

CHOICE LITERATURE.

THROUGH THE WINTER.

CHAPTER XX.—TRAILING ARBUTUS.

"The spring hath buds, however late,
The June must bring her roses,
To faintest hearts, that trustful wait
For what God's love discloses.
We ask of God the sunniest way,
He answers with a sorrow,
We faint beneath the cross to-day,
We wear the crown to-morrow."

Days followed one another quickly now, each one filled up with work and care; and hands and hearts were alike full, there was so much to be done, so many last things to be remembered, so much to be thought of, talked about, and prayed over. As each passing hour brought the time of parting nearer, the brothers and sister drew closer together, and those last days in the old home were filled, not alone with the business and toil of packing, but with tender, loving incidents, in which often, in after years, memory used fondly to linger, and whose holy power was often to be felt, in restraining and upholding, when feet were like to slip or courage to falter. Mr. Humphrey's plans were all successfully carried out. The house and farm were sold, and all necessary arrangements made for the departure of himself and sons for the West by the tenth of April. It was arranged that Helen and Sibyl should go to Mrs. Waldermar at the same time, and, to Matisie's great satisfaction, it was settled that she should go with them and enter Mrs. Waldermar's service.

In that lady's cottage the air was also full of voices whispering of change.

It was decided that Dr. Waldermar, as soon as his health would permit, should go to Boston and there begin the practice of his profession. Mrs. Waldermar and the rest of the family would remain in Quinnetoco during the summer, but with the early autumn they would follow him.

"Life was too short," Mrs. Waldermar said, "for unnecessary separations to be endured, and since Guy's duties were henceforth to confine him to Boston, they would go there too, and make a new home where all could be together."

So they talked, and planned, and worked, and the sun rose and set, and days went by, until the last afternoon of the last day was too quickly passing away.

It had been a busy time, but all was done now. In the hall stood the great trunks and boxes, that spoke so plainly of partings and journeys; and the old, familiar rooms already wore a strange, forsaken aspect. There had been no time for tears, little time even for words, during the long, busy day: the brothers and sister had worked together mostly in silence. But now, when all was done, they turned, with one consent, to go once more through the quiet house: the only home they had ever known, the only home they were ever to share together.

Slowly, sadly, they went from room to room, pausing at the windows to look out for the last time on some favourite view—a glimpse of water, or a clump of trees, or a distant shadowy outline of the sea—that till their dying day they would remember, and that often, in far-off lands, some mirage of memory would bring before them in all the fresh, vivid colouring of that early springtime.

An April shower came up while they were so employed, and the great, big drops fell fast and heavily for a brief space, then ceased, and the black clouds parted, just in time for the setting sun to radiate them with long shafts of golden light. They were leaning from a western window watching the beautiful play of light and shade, when, in a low voice, Philip said: "Look!"

Passing slowly southward, in solemn, royal state, was a cloud of kingly, uplifted heads, with, as it were, faces rapt in reverent repose and kindled with glorified light, the eyes raised upward, the lips half-parted, as if words of praise and adoration were just escaping.

"How beautiful!" Philip said, thoughtfully; "how real they look! what would they say?"

"Holy, holy, holy Lord God Almighty, which was, and is, and is to come," said a voice slowly and reverently behind them.

Just turning, Helen saw Dr. Waldermar. But no one spoke until the wonderful cloud-vision, with its fading, changing forms, had drifted seaward beyond their gaze.

"I am glad you came just when you did," Philip then said to the doctor. "I wanted some one to say those words for me."

Dr. Waldermar smiled as he laid a hand affectionately on the boy's shoulder.

"What did it make you think of?" he said to Helen.

"The shower and the cloud together," she asked. "I could only think of St. John's beautiful glimpse of heaven, and of the multitude who had come out of great tribulation."

"Nellie is always thinking of tribulation," Fred said, in a tone of mingled impatience and sadness. "Why couldn't you think of this verse I learned Sunday? And now *see* not the bright light which is in the clouds: but the wind passeth and cleanseth them."

Dr. Waldermar looked at the boy with surprise and pleasure.

"Is that what it made you think of, Fred?" he asked, gently. "My dear boy, I hope you will always remember that there is a light in the darkest cloud, an angel—nay, better—a God behind it."

A little longer they lingered at the window, watching the coming down of the evening, each busy with thoughts, while memory and hope clasped hands and whispered, the one, of glad, untroubled "years gone down into the past," the other, of brighter, happier years surely awaiting them in the future.

Fred stood silent. He looked at Helen. Something in her face, in the tender, wishful eyes that were watching him,

seemed to give him strength and resolution. He stepped to her side.

"Nellie," he said, in a low voice, "I think mamma would be glad to have me say it, and before I go I will say it to you. I told you once I had made up my mind to be a Christian. Nellie, I think, I hope, I am one now. I do love and believe in Jesus, and I will try to obey Him, to follow Him whithersoever He may lead me."

The room was very still for a few minutes, while the solemn vow was being written on their hearts and registered in heaven; then Dr. Waldermar said, gently:

"Shall we read and pray together before we part?"

And opening his pocket-Bible he read of Jacob going out from Beersheba.

Full of strength and promise, full of a love that bade them trust and be not afraid, the words were; and in the shadowy evening light they came home with new meaning, to the young hearts that on the morrow were to go forth from home, not knowing what should befall them.

The prayer that followed was an earnest petition that they might have strength, through all the temptations and struggles of life, to remember and keep Jacob's vow: "Then shall the Lord be my God;" and so, at last, when the changes and wanderings of time were over, come home, an unbroken family, in peace and gladness to the Father's house.

That was their last talk together in the old home.

Soon Mr. Humphrey's voice was heard calling Helen, and with the early morning of the next day came the hurry and bustle of departure. The last arrangements were soon made, the last good-byes soon said; and in the first flush of the rosy sunrise Helen stood on the stoop, holding her little sister's hand, and watching the carriage as it rolled away, with the happy boys waving their caps and shouting good-bye until beyond sight and hearing.

It was well for Helen that Mrs. Waldermar, with her tender thoughtfulness, left her little time to indulge her sorrow.

Before the morning colours had fairly blended into the white light of the full day she was there, as she said, "to claim her daughters."

The last trunks were carried out; the windows closed, the door locked, and the key sent by Matisie to its new owner; and with a sad but thankful heart Helen turned from the home of her childhood, to go to the new one so kindly waiting for her coming.

It was the beginning of a new life, and so Helen felt it.

She was parting with much that was dear to her, laying down many duties, that, even while they had pressed heavily, love had made sweet; and entering a new sphere, where hope promised her much of pleasure, joy and ease.

Was she fitted for it?

Would the new path, so free from thorns and roughnesses, and winding only among pleasant places, prove a safe path for her feet? Or would she, like so many others, in prosperity and comfort, grow lukewarm and indifferent? and because she had "no changes therefore" "fear not God."

Thoughts something like these were thronging Helen's mind, as she sat alone in the pleasant chamber to which, after a hasty meeting with the doctor and Margaret, Mrs. Waldermar had thoughtfully taken her to rest a while by herself.

The trials of the past year had sifted her.

"Until the strength of self conceit
Was changed at length
To weakness."

There was no sense of self-sufficiency in her heart, no feeling that, of herself, she could think or do any good thing.

Humble and distrustful, she walked to her window, and leaning on it, looked out. There was a lovely view of the sea, looking then very peaceful under the soft light of the April sky, and directly beneath a sheltered garden-nook, where early flowers were already blooming, trees budding, and birds flitting to and fro, in the delightful importance of young couples just preparing for housekeeping.

In the centre of the garden was a marble fountain, playing that day for the first time that spring; with fascinated eyes Helen watched the tossing, waving spray. How pure, how free, how full of life and joy it seemed!

Where did the water come from?
Helen knew very well.

Not far away, just across the green fields that lay beyond the garden, there was a dewy meadow, over whose springy turf when a child she had often tramped for wild flowers and grasses. And hidden peacefully away among the sentinel-ferns and reeds, there was a spring of the coolest, clearest water, from which, with her hand folded for a cup, she had often drank when heated and thirsty from her summer-walks.

Now, as she beheld the flower-like play of the fountain, and remembered its source in the silent, unseen spring, there came to her one of those sweet Scripture illuminations, so often vouchsafed to praying eyes, and that not only throw a tender light over the Bible words, but make their application to the daily life so simple and so plain:

"All my fresh springs are in Thee." Where had Helen seen these words? Once, long before, when reading the Psalms in an Episcopal prayer-book, she had read them, thinking little of the depths of truth and beauty concealed in them; and now, when her soul craved that, which nothing in the world could bestow, memory recalled them to her.

"All my fresh springs"—springs of sweetness, healing, holiness—"are in Thee," the living water, and the meditation brought a quiet calm to her heart.

It was a pleasant little party that gathered around Mrs. Waldermar's lunch-table that day, and Helen's face, reflecting the light of a trusting spirit, was perhaps the sweetest and brightest there.

"Do you feel rested Helen?" Margaret asked, pausing, in the act of helping the desert, to look at her; and then answering her own question with,

"Why, I declare, you don't look as if you had ever been tired, and when you came you looked completely exhausted: what have you done to yourself this morning?"

"Taken a bath in the fountain of youth," Helen answered,

with a smile that one pair of eyes at the table saw covered a deeper feeling.

"Have you? well, I must own the effect is magical. I don't wonder poor old Ponce De Leon tried so hard to find it, if he had ever seen anyone fresh from its waters; but I am particularly glad you are now rested, for I have a delightful plan, that wants nothing for its successful accomplishment this afternoon, but light hearts and nimble feet."

"What now, Margie?" her brother asked, with a laugh.

"Only a walk in the woods, Guy. The trailing arbutus is in bloom, and I propose to devote the afternoon to gathering it. I never feel spring to be really here until I hold a bit of it in my hands."

Dr. Waldermar looked at Helen.

"Do you really feel strong enough to go?" he inquired.

"You know there is no hurry, though Margie is so impatient; the spring is here, however slow she may be to believe it, and the arbutus will be just as lovely to-morrow as it is to-day; don't try to go unless you are sure you will not find it tiring."

"I am quite sure," she answered, with a grateful smile.

"I am not tired, and the day is so lovely one feels like a caged bird when obliged to stay in-doors."

"I see the spirit of spring has taken full possession of you. Well, then, Margie, it is agreed that we devote this afternoon to wood-foraging."

"Mamma, I hope you will instruct these romantic young ladies, that even on flower quests, in our changeable climate, over shoes and blanket-shawls are things of use, if not of beauty; and without them—whatever else they may or may not find in the woods—I am afraid they would be pretty sure to find colds and rheumatism."

"Guy," Margaret said, playfully, "you are a born croaker. Helen, you have no idea how dreadful it is to live in a house with a doctor. You never can do anything, that, from the heights of his superior wisdom, he doesn't discover to be very imprudent—very good, perhaps for his profession, but exceedingly bad for your health, which of course it is his sacred duty to watch over."

"It certainly is," Dr. Waldermar said, pleasantly, "when its possessor doesn't watch over it herself. But come, young ladies, I challenge you to meet me on the doorstep in five minutes, properly equipped in every particular, for your walk."

"Say fifteen minutes, Guy, and I'll pick up your glove," Margaret said, as with a merry laugh she ran after Helen and Sibyl.

Dr. Waldermar's five minutes lengthened into ten, and the ten was losing itself in twenty, when, with bright faces, the three girls joined him on the doorstep.

"At last," he said, with a playful growl, showing them his watch; "I wonder if Job ever waited while a party of young ladies made themselves ready for a walk; and as for your baskets," and he laughed as he counted them, "judging from them, this must be the day when

"Birnam wood do come to Dunsinane."

Come now, little lady," and he took Sibyl's hand, "let's see if these gay flower-gatherers are fleet-footed enough to keep up with us."

They had a quick walk, almost run, across the fields to the edge of the woods; but once there, Dr. Waldermar slackened his pace and let them stroll along quietly and slowly as they pleased. How beautiful it was in the woods that day! Too early for much foliage, it was not too early for the spicy pine-buds to be swelling, or for the oaks to be hanging forth their delicate fringes of faintest pink, and silvery gray, and pale, shadowy green.

Eyes and hands were alike busy: the one could not be satisfied with seeing, nor the other with gathering, and the pleasant work of filling the baskets went on with earnest, merry will. From one mossy stump to another they wandered, finding everywhere the beautiful flower-children, until, in their interest and excitement, they were out of each other's sight, although not out of hearing.

After a little search for her, Dr. Waldermar found Helen in what looked like a perfect nest of arbutus, and pulling up one full, beautiful cluster after another.

With bright, laughing eyes she looked at him. "I think these are the sweetest and prettiest tinted flowers I have found yet," she said, as with dainty fingers she stripped off the two or three brown, discoloured leaves from a long spray of exquisite white and pink blossoms. "I do not believe there is a jewel in the world that can compare with these flowers for beauty and purity."

"Will you give it to me?" Dr. Waldermar asked with a smile, as he leaned against a tree near watching her.

"Yes, gladly, if you like it: but what will you do with it? wind it round your hat?"

"No."

"On my heart I'll wear it for fear my jewel type."

he hummed lightly as he came to her side, and extended his hand for the spray she reached towards him.

Suddenly he stopped. "Wait a moment," he said, in a changed, earnest voice. "Helen if you give me these flowers, you must give me with them the right to cherish and love the giver, who is more to me than flower, or jewel, or any other earthly possession ever can be. Will you do it?"

One startled, blushing glance she gave him before her veiled eyes sought the ground; and his low word thrilled her with its tenderness, and bowed her heart with a happiness she could scarcely dare to look at, it seemed so strange and incomprehensible.

When, soon after, warned by the lengthening shadows and growing chilliness of the late afternoon, Dr. Waldermar sought for his sister and Sibyl, he found them very unwilling to obey his summons.

"I have had a beautiful time," Margaret said, eagerly. "I never enjoyed the woods as I have to-day. I feel as if I had found a great treasure, and, like a miser, I cannot bear to leave it."

Dr. Waldermar quiet answer made Margaret bright eyes open wider than usual.

"Do you?" he said, "so do I; but there is this difference between your treasure and mine: yours can be safely