

Choice Literature.

MISUNDERSTOOD.

BY FLOR. CE MONTGOMERY.

CHAPTER XV.

Humphrey passed the night partly in heavy sleep, and partly in feverish restlessness.

His first inquiry in the morning was for Miles, and the next for the gentlemen who were to help him to get well so quick.

The latter he was told could not arrive till eleven o'clock, but Sir Everard went to fetch little Miles, and, whispering to him not to talk much or to stay long, he put the child down, and stayed by the door to watch the meeting between the two little brothers.

Miles advanced rather timidly, the room was so dark and everything looked so strange. But as soon as he distinguished his brother he ran forward.

"Humphie! get up, get up. Why do you lie there and look so white?"

"I'm ill, Miles!"—in a tone half plaintive, half triumphant.

"Mustn't be ill, Humphie—oh, don't be ill!"

"You're often ill, Miles; why shouldn't I be ill sometimes?"

"Don't like it," said the child, his eyes filling with tears. "Oh, Humphie, I wish we hadn't tumbled into the pond!"

At this moment Sir Everard was called away, and informed that the physicians had arrived from London.

He found them in the dining room talking over the case with the village doctor, and after ordering them some breakfast, he returned so prepare the little invalid for their arrival.

As he approached the room he was alarmed to hear Humphrey's voice raised, and still more, when little Miles, with a face of terror came running out.

"Oh, Fardie, Fardie! will you come to Humphie? He's crying so, and he wants you to come directly!"

"Crying so! What is the matter with him?"

"Oh, I don't know! He began to cry and scream so when I said it!"

"Said what—said what?"

"Oh, Fardie, I was telling him that I heard Virginie tell so one he would be 'boiteux' all his life, and I only as told him what it meant!"

Vainly all night long had Sir Everard tried to frame a sentence in which to convey the fatal news.

Phrase after phrase had he rejected, because nothing seemed to express half the love and tenderness in which so terrible an announcement should be clothed. Words were so hard, so cold! They were so weak to express what he wanted—so utterly inadequate to contain all the pity, all the yearning sympathy with which his heart was overflowing!

And now, without any preparation, without any softening, the cruel blow had fallen!

For one moment the father's heart failed him, and he felt he could not face the boy, could not meet his questioning gaze, could not with his own lips confirm the fatal truth. But there was no time for reflection. Humphrey's feeble voice calling him to come quickly caught his ear, and, in a dream, he advanced, and stood by the bedside.

"Father!" exclaimed the child (and how shall we express the tones of his voice, or convey an idea of the painful entreaty and nameless horror with which they rang?) "it isn't true—is it? Oh, say it isn't true!"

All the words of consolation and soothing died upon the father's lips, and his tongue seemed tied.

"She's always saying unkind things," sobbed the child, clinging to him; "she oughtn't to—ought she? You don't answer me, father! Fa her, why don't you tell me? Why don't you say quick it's not true?" And as his fear grew, his voice faltered, and his grasp on his father tightened.

"Answer me—father—why—don't you—speak?"

"My poor child, my poor little fellow!" One more struggle for the truth, in spite of the failing voice, and the sense of deadly sickness.

"Lift up your face, father. Let—me—see—your—face!"

What was there in the face that struck terror to his heart, and brought conviction thumping up in great throbs, even before the faltering words came?

"Supposing it should be true—what then?"

Ah! what then? His dizzy brain refused to attach any meaning to the words, or to help him to understand how much was contained in them.

The loud beating of his heart echoed them, his parched lips strove to repeat them, and wildly he fought with his failing senses, straining every nerve to find an answer to the question. In vain! Every pulse in his throbbing head seemed to take up the words and beat them into his brain; the air was alive with voices around him, and voices and pulses alike cried, "What then?—what then?" But the question went unanswered, for Humphrey had fainted away.

Sir Everard hastily summoned the doctors, and they did all they could to restore him.

In a little while he showed signs of coming to himself, and, to prevent his thoughts returning to the subject which had agitated him, they requested Sir Everard to remain out of sight, and stationed themselves close to the bedside, so that theirs should be the first figures that should attract his attention.

As Humphrey slowly recovered consciousness he did not indeed clearly remember on what his thoughts had been dwelling, but that there was something in his mind from which he shrank, he was quite aware.

Waking in the morning to a sense of some sorrow which possessed us ere we slept, we intuitively feel there is

something amiss, though we are too confused to remember what it is; and even while we wish to recall it we dread to turn our thoughts that way, lest we should lose the temporary peace into which forgetfulness has plunged us.

In such a passive state would Humphrey have remained, had not the doctors, to distract his thoughts, touched his brow, and caused him to open his eyes.

Alas! they little knew the all-powerful association of the place where he lay.

He closed his eyes again directly, and took no notice of the doctors' attempts to lead him into conversation; but in that one moment his glance had rested on his mother's picture, and at once his mind wandered back—not indeed to the memory they dreaded, but to one which was scarcely less painful.

We will follow his thoughts for a moment.

He is alone; all alone in the desolate apartment, in the closed, uninhabited room! The twilight is creeping slowly on, and the silence and emptiness within and without him can almost be felt. Upstairs in the nursery Miles is dying—perhaps already dead. No one will help him, or be sorry for him. And as the sense of neglect and isolation steals over him once more, his breast heaves, and his lips move.

"Mother, I want you back so much. Every one is angry with me and I am so very miserable!"

No answer, no sound.

"Mother! put your arms around me! put my head on your shoulder!"

Not a word.

It is only a picture after all.

Never to play with Miles any more! No more games on the stairs, or in the passages! No, never more! For Miles is dying, perhaps already dead. How happy the baby in the picture looks! Can it really be him? Oh, happy baby, always close to mother! always with her arms round him, and her shoulder against his head. Oh, if he could climb up into the baby's place, and stay there for ever and ever! How could he get up to her? She is in heaven. She got there by being ill and dying. Why should he not get ill and die too? Miles is dying, mother is dead—he would so like to die too. But it's no use. He never is ill—not even a cold. Miles caught cold going to the pond—the pond where the water-lilies are. How quiet it was—how cool! How gently they danced upon the water, those lovely water-lilies! How the bird sang and the rat splashed. . . . Come up, Miles—it's as safe as safe can be! . . . Stop! . . . Miles is dying—how could he come up? Miles came into the room, and talked about the—jackdaw. . . . wasn't it?—the poor lame jackdaw. . . . Miles is dying. . . . How did he come in? . . . Hop! hop! comes the jackdaw, poor old fellow! But what did Miles say about the jackdaw? Boiteux! But that's not his name; we always call him Jack. Boiteux means. . . . The jackdaw again! Hop, hop, he comes. . . . He will never fly again—never! Poor old jackdaw! . . . Is it really true that he will never fly again? It is not true. But supposing it should be true, what then? . . . Boiteux! . . . Who is it keeps on asking me what "boiteux" means? . . . Boiteux! "What then?" Boiteux means jackdaw—no, it means lame—no, it means cripp—

The temporary oblivion is over, the unknown dread is taking a tangible shape, and recollection rushes over him, bringing conviction with it.

But Hope, ever the last gift in the casket, faintly holds out against certainty.

"No! no!—not that! It can't be that!"

But something beating in his heart beats hope down. Mighty throbs, like the strokes of a hammer, beat it down, down, crush it to nothing; and a terrible sinking comes in its place. It is true—and in an instant he realizes what its being true will entail.

As lightning, flashing upon the path of the benighted traveller, reveals to him for a moment the country lying before him, illumining all its minutest details; so thought, flashing upon the future of the child, showed him for a moment all too vividly the life of crippled helplessness stretching out before him—the daily, hourly cross, which must be his forever!

Let each one try to conceive for himself the intensity of such a moment to such a nature!

Let each one try to realize the thoughts which followed each other in hot haste through his brain, the confused phantasmagoria which swam before him, fading away at last, and leaving only two distinct pictures—the jackdaw hopping about in his cage, and little lame Tom in the village, sitting in his cripple's chair.

He shrinks back in horror, his soul rises in loathing; he pants and wildly throws himself about, with a half-smothered cry.

"Oh, gently, my darling! you will hurt yourself."

It is his father's voice, and he turns to him and clings tightly.

"I don't care—I don't care. I want to hurt myself. I want to die. I don't want to live like that!" At the sight of the physicians his excitement redoubled, and he clung more tightly to his father. "No! no! Send them away! They shan't look at me, they shan't touch me. They are going to try and make me well, and I don't want to get well. I won't get well!"

The doctors retired, as their presence excited him so much, and Sir Everard tried to loosen the boy's convulsive grasp round his neck.

Humphrey was too exhausted to retain the position long; his hands relaxed their hold, and Sir Everard laid him back on the pillow.

Once more the soft face in the picture exercises its old influence over him, and charms away, as of old, the fit of passionate rebellion.

"Father," he entreated, in a whisper, "let me die! Promise not to let them try and make me well again."

Between surprise and emotion Sir Everard could not answer. He thought the idea of death would be both strange and repugnant to so thoughtless a creature; and he marvelled to hear him speak of it.

"You'll promise, won't you, father? You know I couldn't live like that! Let me go and live with mother in heaven. See," pointing to the picture, "how happy I was in her arms when I was a baby, and I want to lie there again so much! Just now, when I thought it was still the night Miles was ill, before I knew I should never walk or run any more, even then I wanted so to get ill and die, that I might go to her, and I want it more than ever now. I thought then I could never get ill, because I am so strong; but now I am ill, and so you'll let me die! Promise not to try and make me well?"

Three times Sir Everard strove to answer, and three times his voice failed him. He managed, however, to murmur something which sounded like an affirmative, which satisfied and quieted the child.

But much of the boy's speech had been wholly unintelligible to him, and his allusions to his mother's picture especially puzzled him. Looking upon the drawing room as a closed room, he had no idea that the children ever penetrated into it, or that they knew of the existence of the picture. And, laying his hand on the child's head, said: "How did you know that was your mother, Humphrey?"

The boy shot at him a glance of such astonishment that Sir Everard felt rebuked, and did not like to continue the conversation; and the doctors, returning at that moment, it was not resumed.

This time Humphrey made no resistance, and the physicians were able to make their examination.

Leaving the village doctor by the bedside, Sir Everard led the way to the library, to hear their opinion.

He hardly knew what he wished. Humphrey's horror at his impending fate had made such an impression on Sir Everard that he almost shrank from hearing the child would recover, to such a life as that. And yet when the doctors told him his boy must die, a revulsion of feeling swept over him, and his rebellious heart cried, "Anything but that!"

"Would it be soon?" he tried to ask.

"It could not be far off," they said.

"Would the child suffer?"

"They hoped not—they believed not;" and they wrung his hand and departed.

He followed them to the hall door, and waited with them till their carriage came up.

It was a still summer's morning when they came out upon the steps, as if all nature were silently and breathlessly awaiting the verdict. But as the doctors got into their carriage a light breeze sprang up, causing the trees to sway and rustle with a mournful sound, as if they knew the sentence, and were conveying it to the fields around. Sir Everard stood watching them as they drove away—those great court physicians, who, with all their fame and all their learning, could do nothing for his boy—nothing!

He listened to the sighing of the wind, and watched the trees bowing mournfully before it; and he wondered vaguely what was the language of the winds and breezes, and in what words nature was learning his boy's fate. It seemed to him that the breezes pursued the retreating doctors, and flung clouds of dust around them, as if taunting them with their inability to help; and then, returning once more to the oaks and beeches, resumed their melancholy wail. Dreamily there recurred to his mind that ancient fable the children loved to hear; that story of the olden time which tells how the winds wafted through the trees to the passer-by, the secret which had been whispered into the bosom of the earth:

"List! Mother Earth; while no man hears.

King Midas has got asses' ears."

And, as he cast one more look at the carriage in the distance, before re-entering the house, the messages of the breezes seemed to come into his head in the form of the baby rhymes he had so often heard the children sing.

(To be continued.)

THE COMMON SCHOOLS.

It is obvious that the infinite evils resulting from the proposed perversion of the great educating agency of the country cannot be corrected by the supplementary agencies of the Christian home, the Sabbath school, or the Church. This follows, not only because the activities of the public schools are universal, and that of all the other agencies partial, but chiefly because the Sabbath school and Church cannot teach history or science, and therefore cannot rectify the anti-Christian history and science taught by the public schools. And if they could, a Christian history and science on the one hand cannot coalesce with and counteract an atheistic history and science on the other. Poison and its antidote together never constitute nutritious food. And it is simply madness to attempt the universal distribution of poison, on the ground that other parties are endeavouring to furnish a partial distribution of an imperfect antidote.

It is greatly to be regretted that this tremendous question has been obscured and belittled by being identified with the entirely subordinate matter of reading short portions of the King James version of the Bible in the public schools. Another principal occasion of confusion on this subject is the unavoidable mutual prejudice and misunderstanding that prevails between the two great divisions of our Christian population, the Romanist and the Protestant. The protest against the reading of the Protestant version of Scripture came in the first instance from the Romanists. Hence, in the triangular conflict which ensued, between Protestants, Romanists, and infidels, many intelligent Christians, on both sides, mistook the stress of battle. Every intelligent Catholic ought to know by this time that all the evangelical churches are fundamentally at one with him in essential Christian doctrine. And every intelligent Protestant ought to know by this time, in the light of the terrible socialistic revolutions which are threatened, that the danger to our country in this age is infinitely more from scepticism than from superstition. We have, Protestant and Romanist alike, a common essential Christianity, abundantly sufficient for the purpose of the public schools, and all that remains for specific indoctrination may easily be left to the Sab-