

## CHOISE LITERATURE.

## THROUGH THE WINTER.

## CHAPTER XI.—CHRISTMAS EVE.

"The world shut out, and love shut in  
With youth, and gentle mirth,  
Which ever make their pleasant din  
Best by the household hearth.  
Then let us rest amid the gifts  
God's tenderness hath given,  
And bless each blessing, as it lifts  
Our grateful hearts to heaven."

It was the night before Christmas. The winter air was crisp and frosty, and the winter stars were bright and sparkling, as if they too rejoiced over the glad tidings of peace and good will that were once again being sung over the valleys and hills of earth, and once again finding echo in the hearts of men.

In Mrs. Waldermar's pleasant home the Christmas spirit was ruling with loving, joyous sway. The icy winds might roar around the house, and shake rudely the oaken doors, but no farther could they come in their frantic efforts to chill the warmth within. Up the wide-mouthed, old-fashioned chimneys crackled and blazed the large hospitable fires, beloved of our ancestors, and perhaps good types of their own warm, roomy, hospitable hearts.

They were all there—Helen and Sibyl, Fred, Ronald and Philip. The old sleigh that had brought them was only just turned homeward, and they stood there around the warm fire, feeling as if something very new and pleasant had come to them, something of which they were at one and the same time very glad and very shy.

The gladness might linger—in fact it could not help doing so; but the shyness could not endure long in the loving, genial atmosphere that surrounded them. And very soon there crept into each young heart a happy, restless feeling, much as if they had been away and had just come home. It was Mrs. Waldermar's tender motherliness that wrought the charm: answering the mute orphaned cry of mother, with the holy sympathy that whispered child. They were all happy; and if in Helen's eyes there lurked a shadow that told of wistful yearning and of fond regret, yet those who watched her most closely could scarcely wish it away. It threw no shadow over the enjoyment of others; it only seemed to set on the head of dreaming girlhood the crown of thoughtful womanhood, and to invest with the sacred royalty of sorrow nobly borne, the loveliness of inexperienced and untested youth.

Mrs. Waldermar's step-mother was with her for the holidays—a lovely, white-capped old lady, whose gentle, placid face, that told of a youthful, loving spirit which the snows of seventy winters had not been able to chill or make old, and who won the children at once.

"And now," Margaret said, after the excitement of arrival had somewhat subsided, "we have a great deal to do to-night; but the first thing on the programme is tea, and that, as Guy has monopolized the dining-room, we are to take, very informally, in here. Ronald and Sibyl, don't you want to help me clear the centre-table?"

Was there ever a child who did not enjoy being treated as if he was really of some use? Ronald and Sibyl felt very happy and important as they removed the books and ornaments from the table and placed them with great care on the piano. That done, Fred and Philip were called upon to wheel the table nearer the fire, and then, in answer to Margaret's ring, a servant appeared with a large tray full of dishes. With what eager, delighted eyes the children watched all Margaret's pretty preparations! How tempting the table looked, with its snowy naperies and lovely china, its plates and baskets of light, snowy sandwiches, and delicious cake, and the fragrant aroma from the silver chocolate pot pervading all. It seemed to them like taking tea in fairy-land.

"And now," Margaret said, "we will just imagine we are at a picnic, and we will sit where we like and take what we like. Helen, you shall pour the chocolate, and Fred shall pass it, and we'll only have one rule of etiquette, and that is we shall each see how helpful we can be to the others."

It was a pretty picnic they made of their tea-taking in the cozy, fire-lit parlour; and before it was over Dr. Waldermar came in. His appearance was the signal for a full chorus of voices.

"Guy," cried Margaret, "I began to think you never would come; how could you be so late?"

Mrs. Waldermar asked some question which was lost in the hub-bub. Fred's and Philip's boyish voices rang forth in a glad "How do you do, Dr. Waldermar?" and Sibyl's little voice piped, "I am very glad to see you, Dr. Waldermar."

Helen alone was silent, but her blush and smile spoke for her.

Cheerily Dr. Waldermar replied to all their greetings. Sibyl's little heart was made very happy by the gentle kiss with which he answered her; and Ronald felt as if he had suddenly grown several inches, when Dr. Waldermar's hand rested on his head, and his kind voice said:

"Well, my little man, how are you to-night?"

Stooping for a moment over his mother's chair, he heard and answered her question, and then going round to Helen, he petitioned for a cup of her chocolate. Taking it from her hand, he took his favourite position by the mantle, near the fire, and standing there asked and answered questions, told stories, joked with the boys, and played with Sibyl, until the usually quiet parlour rang with peals of glad laughter, and shouts of innocent, unrestrained mirth. Yet through all the fun and frolic, Dr. Waldermar's manner never once lost the air of gentle, loving deference it always bore toward his mother, and the dignity which was the natural outgrowth of his own true manhood, while it offered no check to innocent enjoyment, was an effectual barrier to all rudeness and boldness.

Helen need have no fears that the boys, carried away by their high spirits, would forget where they were, or the gen-

tleness of behaviour required of them in Mrs. Waldermar's parlour. If they were in any danger of forgetting, the doctor was not; and the mirth he had raised he knew how to control.

"And now," he said, when the last cups of chocolate had been drunk and the pleasant picnic was over, "at half-past eight I am going to invite you all to attend me in the dining-room; but—with a glance at the little clock ticking near—"it will be two hours before the doors of that room will pay any heed to our 'Open Sesame;' and in the meantime I propose that we make believe we are in an old-fashioned New England kitchen, and try what we can do for amusement there. Boys, can you crack hickory nuts as well as conundrums?"

"Try us," Fred's gay voice answered with emphasis.

"Come on, then," Dr. Waldermar said, as he offered his grandmother his arm, and, opening the door, led the way across the hall, down a short flight of stairs.

Was it really an old-fashioned kitchen into which he ushered them?

The room was small, but beautifully clean and neat. The sides were lined with a wood, dark and polished with years and care. Overhead there was no ceiling: all was open to the massive oaken beams, that told so plainly with what thought for stability and futurity the builders of the olden time wrought. The floor was white with scurrings, and strewn with sand, drawn after the fashion of our grandmothers into waving outlines of flowers and shells. Straight, high-backed chairs were ranged against the sides: there were dresser-shelves, on which rows of brightly-decorated earthen-ware and polished tin utensils reposed; long feathery sprays of asparagus nodded to them from the high wooden mantel; in one corner, from its huge, ponderous case, a century-old clock ticked its loud welcome. Candles, in high brass candlesticks, threw light on the scene; while in the fireplace, so large that one might stand in it and looking up see the stars, there blazed the old-fashioned, hospitable wood fire with its solid, immense back-log, and over it, suspended from the blackened crane, there bubbled and boiled the tea kettle, its cover dancing as wreath after wreath of vapoury steam escaped and curled lazily up the chimney. Near the centre of the room, but a little to one side, stood the music-box of our grandmothers, the quaint, old-fashioned spinning-wheel.

"This is our Christmas present to grandma," Margaret whispered to Helen; "she was a New England girl, and it is her delight to tell of old-time life and doings: so Guy and I have dressed up this room as a surprise for her—I wonder what she will say to it? Grandma," she said aloud, turning to the dear old lady, whom Dr. Waldermar had just seated comfortably in a high, straight-backed arm-chair minus both rockers and upholstery; "Grandma, does this take you back to the good old times when you were a girl? Is it like what you had then?"

There was a mist like tears in Mrs. Leighton's eyes, but her smile was very sweet as she answered.

"Like and yet unlike, Margie; you have recalled the shadow—if now you could only bring back the substance—if you could fill this room with the faces and voices that made the old time beautiful, then the illusion would be complete."

"Here is one voice at least that you were familiar with then," Margaret said, in a mood to let her grandmother indulge in sad memories. "Can you spin, Helen? No? My dear, your education has been sadly neglected." And flying across the room Margaret took her station at the spinning-wheel.

She made a pretty picture standing there, in her soft, bright dress, one white hand holding the flax, while with her foot she guided the motion of the wheel that hummed and buzzed as if, after its long years of rest, it enjoyed its resurrection to action and use once more.

Mrs. Leighton gazed with a tender, yearning look in her eyes.

"I could believe she was my sister, your Aunt Achsah returned to life," she said to her daughter. "Ah! well, I shall go to them; they will not return to me."

"Why don't girls use spinning-wheels now?" Fred asked, expressing in his question his great admiration of Margaret and her performance.

"I should have to take you to some of our mammoth factories, and show you the great wheels and looms driven by the great steam, to make you fully appreciate the answer to your question," Dr. Waldermar said. "When you have once seen the webs of fine linen, enough to satisfy all a housekeeper's demands for many days, that could be turned out in even the little time while Margaret has been playing, you will wonder no more why the drone of the spinning-wheel has ceased to be heard in our homes."

Mrs. Leighton heard his words.

"I know," she said, pleasantly; "it is even so, Guy; the ways and arts of old times are giving place to the wonderful inventions of these modern days. It will soon be thought cheaper to do nothing than even to knit; where girls of my day used to make music at their spinning-wheels, the girls of to-day make discords at their pianos. Never mind, Margie dear," she continued, looking with a bright smile at her grand-daughter, "you may keep your piano, if they will let you: I don't doubt but before long they will find you some easier way of playing it while you sit by with folded hands, but you will never look prettier, nor make sweeter music, than you have done to-night. I thank you, dear, for your loving thoughts of your old grandmother."

"And now," Dr. Waldermar said, as Margaret's wheel ceased humming, "now for our other amusements."

Going to the table, he took up a large dish of nuts.

"Here Fred and Philip," he said, "here is work for you: let us see if you are equal to squirrels for nut-cracking. Margie, if you and the little folks will pop the corn, Miss Helen and I will make the candy—if she will be good enough to assist me," he added, with a smile, as he looked at Helen.

"What can I do?" Helen asked, brightly, as she came forward. "I shall be glad to be useful, if I can."

"Did you ever make molasses candy?"

She looked dubious. "At home on the stove, yes."

"But never over an open fire? Miss Helen, we have left

the present, and have taken a leap of about fifty years into 'the dark backward and abysm of time;' be pleased to forget that such a light-extinguisher as a stove was ever heard of; and as a reward for your forgetfulness, you shall see how we made candy in 'ye good olden time.'"

Taking up the heavy iron tongs that stood in the chimney corner, Dr. Waldermar drew the crane forward, removed the steaming tea-kettle, and in its place set a small iron kettle; swinging it back over the fire, he waited a few moments for it to heat, and then, handing Helen a pitcher of molasses, he told her it was her turn to work now and she might fill the kettle. That done, the kettle was once again swung back over the blazing wood, and Helen and the doctor stood by to watch it.

"It must be stirred," Helen said, turning to the table.

"Where is the spoon?"

"Here, Miss Helen; but if you please I reserve the honour of stirring for myself. I might trust you, perhaps, not to burn the molasses, but in the meantime, who is to assure me you will not burn yourself?"

"Grandma," he said, after giving the molasses a vigorous stir, "I am every moment growing stronger in my belief, that if we had to live in an old-fashioned kitchen for the rest of our days, we would bless the man who first invented stoves."

Mrs. Leighton laughed. "New days, new wants, Guy," she answered; "but if you had an ugly, black stove standing in the middle of the room you would spoil the pretty picture I am enjoying now."

It was a pretty sight. All over the room, with its quaint furnishings, danced the red light of the fire. Seated on benches were Mrs. Waldermar and her mother; Philip and Fred were cracking their nuts, and talking and laughing with frank, boyish earnestness; down on the wide, red hearth knelt Ronald and Sibyl, watching with grave interest, while Margaret shook her old-fashioned corn-popper—a covered iron pan with a very long handle—over the bed of glowing coals she had raked together in one corner of the fire-place; and not far from them stood Helen, bending with watchful care over the boiling kettle. Dr. Waldermar looked round the room and smiled; and then his eyes came back to Helen.

"Disobeying orders, Miss Helen," he said, taking the spoon from her. "Now, if you will butter the pans, I think the warmest part of the work will soon be done."

The pans were buttered; the candy poured into them; and after waiting a little while for it to cool, came the important business of pulling it. A very small portion was intrusted to Helen, with the laughing injunction to pull it with the tips of her fingers, and on no account to suffer it to touch the palms of her hands, and with a challenge to see which would make the lightest candy the contest began.

Over Helen's back drew Mrs. Waldermar insisted on tying a large, white apron, her sleeves were pushed back, revealing the round, dimpled arms, and her hair, loosened by exercise, dropped in soft waves round her brow. As Mrs. Waldermar watched her pulling the long, amber strands backward and forward, she thought she had never seen a prettier gymnastic exercise. It was pulled at last; and then, under the doctor's direction, Helen cut it into short, tempting rolls, and placed it on the large, blue platter, that Mrs. Leighton said was her mother's, and had often, in other days and in another home, been used for the same purpose.

"Still fifteen minutes to spare before the dining-room will claim us," Dr. Waldermar said. "Miss Helen, you have fairly earned a right to rest. How would you have liked work in an old-fashioned kitchen?" he asked, as he brought forward a low, flat-bottomed chair for her.

Helen glanced round the room.

"It seems like a bit of poetry," she answered.

"Yes, now, to us; but I am afraid the bits of poetry were very rare, and life's passages, most of them, of sober, serious prose in those old days."

"But not on Christmas eve," Helen said, gently.

He smiled.

"No, not on Christmas eve. Whatever the rest of the year might be, I am sure that then, into the dullest, saddest life there must have stolen faint gleams from Bethlehem's stars, there must have been heard glad echoes of the angels' Christmas song. There were those, too, who had the rare gift of telling the thoughts the Christmas time brought them. What do you think of this, Miss Helen?" And, standing near her, leaning on the mantle, Dr. Waldermar slowly repeated:

"Nor war, or battle's sound  
Was heard the world around;  
The idle spear and shield were high up-hung;  
The hooked chariot stood  
Unstained with hostile blood;  
The trumpet spake not to the armed throng;  
And kings sat still with awful eye,  
As if they surely knew their sovereign Lord was by."

"But peaceful was the night,  
Wherein the Prince of Light  
His reign of peace upon the earth began;  
The winds, with wonder whist,  
Smoothly the waters kist,  
Whispering new joys to the mild ocean,  
Who now hath quite forgot to rave,  
While birds of calm sat brooding on the charmed wave."

Helen's face, with its earnest, glad expression, told what she thought of it, but she did not attempt to say: she only asked:

"Is there more of it? Did Wordsworth write it?"

"Yes, the e is more. What I have recited is only a little part of it. Wordsworth did not write it; it is one of Milton's immortal utterances."

"I wish I could read it all," Helen said. "How many books you must have read, Dr. Waldermar," she added, with a low, unconscious sigh.

"Not quite all there are in the world, Miss Helen. You mustn't look at me as Goldsmith's villagers looked at their schoolmaster."