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Excerpt

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# WASHINGTON ALLSTON

## CHAPTER I.

ALLSTON'S PARENTAGE.—HIS CHILDHOOD.—SCHOOL-DAYS IN CHARLESTON AND NEWPORT.—ACQUAINTANCE WITH KING AND MALBONE.  
—ENTRANCE AT HARVARD COLLEGE.

The South Carolina Allstons trace their descent from a baronial family in the Norse settlement in Northumberland. Their immediate ancestor, John, who adhered to the fortunes of the Duke of Monmouth in his unsuccessful rebellion, to escape his leader's sad fate, probably, came over about the year 1685, and settled in the rich rice country bordering the Waccamaw River, where he and his descendants became a wealthy and influential family. About the same time there emigrated to Carolina, and settled in St. James' Parish, Berkley, James Moore, a grandson, as tradition tells, of the brilliant and famous Roger Moore (or More), leader of the Irish rebellion of 1641. He was made Governor of the colony in 1700. He married the only child of a former Governor, Sir Joseph Yeamans, Bart., by whom he had a son, James, who was also made Governor in 1719, having before then, as commander of the forces of the colony, gained great distinction in wars against the Indians. Ramsey, in his "History of South Carolina," says of Colonel Moore: "He was a man excellently qualified for being a popular leader in perilous adventures; in every new enterprise he had been a volunteer, and in all his undertakings was resolute, steady, and inflexible."

His son John married Rachel Villeponteux, a Huguenot lady. Their son John married Elizabeth Vanderhorst, also a Huguenot, and their daughter, Rachel Moore, was the mother of Washington Allston. This last-named John Moore became very rich, which was proven, as well as his patriotism, by his lending the government, for carrying on the War of Independence, the very considerable sum, in those times, of fourteen thousand pounds, in gold. His three daughters are mentioned in a historical scrap as among the most beautiful women of the colony, and the excellent portrait of Rachel (habitually called by the *petit nom* of "Cettie," as others of her family were), now owned by her descendant, Miss Helen Allston, of Charleston, shows that she certainly merited the compliment. She was married January 19, 1775, to William Allston, son of John and Deborah, a captain in the war, and a widower at the time, having two sons by a former wife. He is mentioned in James's "Life of Marion" in these terms:

"During the struggle of the year 1781, Captain William Allston, of True Blue, on Little River, All Saints Parish, served under Marion. He was a firm patriot and good soldier; indeed he may well be enumerated among the martyrs to the cause of his country."

The children of this marriage were—Mary, born in 1778; Washington, whose birth is registered in the family Bible thus: "My son Washington was born Friday night, half after eleven o'clock, the fifth of November, 1779," and William Moore, born 1781.

Mrs. Allston, having had a French grandmother on the father's side and a French mother, was, as to blood, three-fourths French. Charleston was largely peopled with Huguenot refugees in those times; her aunt, Elizabeth Moore, was married to one of them, a gentleman named Neufville (corrupted since to Neville), and of the loves of a son of theirs and his cousin

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Rachel, a story has come down which may properly be related here, since such readers as may become interested in the life of her son may want to know something of the mother. Early in their lives the two cousins, much thrown together during childhood, as we may presume, became lovers, and when young Neufville, as was usual with scions of the Carolina aristocracy, was sent to England to be educated, they were affianced lovers, expecting to be united when he should have completed his studies and made the tour of Europe. It would not have been strange if so long a separation and the many attractions and allurements besetting a youth abroad in the world had weakened the ties of first love, so far as the man was concerned, though, as will be seen, the woman was true. Certain it is that his letters became less and less frequent, and finally ceased altogether; there was a report of his death when the eligible and attractive widower Allston began to pay her attentions. She repelled them, of course; but her parents, and especially her mother, strongly desired the match, and so strongly seconded the cause of the suitor that Rachel finally yielded, though not until after she had been made to believe that Neufville was dead.

As was usual with planters on the Waccamaw River, Captain Allston had both a "plantation house" near his rice-fields and a "sea-shore house" not far distant, where was found in summer-time a refuge from heat as well as malaria. Opposite this last, in the spring of 1778, and after his family had been removed to it, a ship was wrecked. The crew took to the boats and pulled for the shore, where storm-driven waves rolling up a level beach made breakers of such height as to render their chances of safely "beaching" desperate. All but one perished in the attempt. He, not a sailor, but a passenger, when he had clambered out of the surf, made his way to the nearest habitation. In answer to his inquiries, the servants who admitted him informed him it was the house of Captain Allston, who was not then at home,

but said that they would inform their mistress. Soon the door of the room in which he was waiting opened and the mistress entered. He gazed at her in speechless astonishment. She started back, and uttering the name of him who she thought was sleeping with the dead in a distant land, fell to the floor in a swoon. When she recovered, Neufville had left the house, and shortly after tidings were received of his death from yellow fever in Charleston.

This narrative reads so like a conventional romance that it is difficult to credit it as a record of facts; yet such it is. An experience so impressive could not fail to exert a lasting influence. We may assume that it did much to chasten, much to establish that poise of character, and to develop those high qualities of womanhood for which the mother of Washington Allston was conspicuous. Self-reliance, tender-heartedness, frankness, generosity, and firmness were characteristics she bequeathed to her progeny.

In 1781 Captain Allston, on his return from the famous battle of Cowpens, was seized with a mysterious illness, from which he died. It was believed he was poisoned by a trusted servant. Just before his death, at his request, the infant Washington was brought to his bedside; he then uttered these prophetic words: "He who lives to see this child grow up will see a great man." The young mother cherished the prediction of the dying father as a sacred legacy. Every incident of Washington's childhood indicating genius would recall the words of the sick-room in corroboration of her ambition and expectations regarding him. It was a voice from the borders of the spirit world, a solemnly impressive and true prophecy of his future greatness. She never doubted it, and she reared him as in the light of that prophecy. How far the reflex influence of her mind thus biassed was an element in the development of his character, we cannot tell, and yet we may not reasonably ignore or deny it.

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The spring after Captain Allston's death, Lord Cornwallis selected as his head-quarters the plantation of the Widow Allston, and, with his staff, took up his abode in her house. His Lordship and officers were extremely gallant and courteous, conducting themselves rather as gentlemen on a visit to a friend than as representatives of a hostile army in the house of one of the enemy. The utmost consideration and deference were shown in the endeavor to conform to the customs of the house; nothing on the premises was injured, and the widow was pleased by their gentle and considerate deportment. One day at dinner, having learned through the servants that there was an infant in the house named Washington, his Lordship politely requested the young mother to present them to the little general; she assented, and the child was carried around the table, receiving the admiration and playful caresses of all present.

Born on a Southern plantation Allston was surrounded by influences favorable to the development of that ideality which was so richly manifested in his life. The pet of the negroes on a large plantation undergoes a novitiate, in barbaric magic and superstition, potential in the highest degree in developing imagination and fancy. The boy Washington was sensible and sturdy enough to be able to listen without injury to stories of ghosts and goblins in which the African delights. The Southern negro is never so happy as when relating to infantile gentry legends and myths to startle and alarm. No training could be more effective in peopling the shades of night with spectral forms to terrify, than that to which this child of genius was subjected. The love of the dramatic and tragic which was ever a conspicuous element in his character; that ideality that was continually reaching for and presenting visions of the invisible; that love of imagery in the realms of the spectral and supernatural; in short, the tendency toward the marvellous, not only of his brush but of his pen and conversation, it is not too much

to say was in great part a legitimate result of the influence of the negroes acting upon his highly imaginative nature. In later years, while repeating the ghost stories learned in his childhood, he would say that the excitement he experienced in being frightened by those stories was delightful to him. He craved excitement, and to such a degree that, even though mingled with fear, it did not lose its relish. There was in him an affinity for the purely ideal which belongs not to ordinary minds, but is the property of the true poet.

The current of the talent of which he partook so largely can be traced back many generations to a distinguished Dutch ancestor, Vanderhorst, a contemporary of Rubens, who was famous as an illustrator of books, and associated with the great artist in that work.

Dr. Henry C. Flagg was chief of the medical staff of Greene's army; he was the son of a wealthy shipping merchant of Newport, R. I., in her days of commercial prominence. He remained in the South after the war, and the widow of Captain Allston became engaged to him, much against the wishes and Southern prejudices of her family. Her mother considered the officers of Greene's army a set of Northern adventurers, socially, and in every way beneath the gentry of the South. The landholders—the Southern planters—were regarded by themselves as the aristocracy, the nobility of the country. They sent their sons to the North to be educated, it is true; but learning alone could not give that social elevation which is based on ownership of land. Mrs. Moore was so imbued with this arrogant spirit that she bitterly opposed her daughter's marriage to a Northern officer. It was not the personality of the suitor, but his birth and origin to which she objected. To her earnest remonstrances Mrs. Allston replied that she had married once to please her family, and she was now determined to please herself. This persistence was at the cost of her patrimony. After marrying



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thus against the will of her family, her father said she had married a Yankee adventurer, and poverty should be her portion.

Dr. Flagg, the step-father of Washington Allston, manifested the deepest interest in his early training. He placed him at Mrs. Colcott's school, in Charleston, where he was thoroughly grounded in rudimentary studies. As a punishment for some offence the school-mistress once placed him in solitary confinement. After two hours, hearing no demonstrations of penitence, she opened the door of the room where he was confined, and found him drawing a ship on the bottom of a wooden chair with a piece of chalk. She was so pleased with this drawing that she kept the chair locked up during her life, occasionally showing it as a memento of the early days of the great artist.

In relation to the first evidence of his artistic talent, Allston writes: "To go back as far as I can, I remember that I used to draw before I left Carolina, at six years of age (by the way no uncommon thing); and still earlier, that my favorite amusement, much akin to it, was making little landscapes about the roots of an old tree in the country, meagre enough, no doubt; the only particulars of which I can call to mind were a cottage built of sticks, shaded by little trees, which were composed of the small suckers (I think so called), resembling miniature trees, which I gathered in the woods. Another employment was the converting the forked stalks of the wild ferns into little men and women, by winding about them different-colored yarn. These were sometimes presented with pitchers made of the pomegranate flower. These childish fancies were straws by which, perhaps, an observer might have guessed which way the current was setting for after-life. And yet, after all, this love of imitation may be common to childhood. General imitation certainly is; but whether adherence to particular kinds may not indicate a permanent propensity, I leave to those who have studied the subject more than I have to decide."

“But even these delights would sometimes give way to a stronger love for the wild and marvellous. I delighted in being terrified by the tales of witches and hags, which the negroes used to tell me, and I well remember with how much pleasure I recalled these feelings on my return to Carolina; especially on revisiting a gigantic wild grape-vine in the woods, which had been the favorite swing for one of these witches.”

While at school in Charlestown he learned to prepare oil colors, and in his vacations locked himself in his room, where he commenced a picture of the eruption of Vesuvius. When this, his first effort in oil was shown, his family were so surprised by its excellence that they feared lest he might disgrace them by becoming a painter. His step-father, thinking to overcome this dangerous tendency, sent him to Newport to prepare for college, under the tuition of a Mr. Rogers. This course, however, instead of turning him from the pursuit of art, only confirmed him in his determination to be an artist.

Of his youth, Allston writes: “I concluded my last letter with the amusement of my childhood, my next step will be to my boyhood. My chief pleasure now was in drawing from prints, of all kinds of figures, landscape and animals. But I soon began to make pictures of my own; at what age, however, I cannot say. The earliest compositions that I can remember were the storming of Count Roderick's castle, from a poor (though to me delightful) romance of that day, and the ‘Siege of Toulon.’ The first in India ink, the other in water-colors. I cannot recall the year in which they were done. To these succeeded many others, which have likewise passed into oblivion. Though I never had any regular instructor in the art (a circumstance, I would here observe, both idle and absurd to boast of), I had much incidental instruction, which I have always through life been glad to receive from anyone in advance of myself. And, I may add, there is no such thing as a self-taught artist, in the



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ignorant acceptance of the word ; for the greatest genius that ever lived must be indebted to others, if not by direct teaching, yet indirectly through their works.

“I had, in my school-days, some of this latter kind of instruction from a very worthy and amiable man, a Mr. King, of Newport, who made quadrants and compasses, and occasionally painted portraits. I believe he was originally bred a painter, but obliged, from the rare calls upon his pencil, to call in the aid of another craft. I used at first to make frequent excuses for visiting his shop to look at his pictures ; but finding that he always received me kindly, I went at last without any, or rather with the avowed purpose of making him a visit. Sometimes I would take with me a drawing, and was sure to get a kind word of encouragement. It was a pleasant thing to me, some twenty years after this, to remind the old man of these little kindnesses.”

In Newport Allston made the acquaintance of Malbone, the foremost miniature painter of his day, of whom he writes : “I became acquainted with Malbone but a short time before he quitted Newport, a circumstance which I then remember regretting exceedingly, for I looked up to him with great admiration ; our not meeting earlier was owing, I suppose, to his going to another school, and being some years older than myself. I recollect borrowing some of his pictures on oiled paper to copy.”

The new influence exerted over young Allston by these men tended to confirm him more and more, and to aid him in his inextinguishable purpose. Moreover, the scenery about Newport, so grandly different from that of the low country of South Carolina, in which his childhood was passed, stimulated his imagination and developed still further his taste for painting.

While in Newport, engaged in his preparatory studies, he was a favorite in the best society ; there he met the sister of the celebrated Unitarian clergyman, Dr. William Ellery Channing.

This lady, to whom he became engaged, exerted a very strong influence upon his after-course. Channing entered college a year before Allston, and in "Dana's Memoranda" we find the following interesting extracts of letters written him by Allston at that time :

"The first letter," says Mr. Dana, "is without date, and relates a dream which Allston had, of walking slowly on the hill in Newport, and seeing a spacious mansion, overshadowed by a lofty elm—nature and art in rivalry set all off with bowers and woodbine—a fair lady in a bower, who blushes at seeing him, then comes forward, and he falls upon his knees before her, while she confesses to having perceived an attachment.

"At the close, he says: 'Give my love to Ned, and tell him that I have at last finished "Mount Vesuvius."' On the back of the letter is written 'Sophomore,' which doubtless refers to C.'s year at college. This letter shows somewhat of the after-man, extremely youthful in character as it is; however, boys were truly boys in those days; but then what men they made!

"In a letter dated March 22, 1795, from Newport, he says: 'My temper is naturally quick and resentful for a few minutes, but, believe me, in the cooler time of reflection I repine in secret if I have offended. I wish to make reparation, but a foolish pride, which too many think honorable, stops me and obliges me to do a thing which I inwardly abhor.'

"In June, 1795, he writes: 'I am sorry to tell you that I am disappointed of my expectation of seeing you at Cambridge as a fellow-student, as my father-in-law has fixed on Providence College. Mr. Taylor, contrary to our expectation at his entrance, as usher, is generally esteemed, and resembles Mr. Hawes more than any tutor we have had since the departure of that grave-comic-foolish-wise man. Apropos, I think it my duty to warn you to guard your heart against the fatal shaft of Cupid, which has so often left dreadful monuments of its