her companion soothed her with kind words. 'I said you would feel the thorns as you passed,' he said. 'We cannot be free of them, we who are of mankind.'

'But oh,' she cried amid her tears, 'why,—why? The air of the earth is in my eyes, I cannot see. Oh, what pain it is, what misery! Was it because they loved him too much, and that he drew their hearts away?'

The Sage only shook his head at her, smiling. 'Can one love too much?' he said.

'O brother, it is very hard to live and to see another—I am confused in my mind,' said the little Pilgrim, putting her hand to her eyes. 'The tears of those that weep have got into my soul. To live and see another die,—that was what I was saying; but the child lives like you and me. Tell me, for I am confused in my mind.'

'Listen!' said the Sage; and when she listened she heard the sound of the children going back with a great murmur and ringing of pleasant voices like silver bells in the air, and among them the voice of the child asking a thousand questions, calling them by their names. The two pilgrims listened and laughed to each other for love at the sound of the children. 'Is it for the little brother that you are troubled?' the Sage said in her ear.

Then she was ashamed, and turned from the joyful sounds that were ascending ever higher and higher to the little house that stood below, with all its windows closed upon the light. It was wrapped in darkness though the sun was shining, the windows closed as if they never would open more, and the people within turning their faces to the wall, covering their eyes that they might not see the light

of day. 'O miserable day!' they were saying; 'O dark hour! O life that will never smile again!' She sat between earth and heaven, her eyes smiling, but her mouth beginning to quiver once more. 'Is it to raise their thoughts and their hearts?' she said.

'Little sister,' said he, 'when the Father speaks to you, it is not for me nor for another that He speaks. And what He says to you is—' 'Ah,' said the little Pilgrim, with joy, 'it is for myself, myself alone! As if I were a great angel, as if I were a saint. It drops into my heart like the dew. It is what I need, not for you, though I love you, but for me only. It is my secret between me and Him.'

Her companion bowed his head. 'It is so. And thus has He spoken to the little child. But what He said or why He said it, is not for you or me to know. It is His secret; it is between the little one and his Father. Who can interfere between these two? Many and many are there born on earth whose work and whose life are ordained elsewhere,—for there is no way of entrance into the race of man which is the nature of the Lord, but by the gates of birth; and the work which the Father has to do is so great and manifold that there are multitudes who do but pass through those gates to ascend to their work elsewhere. But the Father alone knows whom he has chosen. It is between the child and Him. It is their secret; it is as you have said.'

The little Pilgrim was silent for a moment, but then turned her head from the bright shining of the skies and the voices of the children which floated farther and farther off, and looked at the house in which there was sorrow and despair. She pointed towards it, and looked at him who was her instructor, and had come to show her how these things were.

'They are to blame,' he said; 'but none will blame them. The little life is hard. The Father, though He is very near, seems far off; and sometimes even His word is as a dream. It is to them as if they had lost their child. Can you not remember?—that was what we said. We have lost—'

Then the little Pilgrim, musing, began to smile, but wept again as she thought of the father and the mother. 'If we were to go,' she said, 'hand in hand, you and I, and tell them that the Father had need of him, that it was not for the little life but for the great and beautiful world above that the child was born; and that he had got great promotion and was gone with the princes and the angels according as was ordained? And why should they mourn? Let us go and tell them—'

He shook his head. 'They could not see us; they would not know us. We should be to them as dreams. If they do not take comfort from our Lord, how could they take comfort from you and me? We could not bring them back their child. They want their child, not only to know that all is well with him,—for they know that all is well with him,—but what they want is their child. They are to blame; but who shall blame them? Not any one that is born of woman. How can we tell them what is the Father's secret and the child's?'

'And yet we could tell them why it must be so?' said the little Pilgrim. 'For they prayed and besought the Lord. O brother, I have no understanding. For the Lord said, "Ask, and it shall be given you;" and they asked, yet they are refused.'

'Little sister, the Father must judge between His children; and he must first be heard who is most concerned. While they were praying, the Father and the child talked together and said what we know not; but this we know, that his heart was satisfied with that which was said to him. Must not the Father do what is best for the child He loves, whatever the other children may say? Nay, did not our own fathers do this on earth, and we submitted to them; how much more He who sees all?'

The little Pilgrim stole softly from his side when he had done speaking, and went back into the darkened house, and saw the mother where she sat weeping and refusing to be comforted, in her sorrow perceiving not heaven nor any consolation, nor understanding that her child had gone joyfully to his Father and her Father, as his soul had required, and as the Lord had willed. Yet though she had not joy but only anguish in her faith, and though her eyes were darkened that she could not see, yet the woman ceased not to call upon God, God, and to hold by Him who had smitten her. And the father of the child had gone into his chamber and shut the door, and sat dumb, opening not his mouth, thinking upon his delightful boy, and how they had walked together and talked together,

and should do so again nevermore. And in their hearts they reproached their God, the giver of all, and accused the Lord to His face, as if He had deceived them, yet clung to Him still, weeping and upbraiding, and would not let Him go. The little Pilgrim wept too, and said many things to them which they could not hear. But when she saw that though they were in darkness and misery, God was in all their thoughts, she bethought herself suddenly of what the poet had said in the celestial city, and of the songs he sang, which were a wonder to the Angels and Powers, of the little life and the sorrowful earth, where men endured all things, yet overcame by the name of the Lord. When this came into her mind, she rose up again softly with a sacred awe, and wept not, but did them reverence; for without any light or guidance in their anguish they yet wavered not, died not, but endured, and in the end would overcome. It seemed to her that she saw the great beautiful angels looking on, the great souls that are called to love and to serve, but not to suffer like the little brethren of the earth; and that among the princes of heaven there was reverence and awe, and even envy of those who thus had their garments bathed in blood, and suffered loss and pain and misery, yet never abandoned their life and the work that had been given them to do.

As she came forth again comforted, she found the Sage standing with his face lifted to heaven, smiling still at the sound, though faint and distant, of the children all calling to each other and shouting together as they reached the gate. 'Oh, hush!' she said; 'let not the mother hear them! for it will make her heart more bitter to think she can never hear again her child's voice.'

'But it is her child's voice,' he said; then very gently, 'they are to blame; but no one will be found to blame them either in earth or heaven.'

The earth pilgrims went far after this, yet more softly than when they first left their beautiful country,—for then the little Pilgrim had been glad, believing that as all had been made clear to her in her own life, so that all that concerned the life of man should be made clear; but this was more hard and encompassed with pain and darkness, as that which is in the doing is always more hard to understand than that which is accomplished. And she learned now what she had not understood, though her companion warned her, how sharp are those thorns of earth that pierce the wayfarer's foot, and that those who come back cannot help but suffer because of love and fellow-feeling. And she learned that though she could smile and give thanks to the Father in the recollection of her own griefs that were past, yet those that are present are too poignant, and to look upon others in their hour of darkness makes His ways more hard to comprehend than even when the sorrow is your own.

While she mused thus, there was suddenly revealed to her another sight. They had gone far before they came to this new scene. Night had crept over the skies all gray and dark; and the sea came in with a whisper which sounded to some like the hush of peace, and to some like the voice of sorrow and moaning, and to some was but the monotony of endless recurrence, in which was no soul. The skies were dark overhead, but opened with a clear shining of light which had no color, towards the west,—for the sun had long gone down, and it was night. The two travellers perceived a woman who came out of a house all lit with lamps and firelight, and took the lonely path towards the sea. And the little Pilgrim knew her, as she had known the father and mother in the darkened house, and would have joined her with a cry of pleasure; but she remembered that the friend could not see her or hear her, being wrapped still in the mortal body, and in a close enveloping mantle of thoughts and cares. The Sage made her a sign to follow, and these two tender companions accompanied her who saw them not, walking darkling by the silent way. The heart of the woman was heavy in her breast. It was so sore by reason of trouble, and for all the bitter wounds of the past, and all the fears that beset her life to come, that she walked, not weeping because of being beyond tears, but as it were bleeding, her thoughts being in her little way like those of His upon whose brow there once stood drops as it were of blood; and out of her heart there came a moaning which was without words. If words had been possible, they would have been as His also, who said, 'Father, forgive them, for they know not what they do.' For those who had wounded her were those whom in all the world she loved most dear; and the quivering of anguish was in her as she walked, seeking the darkness and the silence, and to hide

herself, if that might be, from her own thoughts. She went along the lonely path with the stinging of her wounds so keen and sharp that all her body and soul were as one pain. Greater grief hath no man than this, to be slain and tortured by those whom he loves. When her soul could speak, this was what it said 'Father, forgive them! Father, save them!' She had no strength for more.

This the heavenly pilgrims saw,—for they stood by her as in their own country, where every thought is clear, and saw her heart. But as they followed her and looked into her soul—with their hearts, which were human too, wrung at the sight of hers in its anguish—there suddenly became visible before them a strange sight such as they had never seen before. It was like the rising of the sun; but it was not the sun. Suddenly into the heart upon which they looked there came a great silence and calm. There was nothing said that even they could hear, nor done that they could see; but for a moment the throbbing was stilled, and the anguish calmed, and there came a great peace. The woman in whom this wonder was wrought was astonished, as they were. She gave a low cry in the darkness for wonder that the pain had gone from her in an instant, in the twinkling of an eye. There was no promise made to her that her prayer would be granted, and no new light given to guide her for the time to come; but her pain was taken away. She stood hushed, and lifted her eyes; and the gray of the sea, and the low cloud that was like a canopy above, and the lightening of colorless light towards the west, entered with their great quiet into her heart. 'Is this the peace that passeth all understanding?' she said to herself, confused with the sudden calm. In all her life it had never so happened to her before,—to be healed of her grievous wounds, yet without cause; and while no change was wrought, yet to be put to rest.

'It is our Brother,' said the little Pilgrim, shedding tears of joy. 'It is the secret of the Lord,' said the Sage; but not even they had seen Him passing by.

They walked with her softly in the silence, in the sound of the sea, till the wonder in her was hushed like the pain, and talked with her, though she knew it not. For very soon questions arose in her heart. 'And oh,' she said, 'is this the Lord's reply?' with thankfulness and awe; but because she was human, and knew so little, and was full of impatience, 'Oh, and is this *all*?' was what she next said. 'I asked for *them*, and Thou hast given to *me*—' then the voice of her heart grew louder, and she cried, with the sound of the pain coming back, 'I ask one thing, and Thou givest another. I asked no blessing for me. I asked for them, my Lord, my God. Give it to them—to them!' with disappointment rising in her heart. The little Pilgrim laid her hand upon the woman's arm,—for she was afraid lest our Lord might be displeased, forgetting (for she was still imperfect) that He sees all that is in the soul, and understands and takes no offence,—and said quickly, 'Oh, be not afraid; He will save them too. The blessing will come for them too.'

'At His own time,' said the Sage, 'and in His own way.'

These thoughts rose in the woman's soul. She did not know that they were said to her, nor who said them, but accepted them as if they had come from her own thoughts. For she said to herself, 'This is what is meant by the answer of prayer. It is not what we ask; yet what I ask is according to Thy will, my Lord. It is not riches, nor honors, nor beauty, nor health, nor long life, nor anything of this world. If I have been impatient, this is my punishment,—that the Lord has thought, not of them, but of me. But I can bear all, O my Lord! that and a thousand times more, if Thou wilt but think of them and not of me!'

Nevertheless she returned to her home stilled and comforted; for though her trouble returned to her and was not changed, yet for a moment it had been lifted from her, and the peace which passeth all understanding had entered her heart.

'But why, then,' said the little Pilgrim to her companion, when the friend was gone, 'why will not the Father give to her what she asks? for I know what it is. It is that those whom she loves should love Him and serve Him; and that is His will too, for He would have all love Him, He who loves all.'

'Little sister,' said her companion, 'you asked me why He did not let the child remain upon the earth.'

'Ah, but that is different,' she cried; 'oh, it is different! When you said that the secret was between the child and the Father I knew that it was so; for it is just that the Father should consider us first one by one, and do for us what is best. But it is always best to serve Him. It is best to love him; it is best to give up all the world and cleave to Him, and follow wherever He goes. No man can say otherwise than this,—that to follow the Lord and serve Him, that is well for all, and always the best!'

She spoke so hotly and hastily that her companion could find no room for reply. But he was in no haste; he waited till she had said what was in her heart. Then he replied, 'If it were even so, if the Father heard all prayers, and put forth His hand and forced those who were far off to come near—'

The little Pilgrim looked up with horror in her face, as if he had blasphemed, and said, 'Forced! not so; not so!'

'Yet it must be so,' he said, 'if it is against their desire and will.'

'Oh, not so; not so!' she cried, 'but that He should change their hearts.'

'Yet that too against their will,' he said.

The little Pilgrim paused upon the way; and her heart rose against her companion, who spoke things so hard to be received, and that seemed to dishonor the work of the Lord. But she remembered that it could not be so, and paused before she spoke, and looked up at him with eyes that were full of wonder and almost of fear. 'Then must they perish?' she said, 'and must her heart break?' and her voice sank low for pity and sorrow. Though she was herself among the blessed, yet the thorns and briars of the earth caught at her garments and pierced her tender feet.

'Little sister,' said the Sage, 'to us who are born of the earth it is hard to remember that the child belongs not first to the parents, nor the husband to the wife, nor the wife to the husband, but that all are the children of the Father. And He is just; He will not neglect the little one because of those prayers which the father and the mother pour forth to Him, although they cry with anguish and with tears. Nor will He break His great law and violate the nature He has made, and compel His own child to what it wills not and loves not. The woman is comforted in the breaking of her heart; but those whom she loves, are not they also the children of the Father, who loves them more than she does? And each is to Him as if there were not another in the world. Nor is there any other in the world,—for none can come between the Father and the child.'

A smile came upon the little Pilgrim's face, yet she trembled. 'It is dim before me,' she said, 'and I cannot see clearly. Oh, if the time would but hasten, that our Lord might come, and all struggles be ended, and the darkness vanish away!'

'He will come when all things are ready,' said the Sage; and as they went upon their way he showed her other sights, and the mysteries of the heart of man, and the great patience of our Lord.

It happened to them suddenly to perceive in their way a man returning home. These are words that are sweet to all who have lived upon the earth and known its ways; but far, far were they from that meaning which is sweet. The dark hours had passed, and men had slept; and the night was over. The sun was rising in the sky, which was keen and clear with the pleasure of the morning. The air was fresh with the dew, and the birds awaking in the trees, and the breeze so sweet that it seemed to blow from heaven; and to the two travellers it seemed almost in the joy of the new day as if the Lord had already come. But here was one who proved that it was not so. He had not slept all the night, nor had night been silent to him nor dark, but full of glaring light and noise and riot; his eyes were red with fever and weariness, and his soul was sick within him, and the morning looked him in the face and upbraided him as a sister might have upbraided him, who loved him. And he said in his heart, as one had said of old, that all was vanity; that it was vain to live, and evil to have been born; that the day of death was better than the day of birth, and all was delusion, and love but a word, and life a lie. His footsteps on the road seemed to sound all through the sleeping world; and when he looked the morning in the face he was ashamed, and cursed the light. The two went after him into a silent house, where everybody slept. The light that had burned for him all night was sick like a guilty thing in the eye of day, and all that had been prepared for his repose was ghastly to him in the hour of

awaking, as if prepared not for sleep but for death. His heart was sick like the watch-light, and life flickered within him with disgust and disappointment. For why had he been born, if this were all?—for all was vanity. The night and the day had been passed in pleasure, and it was vanity; and now his soul loathed his pleasures, yet he knew that was vanity too, and that next day he would resume them as before. All was vain,—the morning and the evening, and the spirit of man and the ways of human life. He looked himself in the face and loathed this dream of existence, and knew that it was naught. So much as it had cost to be born, to be fed, and guarded and taught and cared for, and all for this! He said to himself that it was better to die than to live, and never to have been than to be.

As these spectators stood by with much pity and tenderness looking into the weariness and sickness of this soul, there began to be enacted before them a scene such as no man could have seen, which no one was aware of save he who was concerned, and which even to him was not clear in its meanings, but rather like a phantasmagoria, a thing of the mists; yet which was great and solemn as is the council of a king in which great things are debated for the welfare of the nations. The air seemed in a moment to be full of the sound of footsteps, and of something more subtle, which the Sage and the Pilgrim knew to be wings; and as they looked, there grew before them the semblance of a court of justice, with accusers and defenders; but the judge and the criminal were one. Then was put forth that indictment which he had been making up in his soul against life and against the world; and again another indictment which was against himself. And then the advocates began their pleadings. Voices were there great and eloquent, such as are familiar in the courts above, which sounded forth in the spectators' ears earnest as those who plead for life and death. And these speakers declared that sin only is vanity, that life is noble and love sweet, and every man made in the image of God, to serve both God and man; and they set forth their reasons before the judge and showed him mysteries of life and death; and they took up the counter-indictment and proved to him how in all the world he had sought but himself, his own pleasure and profit, his own will, not the will of God, nor even the good desire of humble nature, but only that which pleased his sick fancies and his self-loving heart. And they besought him with a thousand arguments to return and choose again the better way. 'Arise,' they cried, 'thou, miserable, and become great; arise, thou vain soul, and become noble. Take thy birthright, O son, and behold the face of the Father.' And then there came a whispering of lower voices, very penetrating and sweet, like the voices of women and children, who murmured and cried, 'O father! O brother! O love! O my child!' The man who was the accused, yet who was the judge, listened; and his heart burned, and a longing arose within him for the face of the Father and the better way. But then there came a clang and clamor of sound on the other side; and voices called out to him as comrade, as lover, as friend, and reminded him of the delights which once had been so sweet to him, and of the freedom he loved; and boasted the right of man to seek what was pleasant and what was sweet, and flouted him as a coward whose aim was to save himself, and scorned him as a believer in old wives' tales and superstitions that men had outgrown. And their voices were so vehement and full of passion that by times they mastered the others, so that it was as if a tempest raged round the soul which sat in the midst, and who was the offender and yet the judge of all.

The two spectators watched the conflict, as those who watch the trial upon which hangs a man's life. It seemed to the little Pilgrim that she could not keep silent, and that there were things which she could tell him which no one knew but she. She put her hand upon the arm of the Sage and called to him, 'Speak you, speak you! he will hear you; and I too will speak, and he will not resist what we say.' But even as she said this, eager and straining against her companion's control, the strangest thing ensued. The man who was set there to judge himself and his life; he who was the criminal, yet august upon his seat, to weigh all and give the decision; he before whom all those great advocates were pleading,—a haze stole over his eyes. He was but a man, and he was weary, and subject to the sway of the little over the great, the moment over the life, which is the condition of man. While yet the judgment was not given or the issue decided, while still the pleadings were in his ears, in a moment his head dropped back upon his pillow, and he fell asleep. He slept like a child, as if there was no

evil, nor conflict, nor danger, nor questions, more than how best to rest when you are weary, in all the world. And straightway all was silent in the place. Those who had been conducting this great cause departed to other courts and tribunals, having done all that was permitted them to do. And the man slept, and when it was noon woke and remembered no more.

The Sage led the little Pilgrim forth in a great confusion, so that she could not speak for wonder. But he said, 'This sleep also was from the Father; for the mind of the man was weary, and not able to form a judgment. It is adjourned until a better day.'

The little Pilgrim hung her head and cried, 'I do not understand. Will not the Lord interfere? Will not the Father make it clear to him? Is he the judge between good and evil? Is it all in his own hand?'

The Sage spoke softly, as if with awe. He said, 'This is the burden of our nature, which is not like the angels. There is none in heaven or on earth that can take from him what is his right and great honor among the creatures of God. The Father respects that which He has made. He will force no child of His. And there is no haste with Him; nor has it ever been fathomed among us how long He will wait, or if there is any end. The air is full of the coming and going of those who plead before the sons of men; and sometimes in great misery and trouble there will be a cause won and a judgment recorded which makes the universe rejoice. And in everything at the end it is proved that our Lord's way is the best, and that all can be accomplished in His name.'

The little Pilgrim went on her way in silence, knowing that the longing in her heart which was to compel them to come in, like that king who sent to gather his guests from the highways and the hedges, could not be right, since it was not the Father's way, yet confused in her soul, and full of an eager desire to go back and wake that man and tell him all that had been in her heart while she watched him sitting on his judgment-seat. But there came recollections wafted across her mind as by breezes of the past, of scenes in her earthly life when she had spoken without avail, when she had said all that was in her heart and failed, and done harm when she had meant to do good. And slowly it came upon her that her companion spoke the truth, and that no man can save his brother; but each must sit and hear the pleadings and pronounce that judgment which is for life or death. 'But oh,' she cried, 'how long and how bitter it is for those who love them, and must stand by and can give no aid!'

Then her companion unfolded to her the patience of the Lord, and how He is not discouraged, nor ever weary, but opens His great assizes year by year and day by day; and how the cause was argued again, as she had seen it, before the souls of men, sometimes again and again and over and over, till the pleadings of the advocates carried conviction, and the judge perceived the truth and consented to it. He showed her that this was the great thing in human life, and that though it was not enough to make a man perfect, yet that he who sinned against his will was different from the man who sinned with his will; and how in all things the choice of the man for good or evil was all in all. And he led her about the world so that she could see how everywhere the heavenly advocates were travelling, entering into the secret places of the souls, and pleading with each man to his face. And the little Pilgrim looked on with pitying and tender eyes, and it seemed to her that the heart of the judge, before whom that great question was debated, leaned mostly to the right, and acknowledged that the way of the Lord was the best way; but either that sleep overpowered him and weariness, or the other voices deafened his ears, or something betrayed him that he forgot the reasons of the wise and the judgment of his own soul. At first it comforted her to see how something nobler in every man would answer to the pleadings; and then her heart failed her, to perceive that notwithstanding this the judge would leave his seat without a decision, and all would end in vanity. 'And oh, friend,' she cried, 'what shall be done to those who see and yet refuse?'—her heart being wrung by the disappointment and the failure. But her companion smiled still, and he said, 'They are the children of the Father. Can a woman forget her child that she should not have compassion on the son of her womb? She may forget; yet will not He forget.' And thus they went on and on.

But time would not suffice to tell what these two pilgrims saw as they wandered among the ways of men. They saw poverty and misery and pain, which came of the evil which man had done upon the earth, and were his punishment, and could be cured by nothing but by the return of each to his Father, and the giving up of all self-worship and self-seeking and sin. But amid all the confusion and among those who had fallen the lowest they found not one who was forsaken, whose name the Father had forgotten, or who was not made to pause in his appointed moment, and to sit upon his throne and hear the pleadings before him of the great advocates of God, reasoning of temperance and righteousness and judgment to come.

But once before they returned to their home, a great thing befell them; and they beheld that court sit, and the pleadings made, for the last time upon earth, which was a sight more solemn and terrible than anything they had yet seen. They found themselves in a chamber where sat a man who had lived long and known both good and evil, and fulfilled many great offices, so that he was famed and honored among men. He was a man who was wise in all the learning of the earth, standing but a little way below those who have begun the higher learning in the world beyond, and lifting up his head as if he would reach the stars. The travellers stood by him in his beautiful house, which was as the palace of wisdom, and saw him in the midst of all his honors. The lamps were lit within, and the night was sweet without, breathing of rest and happy ease, and riches and knowledge, as if they would endure forever. And the man looked round on all he had, and all he had achieved, and everything which he possessed, to enjoy it. For of wisdom and of glory he had his fill, and his soul was yet strong to take pleasure in what was his, and he looked around him like God, and said that everything was good; so that the little Pilgrim gazed, and wondered whether this could indeed be one of the brethren of the earth, or if he was one who had wandered hither from another sphere.

But as the thought arose, she heard, and lo! the steps of the pleaders and the sound of their entry. They came slowly like a solemn procession, more grave and awful in their looks than any she had seen, for they were great and the greatest of all, such as come forth but rarely when the last word is to be said. The words they said were few; but they stood round him reminding him of all that had been, and of what must be, and of many things which were known but to God and him alone, and calling upon him yet once more before time should come to an end and life be lost. But the sound of their voices in his ear was but as some great strain of music which he had heard many times and knew and heeded not. He turned to the goods which he had laid up for many years, and all the knowledge he had stored, and said to himself, 'Soul, take thine ease.' And to the heavenly advocates he smiled and replied that life was strong and wisdom the master of all. Then there came a chill and a shiver over all, as if the earth had been stopped in her career or the sun fallen from the sky; and the little Pilgrim, looking on, could see the heavenly pleaders come forth with bowed heads and the door of hope shut to, and a whisper which crept about from sea to sea and said, 'In vain! in vain!' And as they went forth from the gates an icy breath swept in, and the voice of the Death-Angel saying, 'Thou fool, this night thy soul shall be required of thee!' The sound went through her heart as if it had been pierced by a sword, and she gave a cry of anguish, for she could not bear that a brother should be lost. But when she looked up at the face of her companion, though it was pale with the pity and the terror of that which had been thus accomplished, there was still upon it a smile; and he said, 'Not yet; not yet. The Father loves not less, but more than ever.' 'O friend,' she cried, 'will there ever come a moment when the Father will forget? IS there any place where He cannot go?'

Then he who was wise turned towards her, and a great light came upon his face; and he said, 'We have searched the records, and heard all witnesses from the beginnings of time; but we have never found the boundary of His mercy, and there is no country known to man that is without his presence. And never has it been known that He has shut His ear to those who called upon Him, or forgotten one who is His. The heavenly pleaders may be silenced, but never our Lord, who pleads for all; and heaven and earth may forget, yet will He never forget who is the Father of all. And every child of His is to Him as if there was none other in the world.'

Then the little Pilgrim lifted her face and beheld that radiance which is over all, which is the love that lights the world, both angels and the great spheres above and the little brethren who stumble and struggle and weep; and in that light there was no darkness at all, but everything shone as in the morning, sweet yet terrible, but ever clear and fair. And immediately, ere she was aware, the rough roads of the earth were left far behind, and she had returned to her place, and to her peaceful state, and to the work which had been given her,—to receive the wanderers and to bid them a happy welcome as the doors opened and they entered into their inheritance. And thus her soul was satisfied, though she knew now nothing more than she had known always,—that the eye of the Father is over all, and that He can neither forget nor forsake.

II. ON THE DARK MOUNTAINS

When the little Pilgrim had been thus permitted to see the secret workings of God in earthly places, and among the brethren who are still in the land of hope,—these being things which the angels desire to look into, and which are the subject of story and of song not only in the little world below, but in the great realms above,—her heart for a long time reposed and was satisfied, and asked no further question. For she had seen what the dealings of the Father were in the hearts of men, and how till the end came He did not cease to send His messengers to plead in every heart, and to hold a court of justice that no man might be deceived, but each know whither his steps were tending, and what was the way of wisdom. After this it was permitted to her to read in the archives of the heavenly country the story of one, who, neglecting all that the advocates of God could say, had found himself, when the little life was completed, not upon the threshold of a better country, but in the midst of the Land of Darkness,—that region in which the souls of men are left by God to their own devices, and the Father stands aloof, and hides His face and calls them not, neither persuades them more. Over this story the little Pilgrim had shed many tears; for she knew well, being enlightened in her great simplicity by the heavenly wisdom, that it was pain and grief to the Father to turn away His face; and that no one who has but the little heart of a man can imagine to himself what that sorrow is in the being of the great God. And a great awe came over her mind at the thought, which seemed well-nigh a blasphemy, that He could grieve; yet in her heart, being His child, she knew that it was true. And her own little spirit throbbled through and through with longing and with desire to help those who were thus utterly lost. 'And oh!' she said, 'if I could but go! There is nothing which could make a child afraid, save to see them suffer. What are darkness and terror when the Father is with you? I am not afraid—if I might but go!' And by reason of her often pleading, and of the thought that was ever in her mind, it was at last said that one of those who knew might instruct her, and show her by what way alone the travellers who come from that miserable land could approach and be admitted on high.

'I know,' she said, 'that between us and them there is a gulf fixed, and that they who would come from thence cannot come, neither can any one—'

But here she stopped in great dismay, for it seemed that she had thus answered her own longing and prayer.

The guide who had come for her smiled upon her and said, 'But that was before the Lord had ended His work. And now all the paths are free wherever there is a mountain-pass or a river-ford; the roads are all blessed, and they are all open, and no barriers for those who will.'

'Oh,' she cried, 'dear friend, is that true for all?'

He looked away from her into the depths of the lovely air, and he replied: 'Little sister, our faith is without bounds, but not our knowledge. I who speak to you am no more than a man. The princes and powers that are in high places know more than I; but if there be any place where a heart can stir and cry out to the Father and He take no heed,—if it be only in a groan, if it be only with a sigh,—I know not that place, yet many depths I know.' He put out his hand and took hers after a pause; and then he said, 'There are some who are stumbling upon the dark mountains. Come and see.'

As they passed along, there were many who paused to look at them, for he had the mien of a great prince, a lord among men; and his face still bore the trace of sorrow and toil, and there was about him an awe and wonder which was more than could be put in words. So that those who saw him understood as he went by, not who he was, nor what he had been, but that he had come out of great tribulation, of sorrow beyond the sorrows of men. The sweetness of the heavenly country had soothed away his care, and taken the cloud from his face; but he was as yet unaccustomed to smile, —though when he remembered and looked round him and saw that all was well, his countenance

lightened like the morning sky, and his eyes woke up in splendor like the sun rising. The little Pilgrim did not know who her brother was, but yet gave thanks to God for him, she knew not why.

How far they went cannot be estimated in words, for distance matters little in that place; but at the end they came to a path which sloped a little downwards to the edge of a delightful moorland country, all brilliant with the hues of the mountain flowers. It was like a flowery plateau high among the hills, in a region where are no frosts to check the glow of the flowers, or scorch the grass. It spread far around in hollows and ravines and softly swelling hills, with the rush over them of a cheerful breeze full of mountain scents and sounds; and high above them rose the mountain heights of the celestial world, veiled in those blue breadths of distance which are heaven itself when man's fancy ascends to them from the low world at their feet. All the little earth can do in color and mists, and travelling shadows fleet as the breath, and the sweet steadfast shining of the sun, was there, but with a ten-fold splendor. They rose up into the sky, every peak and jagged rock all touched with the light and the smile of God, and every little blossom on the turf rejoicing in the warmth and freedom and peace. The heart of the little Pilgrim swelled, and she cried out, 'There is nothing so glorious as the everlasting hills. Though the valleys and the plains are sweet, they are not like them. They say to us, lift up your heart!'

Her guide smiled, but he did not speak. His smile was full of joy, but grave, like that of a man whose thoughts are bent on other things; and he pointed where the road wound downwards by the feet of these triumphant hills. She kept her eyes upon them as she moved along. Those heights rose into the very sky, but bore upon them neither snow nor storm. Here and there a whiteness like a film of air rounded out over a peak; and she recognized that it was one of those angels who travel far and wide with God's commissions, going to the other worlds that are in the firmament as in a sea. The softness of these films of white was like the summer clouds that she used to watch in the blue of the summer sky in the little world which none of its children can cease to love; and she wondered now whether it might not sometimes have been the same dear angels whose flight she had watched unknowing, higher than thought could soar or knowledge penetrate. Watching those floating heavenly messengers, and the heights of the great miraculous mountains rising up into the sky, the little Pilgrim ceased to think whither she was going, although she knew from the feeling of the ground under her feet that she was descending, still softly, but more quickly than at first, until she was brought to herself by the sensation of a great wind coming in her face, cold as from a sudden vacancy. She turned her head quickly from gazing above to what was before her, and started with a cry of wonder. For below lay a great gulf of darkness, out of which rose at first some shadowy peaks and shoulders of rock, all falling away into a gloom which eyes accustomed to the sunshine could not penetrate. Where she stood was the edge of the light,—before her feet lay a line of shadow slowly darkening out of daylight into twilight, and beyond into that measureless blackness of night; and the wind in her face was like that which comes from a great depth below of either sea or land,—the sweep of the current which moves a vast atmosphere in which there is nothing to break its force. The little Pilgrim was so startled by these unexpected sensations that she caught the arm of her guide in her sudden alarm, and clung to him, lest she should fall into the terrible darkness and the deep abyss below.

Конец ознакомительного фрагмента.

Текст предоставлен ООО «ЛитРес».

Прочитайте эту книгу целиком, [купив полную легальную версию](#) на ЛитРес.

Безопасно оплатить книгу можно банковской картой Visa, MasterCard, Maestro, со счета мобильного телефона, с платежного терминала, в салоне МТС или Связной, через PayPal, WebMoney, Яндекс.Деньги, QIWI Кошелек, бонусными картами или другим удобным Вам способом.