

Choice Literature.

MISUNDERSTOOD.

BY FLORENCE MONTGOMERY.

CHAPTER II. *Continued*

Even as I write, I see rising from the darkness before me a vision of a mother and a child. I see the soft eyes meeting those of the little listener on the stool at her knee. I see the earnestness pervading every line of the beautiful face. I almost hear the tones of the gentle voice, which, while reducing the mysteries of divine truth to the level of the baby comprehension, carry with them the unmistakable impress of her own belief in the things of which she is telling; the certainty that the love and trust she is describing are no mere abstract truths to her, but that they are life of her life, and breath of her breath!

And I see the child's eyes glow and expand under her earnestness, as the little mind catches a refraction of her enthusiasm. Is this a picture or a reality? Have I brought up to any one a dimly-remembered vision? Or is it purely idealistic and fanciful?

I do not know; but even as I gaze the picture has melted into the darkness from which I conjured it, and I see it no more!

"Boys," sounded Sir Everard's voice at the bottom of the nursery stairs, "your uncle and I are going out for a walk. No one need come with us who would rather not."

There could be but one answer to such an appeal, and a rush and scamper ensued.

It was the usual Sunday afternoon routine, the stables and the farm, and then across the meadows to inspect the hay ricks, and through the corn-fields to a certain gate that commanded the finest view on the estate.

"If only this weather lasts another fortnight," said Sir Everard, as his eyes wandered over golden fields, "I think we shall have a good harvest, eh, Charlie?"

"I am sure we shall," came from Humphrey, who always had an opinion on every subject, and never lost an opportunity of obtruding it on public attention; "We shall have such a lot of corn we shan't know what to do with it."

"Well, I have never found that to be the case yet," said his father; "but if the first part of your prediction prove true, we shall have a harvest home and a dance, and you and Miles shall lead off. 'Up the middle and down again,' with the prettiest little girls you can find in the village."

"I know who I shall dance with," said Humphrey, balancing himself on the top of the gate, "but she's not a little girl, she's quite old, nearly twenty, I dare say, and she's not pretty either. I don't care to dance with little girls, it's foolish."

"Who is the happy lady, Humphrey?" asked Uncle Charlie.

"She is not a lady at all," said Humphrey, indignantly, "she's Dolly, the laundry maid, and wears patters and turned-up sleeves, and her arms are as red as her cheeks. Dolly's not the least like a lady."

"Except on Sundays," put in little Miles, "because then she's got her sleeves down and is very smart. I saw Dolly going to church this morning, with boots all covered with little white buttons."

"That does not make her a lady," said the elder boy contemptuously. "It is no use trying to explain to you, Miles, what a lady is, because you never see any."

"Not Mrs. Jones, the steward's wife?" suggested Miles, timidly, and feeling he was treading on dangerous ground.

"No," said Humphrey, "she's not a real lady, not what I call a lady. You see, Miles," he added, sinking his voice, and drawing nearer to his brother, so that he might not be overheard, "I shall never be able to make you understand, because you can't remember mother."

"No," said poor little Miles, meekly, "I suppose not." This argument was, as he knew by experience, conclusive, and he was always completely silenced by it.

"And who will my little Miles choose for a partner?" broke in Sir Everard; "it must be some very small girl, I think."

"I should like the little girl at the lodge, please, father, because she's the very only little girl I know who is smaller than me."

"Very well; then you are both provided. Charlie, you must come down to the Harvest Home, and see 'Up the middle and down again'; Humphrey struggling with his substantial partner, and Miles bringing up the rear with the 'very only little girl he knows who is smaller than him.' The father's eye rested smiling on his two children as he pictured the sight to himself.

"And when may it be?" asked Humphrey. "Father, please settle a day for the harvest to begin."

"When the yellow corn is almost brown, you may settle a day for the harvest," answered the father. "I have a reaping-machine this year, and it will soon be cut when once they begin."

"I shall come every day to these fields, and see how it is getting on," said Miles.

"I know a much quicker way," said Humphrey, jumping down from the gate, and pulling up several ears of corn by the roots.

"I shall have them up in the nursery, and see them ripen every day."

"Why, you foolish boy," said his father, "you have picked them too soon, they will never ripen now."

Humphrey looked ruefully at his ears of corn. "I quite forgot," said he.

"They will never ripen now," repeated little Miles, sorrowfully.

"Never mind, Miles," said Humphrey, "I will plant them in the sunniest part of our own garden, where the soil is much better than here, and where, I dare say, they will grow much finer and better than if they had been left to ripen with the rest. Perhaps they will thank me some day

for having pulled them out of the rough field, and planted them in such a more beautiful place."

"Perhaps they will," breathed little Miles, clasping his hands with pleasure at the idea.

Miles was leaning against the gate, looking up admiringly at his brother, and Humphrey was sitting on the topmost bar, with the ears of corn in his hand.

"Let us go," said Sir Everard, suddenly; "it is intensely hot here, and I am longing to get under those limes in the next field."

The boys climbed over the gate, and ran on to the indicated spot, followed more leisurely by their elders.

Sir Everard and Uncle Charlie threw themselves down on the grass in the shade, and the children, seating themselves by their father, begged for a story.

"Sailors are the men for stories," was his answer; "you had better ask your uncle."

Uncle Charlie proved a charming story-teller. He told them of sharks and crocodiles, of boar-hunting, and of wonderful adventures by land and sea.

The children hung on his every word.

The shadows grew long and the sun began to sink over the cornfields, and still they were absorbed in listening, and their father in watching their sparkling eyes and varying countenances.

"Come," said Sir Everard at last, jumping up, "no more stories, or we shall be here all night. It is past six, and Virginia will be wondering what has become of us."

"Oh!" said Humphrey, drawing a long breath, as he descended from those heights of wonder to the trifling details of every day life, recalled by the mention of Virginia, "how delicious it has been! I hope, father, you will let me be a sailor when I grow up?"

"Well, I don't think that will exactly be your vocation," answered Sir Everard; "but there is plenty of time before you."

"Me, too," said little Miles; "I want to be a sailor too."

"You, my darling," said Sir Everard, fondly; "no, not you; I couldn't spare you, my sweet little fellow."

And he stooped, as he spoke, to kiss the little face that was uplifted so pleadingly to his, the lips that were always so ready to respond to his caresses.

Humphrey had turned away his head, and was gazing intently at his ears of corn.

"Is he jealous, I wonder?" thought Uncle Charlie, peering at the little face under the straw hat, and wondering whether it was a tear he saw shining among the long dark eyelashes.

But before he could make up his mind that it was so, the child's eyes were sparkling with excitement over a curious creature with a thousand legs, which had crawled out of the corn in his hand.

"And now jump up, boys, and come home," Sir Everard, as he spoke, picked up his cane, and, taking his brother-in-law's arm, walked slowly on. "We shall have all these feats reproduced, Charlie, of that I am quite sure. Virginia has a nice time before her."

There was very little tea eaten that evening, the children were in such a hurry to get down again to the delectable anecdotes.

But Sir Everard took alarm at Miles' flushed cheeks and bright eyes, and would allow no more exciting stories so close upon bed-time.

"Will you finish about the crocodile to-morrow?" asked Humphrey, creeping up his uncle's leg, as he came to wish him good-night.

"To-morrow I go, my boy," he answered.

"Going to-morrow!" said Humphrey. "What a very short visit!"

"What a very short visit!" echoed Miles, who always thought it incumbent on him to say the same thing as his brother.

"I will pay you a longer visit next time," said Uncle Charlie, as he kissed the two little faces.

"But when will next time be?" persisted Humphrey.

"Yes! when will next time be?" repeated Miles.

"Ah! when indeed?" said Uncle Charlie.

CHAPTER III.

"I have got so many plans in my head that I think I shall burst," said Humphrey to Miles the next morning, as they stood on the door-steps, watching the dog-cart vanishing in the distance, on its way to the station with their father and uncle. "Some of the things Uncle Charlie was telling us about would be quite easy for us to do. You wouldn't be afraid, I suppose, to climb up the big tree overhanging the pond where the water-lilies are?"

"No," said Miles, rather doubtfully, "not if you went on first and gave me your hand; but that tree is a long way off—wouldn't one of the trees in the orchard do?"

"Oh, no! it wouldn't be half the fun. Don't you remember the man in the story crawled along the branch that stretched over the water? Well, this tree has a branch hanging right over the pond; and I want to crawl along it like he did."

"Haven't we better ask Virginia if we may go all that way alone?" suggested Miles, in the vain hope of putting off the evil moment.

Humphrey, however, did not see the force of this argument, and so they started off.

It was a very hot day, and after they had got out of the farm-yard there was no shade at all.

Humphrey skipped through the meadows and over the gates, and Miles followed him as quickly as he could, but the sun was very hot on his head, and he soon got wearied and fell back.

Humphrey did not perceive how languidly his little brother was following him, till a faint cry from behind reached him.

"Humphrey, please stop: I can't keep up to you." Instantly he ran back.

"I'm so tired, Humphrey, and so hot, shall we go home?"

"Go home! why are we close to the pond now. Look Miles, it is only across that meadow, and the cornfield beyond

Miles followed the direction of his brother's finger, and his eye rested ruefully on the expanse lying before him, where the sun was scorching up everything.

"I'll try, Humphrey," he said, resignedly.

"I'll tell you what!" exclaimed Humphrey, "I'll carry you!"

Miles felt a little nervous at the prospect, but did not like to object.

"Just get over that gate," continued Humphrey, "and then I'll carry you across the field, and we'll soon be by the pond, where it will be as cool as possible."

Over the gate they scrambled, and then the elder boy disposed himself to take his little brother in his arms. How shall I describe the intense discomfort of the circumstances under which Miles now found himself!

One of Humphrey's arms was so tightly round his neck that he almost felt as if he were choking, and the hand of the other grasped one of his legs with a gripe which amounted almost to pain; and still there was a feeling of insecurity about his position which, already very strong while Humphrey was standing still, did not diminish when he began to move.

Humphrey started with a run, but his speed soon slackened, and grave doubts began to arise even in his own mind as to the accomplishment of the task he had undertaken.

However, he staggered on. But when presently his long-suffering load began to show signs of slipping, Humphrey tightened his grasp to such a degree that Miles, who till now had endured in silence, could endure no longer, and he uttered a faint cry for mercy.

At the same moment Humphrey caught his foot in a rabbit hole, and both boys rolled over together. Peals of laughter from Humphrey followed the catastrophe, but Miles did not quite enter into the spirit of the joke. He was hot and tired, poor little fellow, and began to implore his brother to take him under the neighbouring hedge to rest.

Humphrey readily consented, and led him out of the baking sun.

"Perhaps we had better give it up," said he, sighing, as he sat down by Miles in the shade, "and try again in the cool of the evening. You could do it, couldn't you, if it were not for the heat?"

"Oh, yes," said Miles eagerly. With a respite in view he was ready to agree to anything.

"Very well," said Humphrey, "then we'll give it up and come again this evening after tea. I declare," he added, suddenly breaking off, "there's a mushroom out there."

He was off in a moment, and returned in triumph. "Isn't it a lovely one, Miles? How fresh it smells and how beautiful it peels. If father were at home we'd have had it cooked for his dinner, he is so fond of mushrooms."

"It wouldn't keep good till Friday, I suppose, for the wild men's dinner party?" enquired Miles.

"One would be no use," answered Humphrey, "but we might come here some morning and get a lot if we brought a basket. I'll tell you what, we'll get up quite, quite early to-morrow, and come and have a regular mushroom hunt. Won't it be fun?"

"I'm afraid Virginia would not be awake to dress me," observed Miles.

"Oh, never mind Virginia!" said Humphrey, "I'll dress you, Miles; I don't think Virginia would care to get up so early, and it would be a pity to wake her, poor thing! She goes to bed late, and is so tired in the morning."

"So she is, poor thing!" said Miles.

"And besides you know," continued Humphrey, "she always thinks something dreadful will happen if she doesn't come with us, and it would be a pity to frighten her for nothing."

"So it would; a great pity," repeated Miles. "But what's that noise, Humphrey? Is it a cock crowing or a bull roaring?"

Both children listened.

There was many a sound to be heard round about on that summer morning: the buzzing of bees as they flitted about among the clover, the chirrup of the grasshoppers in the long grass, the crowing of a cock from the farm, and the lowing of cattle in the distance, but that which had attracted Miles' attention was none of all these. It was the gradually approaching sound of a female voice, which, as its owner neared the meadow, assumed to the two little listeners the familiar tones of the French language.

"M. Humphrey! M. Miles! M. Humphrey! on êtes-vous donc?"

"It's Virginia!" they both exclaimed, jumping up.

Virginia it was; and great was the horror she expressed at their having strayed so far from home, at the state of heat in which she found Miles, and at his having been taken such a long walk.

Many were the reproaches she heaped upon Humphrey as they walked back to the house for having caused her such a hunt in the heat of the sun, and her nerves such a shock as they had experienced when she had not found him and his brother in their usual haunts.

Lastly she brought him up with the inquiry, "Et vous leçons! Savez-vous qu'il est midi passé?"

Humphrey's ideas of time were always of the vaguest order, and when anything of so exciting a nature as this morning's expedition came in the way, hours were not in his calculations.

He did not mend matters much by saying he should have thought it had been about half-past nine.

Virginia maintained a dignified silence after this explanation, till they reached the hall door; and it now being too near dinner time to make it worth while for Humphrey to get out his books, she informed him that he would have to do all his lessons in the afternoon.

This was perhaps more of a punishment to Miles than to Humphrey.

Lessons were no trouble to Humphrey when once his at-