

Choice Literature.

MISUNDERSTOOD.

BY FLORENCE MONTGOMERY.

CHAPTER XIV.

No one was to blame. The reapers had run to the pond on hearing the children's cries, and had extricated them immediately; Virginia had sent for the doctor at once. So no one had failed in their duty; or had, as I say, been to blame—except the poor little victim himself.

"At present," the doctor informed Sir Everard, "the extent of the injuries could not be determined."

Miles, from having been jerked off the end of the branch straight into the water, had escaped with a wetting; but Humphrey, from having been nearer the tree, had come in contact with the trunk, and the bough under the water, and the doctor feared both spine and head had been injured. He asked for further advice, and a man was despatched with a telegram for two of the greatest surgeons of the day.

The calamity was so sudden, so awful, so unexpected, Sir Everard could not realize it—kept on misunderstanding the doctor's incoherence—the poor old doctor who had known him all his life, and could not bear to be the one to tell him that, even if his boy's life were spared, he must ever be a helpless cripple.

Humphrey a cripple! Humphrey to lie on his back all his life! Sir Everard could not grasp the idea, could not collect his thoughts to conceive anything so impossible, could not follow the doctor through the circumlocution in which he tried to clothe the announcement, and at last lost patience.

"For God's sake, tell me what you mean! Can you be trying to break to me that my boy—that child who has never to my knowledge sat still in his life—will never have the use of his limbs any more? Speak out, I implore you!"

"Never any more, Sir Everard!—never any more."

Still he could not realize it, could not take it in.

He turned away, and went out into the air, to clear, as it were, the mistiness of his brain, and to bring himself face to face with the words, so as to force himself to understand them. "Never have the use of his limbs any more!" Simple English words—he knew he must really understand them, and yet they seemed to him mere sounds, devoid of any signification.

He repeated them over and over again, to see what he could make of them. "Never have the use of his limbs any more." That meant—let him think it out clearly—it meant, that his boy, his restless, impetuous boy, would be chained to a sofa all his life, for ever cut off from all that glorified his young existence—that was what it meant. It meant—for now that Thought was beginning to assert herself, each word that was meaningless before, was becoming alive with signification—it meant that all that had been should be again no more—that all that the child called life was over—that all that went to make up the sum of his existence was gone—that death in life must be his portion for ever and for ever!

For what did the word life mean to Humphrey? Why, the powers of which he was to be deprived were the very germs of his whole existence—the things for which he was, and moved, and had his being. Take them away, and what remained? Life bereft of these, what was it to him? What is a husk from which the kernel has been taken, or a casket from which the jewel is gone?

Sir Everard was not a worldly man, and in those moments he did not dwell on the blighted youth and blasted manhood; he did not think of the earthly career for ever clouded, the hopes of earthly distinction for ever shut out. He did not see that his boy was debarred from every path of usefulness or honour which man delights to tread—alike shut out from active service and learned profession. Results painful enough in themselves; but it is none of them that have brought that despairing expression to his set, white face. No!

He is thinking of the active little figure chained to an invalid's chair. He is trying to realize that the lawns and gardens will know his joyous presence no more. Surrounded by the haunts of the young life, he is forcing himself to believe that all henceforth shall be lone and silent, that never again shall they echo to his light footstep, or ring with his merry laugh; that the active limbs shall be motionless, and the busy hands for ever still. And only one word rose to his lips, "Impossible!"

At moments like these, how our feelings are reflected on all things around. Never before had Sir Everard so keenly realized the endless motion of nature.

With the probable fate of his boy lying before him, he was perhaps exaggerating the blessing of movement; but certainly he had never before so forcibly noticed how every little leaf on the trees fluttered as the breeze passed over it, how every little blade of grass shook and danced in the wind, how the boughs sway and the blossoms nodded, how the waters of the streamlet rippled and leapt on their way!

And this with what is called inanimate nature; and when it came to the birds and the beasts and the insects!

It was cruel for two lambs to come and gambol together at that moment, just under the poor father's eyes; cruel of a little rabbit to choose that second, out of all the hours of a long summer day, to pop up from under the brushwood, and scamper away across the green grass! When had the air ever been so full of butterflies, horseflies and beetles; for ever and ever on the wing! The bees hurried from flower to flower, the birds chased each other from tree to tree, the summer gnats never rested for a moment;—and Humphrey, of all Nature's children the happiest and the brightest, was to be the one who should sport in the sunshine no more!

He thought of the boy's restless activity, his joy in motion and exercise. From dawn to sunset, never still, never weary of rushing about in the open air. There had always been

with him a sort of lavish enjoyment of existence for its own sake, as if there were happiness in the mere sense of being and moving.

Even as a little baby, it had always been the same. When he could scarcely stand alone, he would struggle to get out of his nurse's arms, and start off by himself, heedless of the many falls he would get on the way. And as memory brought back the early days of the child's life, came mingled with them the thought of the mother who had so delighted in him. And as Sir Everard remembered how she had gloried in his manly spirit, and in his energy and activity he bowed his head, and thanked God that she had not lived to see this day.

Once more he saw her restraining her maternal fears that she might not interfere with her boy's love of enterprise, or bring a shadow on his happiness. Once more he seemed to hear the baby voice at the bedroom door, before the shutters were opened.

"Mother, mother, may I go out?"

The breathless pause till the answer came.

"Out now! My darling, it is so early and so cold. Better wait a little!"

"The insides of houses are so hot, mother; please say I may go out!"

Had the boy ever walked? Had he ever done anything but run?

Sir Everard could not recall one instance of meeting him out of doors, except running and rushing headlong, jumping over everything which obstructed his path.

Once again, there rose the thought of the motionless little figure sitting pale and silent in a cripple's chair. God help the poor father! In the bitterness of his spirit he had almost said, "Sooner than clip his wings, let him soar away."

He retraced his steps, and on entering the hall, was informed by the trembling Virginia that Humphrey had recovered consciousness, and had spoken.

He hurried to the drawing-room, but the doctor met him at the door, and motioned him back.

"Do not go in just yet," he said, closing the door behind him; "he seems to fear your displeasure about something, and shows great excitement at the thought of seeing you. I dare say," he added, quickly, for he was touched by the expression of pain which passed over the poor father's face, "I dare say he will get over it, when he is a little less confused."

"Does he understand what has happened?"

"I think so, now. At first he was sadly confused at finding himself in the drawing-room; but by degrees he remembered the events of the day. The moment he grasped the idea of the accident, he became excited, and asked repeatedly for his little brother. I should fancy this anxiety was associated with his shrinking from seeing you. Perhaps you understand better than I do."

"I have been obliged several times lately to find fault with him for leading his little brother into mischief, and this last unfortunate escapade I had most especially forbidden. Miles is, as you know, so very delicate, that I am obliged to be very careful of him."

This was said almost in an exculpatory tone.

"He is certainly very delicate," answered the doctor, "and ought not to be exposed to such dangers. I am very thankful he has escaped so easily. Now my little patient's constitution is altogether different; seldom have I seen a finer or stronger. However," he added, breaking off with a sigh, "the most iron frame is not proof against such an accident as this. I think, Sir Everard," he concluded, "that what you tell me would quite account for the excitement. May I tell him from you that he has no cause to fear your anger?"

"Need you ask?" said the baronet impatiently, and the doctor returned to the sick room.

Sir Everard paced up and down till the door re-opened, and the doctor made him a sign to come in.

He entered, and advanced to the side of the sofa. The room was so dark that he could only see the outline of the curly head, lying back among the pillows, but a little hand came out and pulled him down.

"Father," in a voice which was hardly above a whisper, "it's all right. He isn't hurt a bit—not even a cold. I am so glad it is me that is hurt instead of him."

"Oh, hush! hush! my darling."

"You're not angry with me, father? I'm so sorry I climbed. I'll never do it again. Say you're not angry, father."

"No, no, my poor child—I'm not angry, only so sorry to see you ill."

"Am I very ill? What is the matter with my head. Shall I soon be well again?"

"I hope so, darling. There are some gentlemen coming to-morrow, to help you to get well very quick."

"I shall be well by the Harvest Home, shan't I?"

"The Harvest Home? When is that?"

"You promised to fix a day early next week, you know, father. Which day shall it be?"

"I—I don't—quite know what day to fix, my boy."

"The corn fell so fast, all day, father—it must be ready soon. Shall we say Tuesday?"

No answer; only an inarticulate murmur.

"Then that's settled. Shall I be well enough on Tuesday to dance 'Up the middle and down again,' with Dolly?"

Rises again, all unbidden, before the father's eyes, a motionless little figure, sitting in a cripple's chair. Dance! Ought he to tell him? ought he to prepare him? who was to do it, if not he? who else was to tell him of the blight that had fallen on his young life?

"You don't tell me, father. Shall I be well soon?"

He could not tell him. He only kissed the little hand, and murmured, "God grant you may, my child!"

"I shan't be able to lie still very long. If it wasn't that I feel so tired, I should like to jump up now."

"Are you very tired, Humphrey?"

"Yes," with a sigh, "and my back aches, and so does my head, and feels so funny. It makes my eyes swim, and that makes me so sleepy."

"Will you try to go to sleep?"

"Yes," murmured the child, and his heavy eyes closed; "I shall wake up quite well to-morrow."

"A good sign," whispered Sir Everard to the doctor. The doctor did not answer; and Sir Everard went up to the nursery, to see Miles. The little fellow was gazing out of the window, humming a forlorn little tune to himself. Jane, with red eyes, was sitting at work.

Sir Everard took the child up in his arms. "What are you doing, my little man?"

"I'm so dull without Humphie. When will he come and play?"

"Soon, I hope, darling."

"Is Humphie going to sleep all night in the drawing room?"

"Yes—isn't that funny?"

"May I go and say good-night to him?"

"No; you can't go to him to-night."

Miles' eyes filled with tears. "I can't go to sleep with out saying good-night to Humphie."

"Ah! don't cry, my child," said the poor father, beseechingly. His feelings had been on the strain so many hours; he felt he could not stand any more, and he dared not let his thoughts dwell on the subject. He tried to turn the conversation. "Tell me," he said, with a forced smile, "what was that little song you were singing to yourself when I came in?"

"It was about Humpty-Dumpty," said Miles, mournfully.

"Let me see; Humpty-Dumpty was an egg, wasn't he?"

"That gentleman said it was Humphie who was Humpty-Dumpty. Is that true, Fardie?"

"No, darling; how could Humphrey be an egg?"

"One part's true, though," said Miles, "Humpty Dumpty had a great fall."

"Ah! that's true!" sighed Sir Everard.

"What's the end, Fardie? I want to remember it, and I can't—do you?"

Why did Sir Everard put the child down so suddenly, and why should his voice falter a little, as he repeated the baby couplet? They were only nursery rhymes, and this is how they ended:

"All the king's horses, and all the king's men,
Will never set Humpty-Dumpty up again."

"It's 'd'iculous nonsense, Fardie, of course?"

"A ridiculous nonsensical rhyme, darling!"

But ah! how nearly the sublime and the ridiculous touch sometimes in this world!

(To be continued.)

THINGS A CENTURY AGO.

On New Year's Day, as soon as service was over in the Middle Dutch Church, you might see the whole company of elders and deacons adjourn to the house of the worthy Dutch mayor, Richard Varick, corner of Pine Street and Broadway. There they broke the first cockey, and sipped the first glass of cherry bounce for the season. From thence they went from house to house, and broke their bread with merry hearts. Dinner being ended, John, with his wife and oldest children, would go to the house of James; the compliments of the season, the customary salute, the bounce (cherry brandy, sweet and weak) and the cockey, with the health of the family, being all discussed, they joined in company and went the rounds; they gathered as they rolled around, and before the moon sank behind the blue hills of the Jerseys you might see two score of these happy mortals in one company. In all these the rules of decorum and society were rarely infringed upon. To be sure, we had no temperance societies in those days, for every man kept a temperance society in his own house. Thus wrote Grant Thorburn of the New Year's celebration in the year 1790, within three years of a century ago. And thus he comments when he jotted down his remembrances of that year's natal day, just half a century later:

Young folks smile when their grandfathers tell of the happy days of auld lang syne. But certain it is that fifty years ago the people of New York lived much happier than they do now. They had no artificial wants—only two banks—rarely gave a note—but one small playhouse—no operas, no ottomans, few sofas or sideboards, and perhaps not six pianos in the city. Now more money is paid to servants in some of these five-story houses for rubbing, scrubbing and polishing of brasses and furniture—for wiping, dusting and breaking of glasses and china—than it took to support a decent family fifty years ago.

True enough, Grant Thorburn, for the queer little seedman from whose writings these quotations are being taken, says of the times just after he had landed in that city fresh from Scotland: While a bachelor I paid \$3 a week for my board and washing. Now (just after his marriage) this sum more than covered our expenses, and the profits of the store paid the rent—only \$50 per annum. He was happy, for he writes: I had not another wish. But his wife was not extravagant in her desires, for here is the inventory for the goods with which he went to housekeeping as he sets them down: One white pine table, cost 50 cents; three rush-bottom chairs, cost 25 cents each; three knives and forks, three cups and saucers, a rag carpet, and other utensils in the same proportion. Though plain, they were all new. Ten dollars closed the concern. The old lady supplied the upholstery gratis. We had enough, and a chair to spare; in fact, we often had two chairs to spare. Of what use are your four dozen of chairs? You can only sit on one at a time, and the rest are only vanity and vexation of spirit. It was within the means of any one to dress his wife well in those days, nearly a century ago, and the happy new year had no nightmares in the shape of milliner's bills, for he writes thus: At this period the dress of a young woman consisted of a long flowing robe, drawn together and tied around the neck with a silken cord, and also around the waist with a ribbon, terminating in a long trail or train, such as you have seen in the paintings of the Goddess of Liberty. I thought then, and I think so now, that that costume was more becoming the female form than any other.