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A Red Wallflower

Susan Warner

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A RED WALLFLOWER

BY SUSAN WARNER AUTHOR OF 'THE WIDE, WIDE WORLD,'
'QUEECHY,' ETC.

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STREET W

NOTE TO THE READER.

The story following is again in its whole chain of skeleton facts a true story. I beg to observe, in particular, that the denominational feeling described in both families, with the ways it showed itself, is part of the truth of the story, and no invention of mine.

S. W.

MARTLAER'S ROCK, June 25, 1884.

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A RED WALLFLOWER.

CHAPTER I.

AFTER DANDELIONS.

It is now a good many years ago that an English family came over from the old country and established itself in one of the small villages that are scattered along the shore of Connecticut. Why they came was not clearly understood, neither was it at all to be gathered from their way of life or business. Business properly they had none; and their way of life seemed one of placid contentment and unenterprising domestic pleasure. The head of the family was a retired army officer, now past the prime of his years; tall, thin, grey, and grave; but a gentleman through and through. Everybody liked Colonel Gainsborough, although nobody could account for a man of his age leading what seemed such a profitless life. He was doing really nothing; staying at home with his wife and his books. Why had he come to Connecticut at all? If he lived for pleasure, surely his own country would have been a better place to seek it. Nobody could solve this riddle. That Colonel Gainsborough had anything to be ashamed of, or anything to be afraid of, entered nobody's head for a moment. Fear or shame were unknown to that grave, calm, refined face. The whisper got about, how, it is impossible to say, that his leaving home had been occasioned by a disagreement with his relations. It might be so. No one could ask him, and the colonel never volunteered to still curiosity on the subject.

The family was small. Only a wife and one little girl came with the colonel to America; and they were attended by only two old retainers, a man and a woman. They hired no other servants after their arrival, which, however, struck nobody as an admission of

scantness of means. According to the views and habits of the countryside, two people were quite enough to look after three; the man outside and the woman inside the house. Christopher Bounder took care of the garden and the cow, and cut and made the hay from one or two little fields. And Mrs. Barker, his sister, was a very capable woman indeed, and quite equal to the combined duties of house-keeper, cook, lady's maid, and housemaid, which she fulfilled to everybody's satisfaction, including her own. However, after two or three years in Seaforth these duties were somewhat lessened; the duties of Mrs. Barker's hands, that is, for her head had more to do. Mrs. Gainsborough, who had been delicate and failing for some time, at last died, leaving an almost inconsolable husband and daughter behind her. I might with truth say quite inconsolable; for at the time I speak of, a year later than Mrs. Gainsborough's death, certainly comfort had come to neither father nor daughter.

It was one morning in spring-time. Mrs. Barker stood at the door of her kitchen, and called to her brother to come in to breakfast. Christopher slowly obeyed the summons, leaving his spade stuck upright in the bed he was digging, and casting loving looks as he came at the budding gooseberry bushes. He was a typical Englishman; ruddy, fair-skinned, blue-eyed, of very solid build, and showing the national tendency to flesh. He was a handsome man, and not without a sufficiency of self-consciousness, both as regarding that and other things. Mrs. Barker was a contrast; for she was very plain, some years older than her brother, and of rather spare habit though large frame. Both faces showed sense, and the manner of both indicated that they knew their own minds.

'Season's late,' observed Mrs. Barker, as she stepped back from the door and lifted her coffee-pot on the table.

'Uncommon late,' answered her brother. 'Buds on them gooseberry bushes only just showin' green. Now everything will be coming all together in a heap in two weeks more. That's the way o' this blessed climate! And then when everything's started, maybe a frost will come and slap down on us.'

'Peas in?'

'Peas in a fortnight ago. They'll be showin' their heads just now.'

'Christopher, can you get me some greens to day?'

'Greens for what?'

'Why, for dinner. Master likes a bit o' boiled beef now and again, which he used to, anyway; and I thought greens is kind o' seasonable at this time o' year, and I'd try him with 'em. But la! he don't care no more what he eats.'

'How is the old gentleman?'

'Doin' his best to kill hisself, I should say.'

'Looks like it,' said Christopher, going on with a good breakfast the while in a business manner. 'When a man don't care no more what he eats, the next thing'll be that he'll stop it; and then there's only one thing more he will do.'

'What's that?'

'Die, to be sure!'

'He ain't dyin' yet,' said Mrs. Barker thoughtfully, 'but he ain't doin' the best he can wi's life, for certain. Can ye get me some greens, Christopher?'

'Nothing in *my* department. I can take a knife and a basket and find you some dandelions.'

'Will ye go fur to find 'em?'

'No furder'n I can help, you may make your affidavit, with all there is to do in the garden yet. What's about it?'

'If you're goin' a walk, I'd let Missie go along. She don't get no chance for no diversion whatsoever when young Mr. Dallas don't come along. She just mopes, she do; and it's on my mind, and master he don't see it. I wish he would.'

'The little one does wear an uncommon solemn countenance,' said the gardener, who was in his way quite an educated man, and used language above his station.

'It do vex me,' repeated the housekeeper.

'But young Mr. Dallas comes along pretty often. If Miss Esther was a little older, now, we should see no more of her solemnity. What 'ud master say to that?'

'It's good things is as they be, and we've no need to ask. I don't want no more complications, for my part. It's hard enough to manage as it is.'

'But things won't stay as they be,' said the gardener, with a twinkle of his shrewd blue eye as he looked at his sister. 'Do you expect they will, Sarah? Miss Esther's growin' up fast, and she'll be an uncommon handsome girl too. Do you know that?'

'I shouldn't say she was what you'd go fur to call handsome,' returned the housekeeper.

'I doubt you haven't an eye for beauty. Perhaps one ought to have a bit of it oneself to be able to see it in others.'

'Well I haven't it,' said Mrs. Barker; 'and I never set up to have it. And I allays thought rosy cheeks went with beauty; and Missie has no more colour in her cheeks, poor child, than well—than I have myself.'

'She's got two eyes, though.'

'Who hasn't got two eyes?' said the other scornfully.

'Just the folks that haven't an eye,' said the gardener, with another twinkle of his own. 'But I tell you, there ain't two such eyes as Miss Esther's between here and Boston. Look out; other folk will find it out soon if you don't. There ain't but three years between twelve and fifteen; and then it don't take but two more to make seventeen.'

'Three and two's five, though,' said Mrs. Barker; 'and five years is a long time. And Miss Esther ain't twelve yet, neither. Then when'll ye be goin' after the greens, Christopher?'

'It'll be a bit yet. I'll let you know.'

The fair spring morning was an hour or two farther on its way, accordingly, when the gardener and the little girl set out on their quest after greens. Yet it was still early, for the kitchen breakfast was had betimes. The gardener carried a basket, and Esther too did the like; in hers there was a small trowel, for 'she might find something,' she said. Esther always said that, although hitherto her 'findings' had amounted to nothing of any account; unless, indeed, I correct that, and say, in any eyes but her own. For in Esther's eyes every insignificant growth of the woods or the fields had a value

and a charm inexpressible. Nothing was 'common' to her, and hardly anything that grew was relegated to the despised community of 'weeds.'

'What are you going for now, Christopher?' she asked as they trudged on together.

'Well, miss, my old woman there has sent me for some greens. She has a wild tooth for greens, she has,' he added, half to himself.

'What sort of greens can you get?'

'There's various sorts to be had, Miss Esther; a great variety of the herbs of the field are good for eating, at the different times o' the year; even here in this country; and I do suppose there ain't a poorer on the face o' the earth!'

'Than *this* country? than Seaforth? O Christopher!'

'Well, m'm, it beats all *I* ever knew for poorness. You should see England once, Miss Esther! That's the place for gardens; and the fields is allays green; and the flowers do be beautiful; and when the sun *shines*, it shines; here it burns.'

'Not to-day,' said Esther gleefully. 'How nice it is!'

She might say so, for if the spring is rough in New England, and there is no denying it, there do nevertheless come days of bewitching, entrancing, delicious beauty, in the midst of the rest. Days when the air and sky and sunlight are in a kind of poise of delight, and earth beneath them, is, as it were, still with pleasure. I suppose the spring may be more glorious in other lands,—more positively glorious; whether relatively, I do not know. With such contrasts before and behind them,—contrasts of raw, chill air, and rough, cutting winds, with skies of grey and gloom,—one of these perfect days of a lost Paradise stands in a singular setting. It was such a day when Esther and Christopher went after dandelions. Still, balmy air, a tender sky slightly veiled with spring mistiness, light and warmth so gentle that they were a blessing to a weary brain, yet so abundant that every bud and leaf and plant and flower was unfolding and out-springing and stretching upward and dispensing abroad all it had of sweetness. The air was filled with sweetness; not the heavy odours of the blossoms of summer, or the South, but a more delicate

and searching fragrance from resinous buds and freshly-opened tree flowers and the young green of the shooting leaf. I don't know where spring gets it all, but she does fling abroad her handfuls of perfume such as summer has no skill to concoct, or perhaps she lacks the material. Esther drew in deep breaths for the mere pleasure of breathing, and looked on all the world of nature before her with an eye of quiet but intense content.

Christopher had been quite right in his hint about Esther's eyes. They were of uncommon character. Thoughtful, grave, beautiful eyes; large, and fine in contour and colour; too grave for the girl's years. But Esther had lived all her life so far almost exclusively with grown people, and very sober grown people too; for her mother's last years had been dulled with sickness, and her father's with care, even if he had not been—which he was—of a taciturn and sombre deportment in the best of times. And this last year past had been one heavy with mourning. So it was no wonder if the little girl's face showed undue thoughtfulness, and a shade of melancholy all premature. And Christopher was honestly glad to see the melancholy at least vanish under the influence of the open earth and sky. The thoughtfulness, he hoped, would go too some day.

The walk in itself offered nothing remarkable. Fields where the grass was very green and fast growing; other fields that were rocky and broken, and good for little except the sheep, and sometimes rose into bare ridges and heights where spare savins were mingled with a variety of deciduous trees; such was the ground the two went over this morning. This morning, however, glorified everything; the fields looked soft, the moss and lichens on the rocks were moist and fresh coloured, grey and green and brown; the buds and young leafage of the trees were of every lovely hue and shade that young vegetation can take; and here and there Esther found a wild flower. When she found one, it was very apt to be taken up by the roots with her little trowel, and bestowed in her basket for careful transport home; and on the so endangered beauties in her basket Esther looked down from time to time with fond and delighted eyes.

'Are you going for cresses, Christopher?'

'No, Miss Esther, not at this time. Sarah has set her mind that she must have boiled greens for dinner; and her will must be done. And here is the article—not boiled yet, however.'

He stopped and stooped, and with a sharp knife cut a bunch of stout-looking leaves growing in the grass; then made a step to another bunch, a yard off, and then to another.

'What are they, Christopher?'

'Just dandelions, Miss Esther. *Leontodon taraxacum*.'

'Dandelions! But the flowers are not out yet.'

'No, Miss Esther. If they was out, Sarah might whistle for her greens.'

'Why? You could tell better where they are.'

'They wouldn't be worth the finding, though.'

Christopher went on busily cutting. He did not seem to need the yellow blossoms to guide him.

'How can you be sure, Christopher, that you are always getting the right ones?'

'Know the look o' their faces, Miss Esther.'

'The *flowers* are their faces,' said the little girl.

Christopher laughed a little. 'Then what are the leaves?' said he.

'I don't know. The whole of them together show the *form* of the plant.'

'Well, Miss Esther, wouldn't you know your father, the colonel, as far off as you could see him, just by his figger?'

'But I know papa so well.'

'Not better than I know the *Leontodon*. See, Miss Esther, look at these runcinate leaves.'

'Runcinate?'

'Toothed-pinnatifid. That's what it gets its name from; lion's tooth. *Leontodon* comes from two Greek words which mean a lion

and a tooth. See — there ain't another leaf like that in the hull meadow.'

'There are a great many kinds of leaves!' said Esther musingly.

'Like men's human figgers,' said the gardener sagely. 'Ain't no two on 'em just alike.'

Talking and cutting, they had crossed the meadow and came to a rocky height which rose at one side of it; such as one is never very far from in New England. Here there were no dandelions, but Esther eagerly sought for something more ornamental. And she found it. With exclamations of deep delight she endeavoured to dig up a root of bloodroot which lifted its most delicate and dainty blossom a few inches above the dead leaves and moss with which the ground under the trees was thickly covered. Christopher came to her help.

'What are you goin' to do with this now, Miss Esther?'

'I want to plant it out in my garden. Won't it grow?'

Christopher answered evasively. 'These here purty little things is freaky,' said he. 'They has notions. Now the *Sanguinaria* likes just what it has got here; a little bit of rich soil, under shade of woods, and with covering of wet dead leaves for its roots. It's as dainty as a lady.'

'*Sanguinaria*?' said Esther. 'I call it bloodroot.'

'*Sanguinaria canadensis*. That's its name, Miss Esther.'

'Why isn't the other its name?'

'That's its nickname, you may say. Look here, Miss Esther, — here's the *Hepatica* for you.'

Esther sprang forward to where Christopher was softly pushing dead leaves and sticks from a little low bunch of purple flowers. She stretched out her hand with the trowel, then checked herself.

'Won't that grow either, Christopher?'

'It'll grow *here*, Miss Esther. See, — ain't that nice?' he said, as he bared the whole little tuft.

Esther's sigh came from the depths of her breast, as she looked at it lovingly.

'This is *Hepatica acutiloba*. I dare say we'd find the other, if we had time to go all over the other side of the hill.'

'What other?'

'The *americana*, Miss Esther. But I'm thinking, them greens must go in the pot.'

'But what *is* this lovely little thing? What's its name, I mean?'

'It's the *Hepatica*, Miss Esther; folks call it liverleaf. We ought to find the *Aquilegia* by this time; but I don't see it.'

'Have you got dandelions enough?'

'All I'll try for. Here's something for you, though,' said he, reaching up to the branches of a young tree, the red blossoms of which were not quite out of reach; 'here's something pretty for you; here's *Acer rubrum*.'

'And what is *Acer rubrum*?'

'Just soft maple, Miss Esther.'

'Oh, that is beautiful! Do you know everything that grows, Christopher?'

'No, Miss Esther; there's no man living that does that. They say it would take all one man's life to know just the orchids of South America; without mentioning all that grows in the rest of the world. There's an uncommon great number of plants on the earth, to be sure!'

'And trees.'

'Ain't trees plants, mum?'

'Are they? Christopher, are those dandelions *weeds*?'

'No, Miss Esther; they're more respectable.'

'How do you know they're not weeds?'

Christopher laughed a little, partly at his questioner, partly at the question; nevertheless the answer was not so ready as usual.

'They ain't weeds, however, Miss Esther; that's all I can tell you.'

'What are weeds, then?'

'I don't know, mum,' said Christopher grimly. 'They're plants that has no manners.'

'But some good plants have no manners,' said Esther, amused. 'I know I've heard you say, they ran over everything, and wouldn't stay in their places. You said it of moss pink, and lily of the valley. Don't you remember?'

'Yes mum, I've cause to remember; by the same token I've been trimming the box. That thing grows whenever my back is turned!'

'But it isn't a weed?'

'No mum! No mum! The *Buxus* is a very distinguished family indeed, and holds a high rank, it does.'

'Then I don't see what *is* a weed, Christopher.'

CHAPTER II.

AT HOME.

Upon reaching home Esther sought to place her bloodroot in safety, giving it a soft and well-dug corner in her little plot of garden ground. She planted it with all care in the shadow of a rose-bush; and then went in to put her other flowers in water.

The sitting-room, whither she went, was a large, low, pleasant place; very simply furnished, yet having a cheerful, cosy look, as places do where people live who know how to live. The room, and the house, no doubt, owed its character to the rule and influence of Mrs. Gainsborough, who was there no longer, and to a family life that had passed away. The traces abode still. The chintz hangings and the carpet were of soft colours and in good harmony; chairs and lounges were comfortable; a great many books lined the walls, so many indeed that the room might have been styled the library. A portfolio with engravings was in one place; Mrs. Gainsborough's work-table in another; some excellent bronzes on the bookcases; one or two family portraits, by good hands; and an embroidery frame. A fine English mastiff was sleeping on the rug before the fire; for the weather was still cold enough within doors to make a fire pleasant, and Colonel Gainsborough was a chilly man.

He lay on the couch when Esther came in with her flowers; a book in his hand, but not held before his eyes. He was a handsome man, of a severe, grave type; though less well-looking at this time because of the spiritless, weary, depressed air which had become his habit; there was a want of spring and life and hope in the features and in the manner also of the occupant of the sofa. He looked at Esther languidly, as she came in and busied herself with arranging her maple blossoms, her Hepatica and one or two delicate stems of the bloodroot in a little vase. Her father looked at the flowers and at her, in silence.

'Papa, aren't those *beautiful*?' she asked with emphasis, bringing the vase, when she had finished, to his side.

'What have you got there, Esther?'

'Just some anemones, and liverleaf, and bloodroot, and maple blossoms, papa; but Christopher calls them all sorts of big names.'

'They are very fragile blossoms,' the colonel remarked.

'Are they? They won't do in the garden, Christopher says, but they grow nicely out there in the wood. Papa, what is the difference between a weed and a flower?'

'I should think you were old enough to know.'

'I know them by sight—sometimes. But what is the *difference*?'

'Your eyes tell you, do they not?'

'No, papa. They tell me, sometimes, which is which; but I mean, why isn't a flower a weed? I asked Christopher, but he couldn't tell me.'

'I do not understand the question. It seems to me you are talking nonsense.'

The colonel raised his book again, and Esther took the hint, and went back to the table with her flowers. She sat down and looked at them. Fair they were, and fresh, and pure; and they bore spring's messages, to all that could hear the message. If Esther could, it was in a half-unconscious way, that somehow awakened by degrees almost as much pain as pleasure. Or else, it was simply that the glow and stir of her walk was fading away, and allowing the old wonted train of thought to come in again. The bright expression passed from her face; the features settled into a melancholy dulness, most unfit for a child and painful to see; there was a droop of the corners of the mouth, and a lax fall of the eyelids, and a settled gloom in the face, that covered it and changed it like a mask. The very features seemed to grow heavy, in the utter heaviness of the spirit.

She sat so for a while, musing, no longer busy with such pleasant things as flowers and weeds; then roused herself. The weariness of inaction was becoming intolerable. She went to a corner of the

room, where a large mahogany box was half-concealed beneath a table covered with a cloth; with a good deal of effort she lugged the box forth. It was locked, and she went to the sofa.

'Papa, may I look at the casts?'

'Yes.'

'You have got the key, papa.'

The key was fished out of the colonel's waistcoat pocket, and Esther sat down on the floor and unlocked the box. It was filled with casts in plaster of Paris, of old medals and bas-reliefs; and it had long been a great amusement of Esther's to take them all out and look at them, and then carefully pack them all away again between their layers of soft paper and cotton batting. In the nature of the case, this was an amusement that would pall if too often repeated; so it rarely happened that Esther got them out more than three or four times a year. This time she had hardly begun to take them out and place them carefully on the table, when Mrs. Barker came in to lay the cloth for dinner. Esther must put the casts back, and defer her amusement till another time in the day.

Meals were served now for the colonel and his daughter in this same room, which served for sitting-room and library. The dining-room was disused. Things had come by degrees to this irregularity, Mrs. Barker finding that it made her less work, and the colonel in his sorrowful abstraction hardly knowing and not at all caring where he took his dinner. The dinner was carefully served, however, and delicately prepared; for there Barker's pride came in to her help; and besides, little as Colonel Gainsborough attended now to the food he ate, it is quite possible that he would have rebelled against any disorder in that department of the household economy.

The meal times were sorrowful occasions to both the solitary personages who now sat down to the table. Neither of them had become accustomed yet to the empty place at the board. The colonel ate little and talked none at all; and only Esther's honest childish appetite saved these times from being seasons of intolerable gloom. Even so, she was always glad when dinner was done.

By the time that it was over to-day, and the table cleared, Esther's mood had changed; and she no longer found the box of casts attrac-

tive. She had seen what was in it so often before, and she knew just what she should find. At the same time she was in desperate want of something to amuse her, or at least to pass away the time, which went so slowly if unaided. She bethought her of trying another box, or series of boxes, over which she had seen her father and mother spend hours together; but the contents hitherto had not seemed to her interesting. The key was on the same chain with the key of the casts; Esther sat down on the floor by one of the windows, having shoved one of the boxes into that neighbourhood, turned the key, and opened the cover. Her father was lying on the couch again and gave her no attention, and Esther made no call upon him for help.

An hour or two had passed. Esther had not changed her place, and the box, which contained a quantity of coins, was still open; but the child's hands lay idly in her lap, and her eyes were gazing into vacancy. Looking back, perhaps, at the images of former days; smiling images of light and love, in scenes where her mother's figure filled all the foreground. Colonel Gainsborough did not see how the child sat there, nor what an expression of dull, hopeless sorrow lay upon her features. All the life and variety of which her face was abundantly capable had disappeared; the corners of the mouth drawn down, the brow rigid, the eyes rayless, she sat an image of childish desolation. She looked even stupid, if that were possible to Esther's features and character.

What the father did not see was revealed to another person, who came in noiselessly at the open door. This new-comer was a young man, hardly yet arrived at the dignity of young manhood; he might have been eighteen, but he was really older than his years. His figure was well developed, with broad shoulders and slim hips, showing great muscular power and the symmetry of beauty as well. The face matched the figure; it was strong and fine, full of intelligence and life, and bearing no trace of boyish wilfulness. If wilfulness was there, which I think, it was rather the considered and consistent wilfulness of a man. As he came in at the open door, Esther's position and look struck him; he paused half a minute. Then he came forward, came to the colonel's sofa, and standing there bowed respectfully.