

CHOICE LITERATURE.

THROUGH THE WINTER.

CHAPTER VIII.—THE STORY OF A WEEK.

"Little battles thou hast won,
Little masteries achieved,
Little wants with care relieved,
Little words in love expressed,
Little wrongs at once confessed;
Little favours kindly done,
Little toils thou didst not shun.
Little graces meekly worn,
Little slights with patience borne—
These shall crown thy pillowed head,
Holy light upon thee shed;
These are treasures that shall rise
Far beyond the smiling skies."

The next day was Tuesday. What a cold, dreary day it was, and how cold and dreary the world and life looked to Helen as she dragged wearily through the duties of the morning. Her home seemed so bleak and bare, the labours required of her so distasteful, after her brief glimpse into such a different home and life. It was so beautiful there—

"Just like living in a picture," she said to Philip, when he asked if she had had a pleasant visit; and often during the day she was conscious of a longing desire to escape from the realities that claimed her, and spend all her days in just such a picture. The ease and rest of Margaret's life; the choice works of art and wealth that surrounded her; the love that watched over and shielded her so tenderly from all contact with the rough side of life; how tempting, how precious they all seemed to poor Helen! how hard, and empty, and unprotected her own life by contrast looked! "Oh, dear!" she sighed, despondently, while she ironed away on her father's shirt, "I don't see why we cannot all have beautiful homes and beautiful possessions. I don't understand why it is that some have all the sunshine of life and others all the shadows. Things don't seem to be equally divided here. I wonder if they ever will be!" Poor Helen; she sank very deep in the Slough of Despond that day.

Ronald and Sibyl seemed duller than usual at their lessons, and fuller than ever of mischief when allowed to play. And Matsie, whose thoughts were very apt to make long absences from the kitchen where her body dwelt, was to-day more forgetful than ever.

At last, after she had let the cake burn to a cinder in the oven, the tea-kettle boil dry, and an iron scorch a new tablecloth, Helen's patience gave out.

"Matsie!" she exclaimed, "I do think you are the stupidest girl that ever pretended to have a mind. Why don't you think what you are doing, instead of moving round here like an automaton? I don't know what you use your head for; but it certainly isn't to help you do your work."

"Sakes alive, Miss Helen," Matsie responded, with snapping eyes, "I thought hands were made to work with, not heads. I guess I'd make queer work mixing bread with my head; and it 'pears to me, Miss Helen, I must say, if I'm the stupidest girl in the world, you ain't very far from being the crossiest. I declar' I don't b'lieve going visiting 'grees with you. I guess you made medicine of sugar-plums, Miss Helen; that's just my opinion."

Poor Helen! her cheeks burned crimson, and her head sank under Matsie's sharp words.

Saucy they certainly were. If there was any one privilege in the world that Matsie prized above all others, and would never submit to have curtailed, it was the privilege of using her tongue, whenever, wherever, and however she pleased. But it was not because her words were saucy, but because they were true, that they stung Helen now.

"Made medicine of sugar-plums." Yes, she certainly had done that, and very bitter, unpalatable medicine, too. Yet in spite of her consciousness that it was so, she seemed impelled to go on tasting and chewing the noxious poison. During the afternoon, while she sat alone mending one of Sibyl's little aprons, her thoughts went back to the conversation in Mrs. Waldemar's library, and to the books that had then appeared to her such forbidden fruit.

"Were they really that? Could she not have taken them?"

She ran over the hours and duties of each day. From six o'clock in the morning to ten o'clock in the evening was a long time; but, long as it was, Helen could find no minutes that were not fully occupied. "It there is nothing else to do, there is always this tiresome, unending sewing," she sighed. "I wonder if it would be very wrong to crowd some of it out, and crowd a book in. The children wear out their clothes very fast; I believe if I didn't mend and make new ones for them all the time, they would be more careful."

"And then, there are the evenings," she went on, moodily. "I don't see, after all, why I should devote them to Philip and Fred. They might play games by themselves, and study their lessons without constantly wanting me to help them. I've a great mind to tell them to-night that I can't be bothered; they must get along by themselves. I am sure, mamma would never wish me to be such a slave, if she knew." "Even Christ pleased not Himself;" how plainly, sweetly, Helen seemed just then to hear her mother read these words. How mean, selfish, contemptible her murmurings sounded beside them!

The hot tears came, and, humbled and ashamed, she dropped her head in her hands and prayed to be forgiven, and, in spite of all her rebelling, to be led aright.

Through the rest of the afternoon and evening Helen went about sadly and gently. If her face was a little sadder than usual, and so, as Philip watched it, he thought it was, yet it seemed sweeter as well, and he could not make up his mind to wish it different.

"I declar', Master Philip," Matsie said confidentially, when Philip was locking the kitchen at bedtime, "I declar' I think our Miss Helen is one very queer girl. This morn-

ing you'd have thought she'd change molasses candy into rhubarb; and now, if she'd just look at sour milk, it is my belief she'd turn it sweet. I declar' I don't understand her at all."

Perhaps Helen in her youth and inexperience did not fully understand herself; but one thing, before she slept that night, she settled in her mind firmly and forever.

"This has been a miserable day," she thought seriously, "and I have been very foolish and wicked; but it wasn't because, as Matsie said, my visit didn't agree with me, but because I am not a loving, obedient child to my heavenly Father. If I was wholly reconciled to His will, it wouldn't hurt me so much to know that there are good, and pleasant, and beautiful things in the world that are out of my reach. Always, if God deemed it best, if I may know Him and do His will, I will ask for no other knowledge. What He gives me, I will take with thanksgiving; when He denies, I will resign with thanksgiving. O mamma, you were right when you said, 'Life only was crowned and royal when we, from our deepest hearts, could say and pray, Not my will, but thine be done.'"

"Papa," Helen said next morning, as her father was preparing to go to his office, "Papa will you please give me a little money? Christmas will be here soon, and I want to buy some Christmas presents for the children."

"Christmas presents!—Christmas nonsense," Mr. Humphrey answered, contemptuously. "I don't believe in such things, Helen. It is a great waste of money, and I can tell you money is a very scarce thing. It doesn't drop from the clouds like snow, and it is not to be gathered from the trees like moss. One has to work for money, and what one works for, one ought to keep with care," and Mr. Humphrey buttoned his overcoat across his breast with an air that said that was what he intended to do, and there was an end of the matter.

"I know it, papa," Helen urged, gently, "but I only want a few dollars, and I won't waste them. I do so want to make the children happy on Christmas day," she pleaded. "Mamma always did."

"Well, here, then," said her father, opening his pocket-book; "here are three dollars; make them go as far as you can. Remember, I didn't pick them out of the road like stones, and so don't throw them away for other men to pick up."

"Thank you, papa," Helen answered, gratefully; "I will try to be careful. Can Philip take me to Riverton this afternoon?"

Mr. Humphrey considered for a moment: "Yes," he said then; "only mind that he keeps to the straight road; don't let him get into any more mischief with the horses."

"No, sir; we will be very careful," and with a bright face Helen went back into the sitting-room. The boys were still there reviewing their lessons.

"Philip," she asked, "can you manage to learn your afternoon lessons this morning, so as to lose nothing but the recitations, if you drive me to Riverton, after dinner?"

"Yes," Philip answered, joyfully; "I almost know them now. What are you going to Riverton for, Nellie? It will be just splendid to go there this afternoon."

"I'm going too, ain't I?" Fred asked, in a very eager voice.

"No," Helen said, gently; "Philip is enough to drive me, and I don't think you ought to leave school, Fred."

"I ought to, just as much as Phil," Fred retorted, wrathfully, the more incensed because he knew his lessons were never as well prepared, nor his standing ever as good as his brothers. "If Phil goes, I'm going, too. I won't be snubbed and put down by—"

What made Fred so suddenly pause in his angry speech? Why was his sentence left unfinished? Why did he turn away and begin to pick up his books for school?

"And He went down with them, and came to Nazareth, and was subject unto them."

Were the words really written on the walls of the room? was the wind really repeating them?

Fred seemed to see and hear them everywhere for a few seconds, while he struggled nobly with his pride and disappointment; then he looked up pleasantly into Helen's distressed face.

"No matter, Nellie," he said, bravely; "I don't mind. The boys are going to have a snow-ball battle after school; I guess that will be as good as Riverton. You'll bring me a sugar-plum, won't you?" he added, as he stopped by his sister to kiss her.

"You deserve more than one," Helen said, as she passed her hand affectionately through his curly brown locks. "Dear Fred," she whispered, "you have made me very happy."

"Don't make a fellow cry," he whispered back. "I forgot all about Him for a minute, Helen; but I remembered, and it is all right now. Come, Phil, are you ready? there goes the first bell." And with a bright good-morning, the two boys ran off.

Two difficulties had been cleared out of Helen's path, but the road to Riverton was not yet free from obstacles.

Ronald and Sibyl had listened, with wide-awake ears, to the conversation between their brothers and sister. It was their turn now, and they were not slow to avail themselves of it.

"What are you going to Riverton for, Nellie?" Ronald asked, feeling his way with the skill of an old diplomatist.

"On business, Ronald."

"Are you going in the sleigh?"

"Yes," Helen answered, as she moved briskly about the room, dusting and arranging furniture.

"Ain't Sibyl and I going, too?"

Helen had already considered that question. If she took the little ones she would be seriously hindered in her shopping. How could she buy a doll for Sibyl, or a book for Ronald, with their curious, prying little eyes watching her every movement?

No. She could not do that, she decided; neither could she leave them in Matsie's protecting care. She had resolved to ask a friendly neighbour, who, living quite by herself, was always ready and glad to do kind thanks for others, to come in and keep house during her absence. And having

so determined she was prepared for Ronald's question, and ready with her answer:

"I think not, Ronald," she said; "I shall be very busy, and it would hinder me if you and Sibyl were with me. Aunt Eliza will stay with you, and you will be good children and make her no trouble, won't you?"

Ronald stood with heaving chest and trembling lips. He was not subdued; he wanted to go dreadfully; but he was not quite ready for open rebellion. Sibyl came to his assistance.

"No," she said, definitely, the large angry tears filling her eyes. "No, we won't be good, Helen; we'll ride down the banisters; we'll play with the fire; we'll be saucy to Aunt 'Liza, and we'll—we'll—wake Nicodemus," she exclaimed, remembering an expression her father had once used when complaining of her noise; "if you don't let us go."

"I cannot let you go; and you must stay home and be good children," Helen repeated, firmly.

"We won't; so there!" Ronald exclaimed, while Sibyl dropped down on her falling resort—the floor—and began to kick and cry vehemently.

Helen stood for a moment looking at the children with a feeling of utter despair. She was half inclined to yield the point and let them go, when Mrs. Waldemar's advice recurred to her: "Insist always upon obedience, when once the question is raised," and in a low, pleasant voice she said:

"Ronald, Sibyl; stop crying and listen to me." Something in her tone arrested the attention of the children; they ceased their cries and waited for her next words.

"I cannot let you go," she repeated.

"Then we'll cry louder," interrupted Sibyl.

"No, you will not;" Helen said, sternly, "You will be quiet and hear what I have to say; don't you know that it is necessary you should obey me?"

"Yes," Ronald said, "but it is also necessary for us to go to Riverton when you go, Helen."

"No," she said, "if it was necessary, I should let you go; I want you now to be good, unselfish little children, and do as I think best without more crying; will you?"

"Will you bring us something?" Sibyl demanded, resolved, if they could not go, at least to effect a compromise which should be in their favour.

"Yes," trembled on Helen's lips; but "Don't bribe them," seemed to be whispered in her ears.

"No," she said again, gently but decidedly. "I cannot buy anything to give you to-night, Sibyl. You must stay at home because it is best you should, and not because I hire you to do so. I am sure," she said, as she looked in their tearful, pouting faces, "Ronald is too much of a man, and Sibyl too much of a woman to want me to treat them as if they were babies. You know men and women often have to do what they don't like to."

"Do they?" Ronald asked, with sudden interest; "do you ever do what you don't want to, Nellie?"

"Yes," she said with a sigh; "often."

"Do you?" Sibyl questioned. "I thought that was why people growed up, so they could do just as they wanted to. When I'm a growed-up woman, Nellie, can't I do just as I'm a mind to?"

"I'm afraid not, dear," Helen said, half-sadly, as she stooped and kissed the uplifted, earnest little face.

Ronald stood for a moment, apparently in deep thought. "Nellie," he said, solemnly, "if I do what I don't want to—if I stay at home and don't cry any more, will it make me a man—a real growed-up man, with a black beaver hat, any sooner?"

"Not a tall man like papa," Helen answered; "it will take years for you to grow to be a man, Ronald; but it will make you a brave, manly boy—a boy I can love and trust, Ronald, and that will be better than being a grown man."

"Will it?" Ronald asked, doubtfully. "Well," he said, drawing a long breath; "I'll try it, Nellie; I'll try to be a manly boy, and you may go to Riverton, and I won't cry," and Ronald bit his lip, and winked very fast in his efforts to keep his word and prove himself manly.

"But I will," Sibyl said, with a stamp of her tiny foot; "I ain't going to be a man, and I'll cry—I'll cry enough for us both."

"No, you won't," Ronald said, turning to her with a look of grave authority. "No, you won't cry, 'cause I won't let you."

"How are you going to help it?" Sibyl retorted.

Ronald looked at her. "What do grown men do to keep little girls from crying, Helen?" he asked, drawing himself up and looking down with an air of great dignity upon Sibyl. "I tell you what, Sibyl," he continued, as a bright thought struck him; "you be good, and stop crying, and I'll let you have my watch; you may wear it all this afternoon."

Ronald's toy watch was his most treasured possession, and Helen fully appreciated the self-denial that made him, after guarding it jealously for weeks from Sibyl's dangerous fingers, now so generously offer to lend it to her. But she was not satisfied to have it so; she wanted Sibyl to be actuated by a higher motive than that of personal gain; so she said:

"Stop a moment, Ronald; you are very kind, but I don't believe Sibyl wants to be hired to do right. If you are going to be a manly boy, Sibyl wants to be a womanly little girl, don't you, dear?"

"No, I don't," Sibyl said, perversely. "I don't want to be a woman; I want the watch."

"But you don't want to be a selfish little girl? you want to be kind to Ronald, as he is to you?"

Sibyl considered the question. "Does that mean for me to let Ronald keep his watch, and to let you go to Riverton, and for me to stay home, and not cry?" she asked, slowly. Helen nodded.

"Is that the way the angels up in heaven do?"

"Yes, the angels are always unselfish."

"It is very hard to be unselfish," Sibyl said, gravely; "I guess I wouldn't want to be an angel very long; but, Nellie, I'll play at one this afternoon, and I won't cry any more. So now it is all 'cided. Ronald, let's you and I go look at the rabbits."