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THE GARDENER'S DAUGHTER; Or, Love Rewarded.

BY A. S. N.

Her cheek was pale and thinner than should be for one so young,
And her eyes on all my motions with a mute observance hung.

CHAPTER I.

A soft, golden June sunset bathed the whole country-side in a flood of radiance. The whole pendant blossoms of the acacia and the delicate green of the just opened foliage were rippled by the low west wind that was beginning to stir among the tree tops, burdened by its freight of perfume stolen from the distant clover fields and the new mown hays and the clustering roses—crimson, white, and blush-tinted—that clothed the unpainted cottage, nestled in at the windows, or disputed the outstanding trellises with honeysuckle, climbing plants, or hardy grape vines—a wealth, a mass of blossoms and tendrils, and emerald leaves.

A shy, slight child, at first sight neither plain nor attractive, looked out eagerly from the gate way down the road to the distant town, with the dust, and in its unshaded barrenness. Strange contrast to the nook of verdure which we have described! It seemed as if some solitude must, perforce, shadow this spot from the desolate common, covered by a crop of stunted weeds, and crossed in every direction with a network of foot paths or metal cart tracks. A sluggish stream wound sullenly among them; and a few huts of miserable structure were scattered here and there, the only other human habitation within sight.

It was indeed a miracle of patient industry and forethought that had rescued this lovely home and the fertile gardens which surrounded it from what was once all desolate and barren. At first, a little patch of ground, scarcely an acre, was enclosed around an old, country house long deserted, and falling into decay. All that remained of its former occupancy were the fine old trees that had shaded its roof, which first attracted the Scotch gardener, Allen Palmer, in his search for a home in the New World. Here he settled for his experiment, reaping the house and garden spot, and spending his little capital in repairs and renovating the worn out soil. His wife, like himself, frugal and industrious, shared with him their earlier toil. Neither she nor her husband, in the heat of summer noonday, and the cold of rainy spring were alike unheeded until their home was their own, blossoming into the promise of its present luxuriance, and yielded a fair return for the original outlay. Little by little they purchased, and dressed, and tilled the barren land, turning the weedy stream to usefulness, and profiting by a knowledge of soils and favorable exposure, then little attended to, or indeed understood in the busy New World.

One thing was against them—the market was so far off. It was the journey of a day to transport the vegetables thither, and dispose of them profitably; and the gardener could afford but two from every week without neglecting his other duties. But they were rewarded with spring delicacies, and latest with successes, so, in spite of this drawback, Allen Palmer had become a prosperous man.

His one wealth, his pride, had developed and strengthened by the honest toil; her earlier hardships, and the first few years of ease and anxiety had stolen slowly strength and health from his one friend and helpmate, so much loved, all-enduring wife. He did her dream how heavily the burden had fallen upon her till the crowning blessing of a child was given to them; and when, in her weakness, she thought life had nothing more to offer, he watched in vain for the old buoyancy of step and tone to return to the mother of his child. One. She lived to hear the little voice prattling to the birds and flowers, to guide its first tottering steps through the shaded garden walks, and then left them both, satisfied, as her life had always been dependent on each other for comfort and companionship.

An old servant was the only person Christine had known her father for; and she was young. When occasional visitors came, she ran away from the garden, her natural shyness heightened by t is unusual seclusion, and hid, clinging to old Betsy's garments, until the intruder was gone. The evening was her delight. Then she sat on her father's knee, and smoothed his fair hair, silvering now upon the temples, or patted his rough, sunburned cheek, and sang, and talked, and questioned him of her departed mother, or his old home, until he came to look upon her more as a loving friend than a child. The wild children of the surrounding huts were no playfellows for her; the farm houses were too far off to find no companions there; but she was satisfied with her flowers and pets, and never knew what she lacked in merriment, or what she escaped in coarse content.

She could not always remain a child, following her father, or aiding old Betsy with her busy, helpful hands, and satisfied with the scenes of her childhood. Her father had no few old books that but for her would have late dusty and undisturbed upon the window sill. The gardener began to think of this; and to rouse from his dreams of the world might befal his orphan child should he too be taken away from her, and so to regret the severed ties of kindred and friends in the Old World.

The thin, wistful face looked longer than usual for the firm market cart Christine could tell so far off. Twice she ran into the house to be sure there was nothing wanting on the supper table she had arranged with her own hands; or to hasten old Betsy's preparations in the kitchen. And when the sober brown horse trotted slowly into view, Christine saw with a sinking heart that her father's face was not alone. She shrank back, hoping that the stranger was a wayfarer, and would pass on; but no. When the wheels paused by so closely that they brushed the low fence behind which she was hidden, she saw by a leathern valise and packages in the wagon that, for the first time since her recollection, a visitor had come to stay at the cottage, for which had watched for her father, and anticipated his coming, after a whole day of absence, so eagerly, that great hot tears of disappointment sprang to her eyes, and she had to stay her feet lately on the ground, with her apron thrown over her face, sobbing harder and harder at fancied neglect, as minute after minute went by, and her father did not come to seek her. He had looked through every room, and wondered at her absence before he came to the door, and then, with a sudden second time so imperatively, that she dared not disobey. How she hated the stranger, whoever, he was, as he walked slowly to the house, with her father, her eyelids swollen to shake the tears from her long lashes, to which they sprung again in spite of her resolution and her pride!

The room was just as she had left it; flowers everywhere where a nosegay could be placed, filling up the center of the wide-mouthed fireplace and reflected on the shining brasses over which they fell, in a mass of shadowy grace, its twisted legs and cloven feet in the corner; on the grandest piece of furniture in the room, called by Betsy a "secretary;" the drawers somewhat of a place for her treasures, and curious receiver and pigeon holes were a wonder still to Christy when her father sat before it making out his accounts or arranging his few papers.

All was so neat, and fresh, and shining with cleanliness, and the supper table looked so inviting, now that Betsy brought in fresh vegetables with their appetizing odor, and the cold joint from yesterday's dinner, that the guest congratulated himself on the excellent quarters into which chance and the market had conveyed him, happily unconscious of the unfavorable scanning of the child standing in the doorway. He was seated in what had been her mother's chair—an offence in itself, for it was only used by strangers, Christy had ventured to occupy it, and always, when she did so, felt grander and more important than at any other time in her life, and held herself very stratly from all contact with its carved cones back and sides. But the stranger—what did he know of its sacredness?—he lolled back comfortably at his ease, and was amusing himself with evident complacency in the little oak-framed mirror between the windows, on which the last slanting sunlight fell.

"Who can he be?" thought Christy, waiting her father's re-appearance from the table, where he had gone to superintend personally the comfort of old Dobbin. "He's more like a picture in a book than my father, or John, or old Mr. Rumsle. How white his hands are! how his hair curls!—just as mine would if Betsy would not cut it off every time." And he was young, too, younger than any man she had ever seen; little and graceful in figure, but with pale features, and listless in attitude, as if suffering from ill health. He was, in fact, just recovering from a severe illness, and had been ordered to the country for a change of air and total cessation of the studies which had so absorbed him as to make him forgetful that knowledge without health was unavailing. Strolling through the market in search of early fruit—all that his appetite craved—he encountered his old acquaintance the gardener, who had served him with many a tasteful if not costly bouquet during his residence in lodgings, had proposed himself as guest, and so suddenly found the arrangement accepted.

It was plain to see that Allen Palmer liked his young acquaintance. Perhaps he was no other of all his chance customers whom he would have admitted to his little household. As it was he turned a deaf ear to old Betsy's muttered wonderings, and ordered that the only occupied room to be put in readiness for their visitor.

"But I never will like him. I don't care how long he stays," the child said petulantly to herself, as she stood beside her father's chair, later in the evening.

The twilight was suddenly replaced by the unclouded splendor of the just risen moon, tracing the foliage across the mottled stripes in the uncarpeted floor, and making the low room and its homely furniture picturesque. Her father's arm was around her; but he scarcely seemed to know it as he talked on as she had never heard him talk before. There was all her little news of the day still untold—the first blossoming of the white rose tree, the loss of a favorite chicken from her little brood, and unreserved lecture from the old servant to be deprecated, and still, for the first time in her recollection, a stranger absorbed all his thoughts. It was very hard; and she looked out into the garden, and the moonlight brought strange, sad thoughts, as it often did, of her unknown mother, and a yearning for sympathy and companionship which she had never felt before, and scarcely understood now, until she stole away to bed without a good-night kiss, for the first time in her life, and cried herself to sleep.

Eternally miserable as Christy determined to be at night, she had to confess herself quite resigned and even interested before the next day was over. She had slept soundly, and made an acquaintance with Mr. Wiley while dusting and arranging his room, a task at which Betsy had allowed her as he had gone to look for a look over the garden with her father. It was in wonderful confusion, to be sure; clothes hanging on the high, slender bed-posts, and lying on the floor near the valise, which he pulled out of the open valise; drawing materials and toilet articles scattered about; and, greatest treasure of all, a pile of books tumbled down as heedlessly.

It was a very plain, unadorned, chamber, low, as were all the rooms, with open rafters overhead, on which were deposited Betsy's accumulation of dried medicinal herbs, with thyme, and sage, and various other winter herbs for zouns and dressings for the kitchen. The one window admitted save the drooping branches of a weeping willow and one adventurous spray of climbing roses, just now flushed with buds and blossoms. But the busy little hands did their best. The bed, with its blue and white counterpane, was straightened into most tidy precision, the clothes gathered together on a single chair for Betsy's longer arms to dispose of. But the pains bestowed upon her large grey eyes lighted by the wonderful interest of the story.

Her face flushed into positive beauty for a moment as she looked up at her father, stealing glances to find Mr. Wiley quietly seated and watching her from the foot of the bed. She had heard the footsteps, and thinking it only the old servant come to chide her for her idleness, she sat still, spell-bound by the legend.

Shame and timidity struggled together as she sprang up, and would have escaped from the room, had he not seized her hands, and held her a prisoner before him.

"And so you read Coleridge?" he said, "and Shelly, too, perhaps? Why, what a wonderful little maiden! Who taught you to like poetry? Oh, no, I can't let you go yet awhile!" And, after a time, she ceased to struggle, and stood passive, while his soft hand brushed the hair back from her face as a woman might have done.

Christy never exactly understood how it came about; but she ceased to think he was so formidable, though a wholesome awe never quite departed, and she was soon showing him the flower garden, and making him the recipient of yesterday's confidence, and looking ahead of her in her, who certainly did not deserve it, she thought.

That evening she listened to the conversation instead of watching the moonlight, although it was not of the subjects she liked best. She could not understand all they said about railroads, and real estate, and the greatly increased value of her father's land if it could only be brought nearer to the market.

But it was pleasant to see her father so interested, instead of talking, as he did, so much to her, so often did in the evening, and to hear Mr. Wiley's pleasant voice, and watch his face, knowing that he could not see her for the shadow in which she sat.

A whole host of new pleasures was suddenly opened to the child, young in heart and experience rather than in years, for she had passed her thirteenth birthday. Almost incapable of exertion, as the convalescent felt himself to be, talking to this little maiden with her strange fancies and sometimes startling thoughts was the occupation that best suited him. He gave her free access to his books, and wondered at her quick intelligence, and the ability with which she read and comprehended. He took long strolls over the unfruitful common with her by his side, silently holding her by his hand if he had fallen into a reverie of the glorious career he would carve out for himself, of the fame, and fortune, and love he was sure to win. So wild young, untried enthusiasm, leaping over all intervening obstacles with the largest faith in the future. Or, if he chatted to her, that was more delightful still. He told her of scenes and adventures, some years older, of pictures that she would learn to understand if she could see them, of the actual world beyond this narrow life which now seemed bounded and circumscribed, until she began to wonder if it would always be thus, or whether she should some day see and hear and learn for herself.

"Have you never been to town?" Mr. Wiley said one evening, after he had already been an inmate for some weeks, and had rapidly improved in health, "Love you ever been to town?" he repeated, in answer to her half-revealed hesitation. "Never? and within seven miles of its hustle and confusion! Would you like to go some day?"

"O, yes, very much!" she replied; and the child's heart gave a great bound, but as suddenly sank again. "With you, I mean," she added timidly. "I should not be afraid then, of course."

"Less afraid with me than your father, Christy?"

"Yes; because he would be too busy to could not attend to me, you know," replied Christine.

"Well, you shall go, little one," said Mr. Wiley. "I am suddenly recalled to town to-morrow, but in one most other respects I dread the return to a town life, after the quiet and peace of these last three weeks. You shall go and see my mother."

The gardener hesitated, and pondered for a moment over the proposition—"But if Mr. Wiley was so good as to be troubled with the child, he saw no reason to say nay," he said at length; and Christine ran headlong to her room, and