

CHOICE LITERATURE.

THROUGH THE WINTER.

CHAPTER VI.—Continued.

From that time forth Helen's sense of security during the fierce, wild, winter storms that so often rage along the Atlantic sea-coast was always shadowed by the remembrance of others.

The boys came home from evening church with fresh reports of the gale.

"It is the brightest moonlight I ever saw," said Philip, "and the wind is increasing every minute. They say the ocean is perfectly terrific, the life-boat went off to the wreck about seven o'clock, and wanted to bring the men on shore, but they wouldn't leave; and now they say no boat can live in such a sea, and so the men on the wreck must stay there."

"Do they think there is really great danger?" Helen asked.

"I don't know what they think; but I heard Mr. Clayton say the ship must be made of stout stuff to stand such a trial as this; and I know most of the men and boys went down to the beach from church. I wish I could go."

"So do I," said Fred; "why can't we?"

"Oh, no," Helen answered, quickly, "don't go—not yet—wait. Perhaps the gale will be over in a little while. And it is Sunday evening. I'd rather you wouldn't go."

"Well, we won't, then," Fred said, heroically practising his good resolutions of the morning; "but if it grows worse, if anything should happen, why, in that case you know, Nellie, we must go."

They separated soon after for bed, but not to sleep. As the night went on the wind increased. It seemed as if mad spirits were holding carnival. The house shook; Helen's bed rocked; while peacefully, in her lofty sphere, far above the reach of tempests and commotions, the full moon looked down in silent beauty on the wind-beaten earth.

About twelve o'clock there came a knock on Helen's door. It was Philip.

"Helen," he asked, "are you asleep?"

"No," she answered, throwing on a shawl and going to the door. "What is it?"

"I've just been out-doors: the street is full of people; every one is going to the beach. They say the wreck is going to pieces. Fred and I are going; papa says we may."

"Oh, wait," Helen exclaimed, nervously. "I can't stay at home and sleep; let me go, too. Ask papa if I can't."

Philip went off; and, in great haste, Helen threw on her clothes. Philip was back in a few moments.

"Papa says it is foolish for you to go, but I told him I saw lots of women going. So he says if you want to go very much why you can. Be quick, Nellie. And wrap up warm," he added, on his own brotherly responsibility. Helen was soon ready, and joined her brothers at the hall door.

"It is an awful night for you to be out, Nellie," Fred said, as they started.

"It won't hurt me," she answered, excitedly. "I couldn't—" A fierce blast of wind came full in their faces; Helen's sentence was never finished. She could scarcely breathe; speech was impossible. But she struggled on bravely between her brothers; too nervous and excited to feel cold, or have a thought about the wisdom of her conduct. A great many people were moving, as Philip said. All Quinsecoco was awake, lights twinkled in every window, and men and women, boys and girls, heedless of their own comfort in their sympathy and anxiety for their suffering fellow-mortals, were going rapidly to the beach.

It was a strange, grand, terrible scene that greeted them there. The door of the life-saving house stood open, and a bright light from lamp and fire seemed to invite entrance, but no one was there. Down on the white sands, as near the sea as possible, several fires had been kindled, and round them, singly or in groups, stood men with pale, solemn faces.

Out on the angry ocean, not far from the shore, near enough to be distinctly seen in the brilliant moonlight, to near that in momentary lulls of the wind cries could be heard and answered, was the ship they had seen the day before, rocking violently in the gale. The men on her deck were all plainly visible. Some lashed to the mast; others clinging to the sides and rigging. Now and then there would come a cry, a prayer for help, that the listeners on the shore could only answer with groans of despair. They were brave, stout-hearted, noble men, these watchers on the shore. From boyhood many of them had been accustomed to a life of daring, and even danger, along the sea-beach and on its waters.

It was not indifference nor fear that made them so inactive. All that human power could do they had done. In the beginning of the tempest, when the danger had been apparent to all on the beach, boats had been sent to the wreck to warn and rescue the men. They had been urged and implored to leave, but, laughing at danger, they had insisted on remaining; believing that the wind would soon subside, and in the early morning they could go at once off to sea. Now, in their hour of mortal peril, when, conscious of their need, they prayed for help, it could not reach them. No boat could live in such a sea; yet, useless as it was to attempt it, the brave crew of the life-saving station had launched their life-boat, only to be tossed by the mad waves like a plaything back upon the shore.

The mortar and lines, all the means a humane government has so liberally provided for the safety of its seamen, were collected there, and all were useless.

None but omnipotent power could control the wind the law of Omnipotence had created. He maketh the winds his messengers: so Helen that morning had heard a verse of the one hundred and fourth Psalm translated. Now, as she stood there, a helpless spectator of this fearful contest of the elements, the words returned to her.

Messengers of what? Terror and destruction, sorrow and anguish?

Why was it? She could find no answer. It was terrible: terrible to stand there alone in the face of death, and watch how surely, swiftly, unswervingly it was coming for its victims.

With a groan Helen closed her eyes and dropped down upon the sand.

A stranger, pacing the beach with folded arms and pained, grave face, paused for an instant as he came near her, glanced round as if looking for some one, and then with an air of quiet decision approached and stooped over her.

"Miss Humphrey," he said, "pardon me, but are you alone? You ought not to be here."

Bewildered and frightened, and trembling with excitement, Helen opened her eyes and looked at him. She did not know him at first, but in a second she recognised the gentleman she had met the day before on her sleigh-ride. How long it seemed since then! She tried to speak, to rise; she felt weak as a child and trembled as if in a nervous chill. The gentleman looked at her anxiously.

"Are you alone?" he repeated; "forgive me, but this is too much for you. Will you not let me take you home?"

She shook her head.

"Fred and Philip are somewhere," she managed to say.

"Oh," as there came another cry for help from the doomed ship, "this is dreadful. Can nothing be done? Won't any one help them?"

"The Lord on high is mightier than the noise of many waters, *yea*, than the mighty waves of the sea," the gentleman repeated, in a hushed, reverent tone.

"It is so cruel," Helen fairly sobbed.

He understood her.

"Only because we cannot stand where he does, and cannot, like him, trace his thought from its beginning to its end. 'Are not five sparrows sold for two farthings? And not one of them is forgotten before your Father.' Do you think He is less pitiful to those poor men than to sparrows? Listen."

Upon the wind, in its fitful pauses and swellings, above the muffled moanings of the sea, there came to them, from the wreck, the sweet, solemn music of the human voice. Despair, of rescue, conscious that for them the night was nearly spent, the morning near at hand, the Indians on the ship were singing; swanlike, closing their lives with song.

Their rich, full voices were heard through the wind, chanting:

"In the Christian's home in glory
There remains a land of rest,
There my Saviour's gone before me
To fulfil my soul's request.
He is fitting up my mansion,
Which eternally shall stand,
For my stay shall not be transient
In that holy, happy land."

Sweeter and purer swelled the voices, while the wind raged higher and fiercer.

"There is rest for the weary,
There is rest for the weary,
There is rest for you."

Then came a sudden snapping, and grinding, and groaning of timbers. There was a thud-like sound, as of the plunging of some heavy body into the water. The sweet singing ceased. There was a solemn pause.

With closed eyes and folded hands Helen knelt down on the sand. With uncovered head the gentleman stood beside her. With bated breath the watchers down by the waves waited in silence. Only for a few moments; then the waters rolled resolutely over a dismantled hulk, and the singers were resting in glory.

"And when the morning broke, Jesus himself stood on the shore," the gentleman said, in a slow, sweet voice. "Miss Humphrey, look there." Helen opened her eyes and looked where he pointed. It was the early dawn. In slow, majestic beauty the moon was sinking. Soft, fleecy clouds were flecking the morning sky; warm, lovely tints of rose, and pearl, and violet, were glowing in the east. The day was breaking—a day of peace, of light, of hope.

Helen looked long and wistfully. Once or twice her eyes left the sky and roved restlessly across the water. Was there a mystery there she could not read? Well, a day was coming when there would be no more sea.

Back to the sky went her eyes—tenderer grew the light—fairer the day.

"The path of the just is as the shining light, that shineth more and more unto the perfect day." What mattered the windings of that path so long as its end was sure?

Helen read and was quieted. With a face that, pale as it was from its night-vigil, looked as if the morning brightness had touched it, she looked up at the stranger by her side.

There was a movement all around them. Men and women were going back to their regular lives. To their sheltered homes. The event of the night was already a thing of the past.

Beginning even then, in the clear light of day, to seem, to some, dream-like and impossible, it would be talked of with sobered voices for a few days: it would be told by warm firesides of stormy evenings for a few years: it would be related by father to son for a few generations: it would become at last one of the old traditions of the sea. And then it would be forgotten, until eternity recalled it and explained its meaning.

Over the sands Philip and Fred came running to Helen. They were very quiet, but their faces brightened as they met the gentleman's pleasant eyes.

"Are you ready, Nellie?" Philip asked. "I am afraid you are dreadfully tired," he said, regretfully, "but Fred and I forgot."

"I know," she said, gently, "it is just as well. I didn't want to go home before."

As they walked away from the beach, one of the life-crew came up, and, bowing respectfully, spoke to the stranger. Would he wait a little longer?—there was something they would like to consult him about.

Willingly consenting, their new friend (for such he already seemed to them) wished them good-morning, and silently, thoughtfully, the brothers and sister walked home together.

CHAPTER VII.—A PLEASANT SURPRISE.

"Not always fall of leaf, nor ever spring,
Not endless night, nor yet eternal day;
The saddest birds a season find to sing,
The roughest storm a calm may soon allay."
—Southwell.

It was late that morning when Mrs. Waldermar's family met at the breakfast-table. The day was calm and pleasant; the wind, after its carnival, was quietly sleeping. The atmosphere of the room breathed only of comfort, ease and rest, but the faces of the occupants were thoughtful and sad. Dr. Waldermar told his mother and sister of the scenes on the beach; of the hymn that was changed ere it was finished into the new song of those who stand around the throne, and of the brave men who, through the storm and flood, went safely home to God. They listened with tearful eyes, and hearts full of sympathy for the bereaved ones; the mothers, wives and children who were left to mourn and suffer. They talked of them, devising ways and means of helping and comforting them; and then, in a pause, Dr. Waldermar said, quietly,

"Miss Humphrey was on the beach last night."

"What, Helen?" exclaimed Mrs. Waldermar and Margaret in one breath.

"Poor child!" Mrs. Waldermar added, compassionately. "If her mother were living she would not have been there. I hope you didn't leave her, Guy?"

"No," he answered, coolly, "not until her brothers came. I saw them start for home together. Mother, has she no aunt, no friend, no one to look after and take care of her?"

"In the sense you mean, no," answered his mother. "She has a father; but, while he would never let her suffer for food, or clothing, or any physical comfort, he is not a man to understand a young girl, or to watch over and guide her at this, the most critical time of her life. It is a blessed thing for Helen that she has the character and mind she has. She is one of the Lord's jewels, Guyon, she said, looking at him with a sweet smile; "and He will never let her suffer for want of polishing."

"And the rest of the family?" Dr. Waldermar questioned, with grave interest.

"You saw them all, Saturday," replied his mother; "the two large boys, and the little brother and sister. Helen has the care of them all. She is housekeeper, mother and teacher; and from what I have heard from others, and from the little she told me herself, I know she is trying nobly, unselfishly, to do her duty. It is a hard lot for one so young, though," she ended with a sigh.

"Yes," Dr. Waldermar assented, in a cool, grave manner in which he had carried on the whole conversation—a coolness that, in him, often served as a veil to some deep feeling, some earnest thought.

"Guyon," said his sister, as they left the table and stood round the fire for a few moments before parting for the morning, "the next time you have the chance, I hope you will run away with Miss Humphrey and bring her here. I am longing to know her, and if mamma won't introduce us, I hope you will."

"I am afraid it will be out of my power to do that for you, Margie," he said with a smile. "I have never been introduced to Miss Humphrey myself."

"Oh! but that makes no difference. She knows who you are."

"Hardly," he said, shaking his head.

"What! I don't you think she knows your name?"

"No," he said, smiling.

Margaret laughed a fresh, sweet laugh of girlish amusement.

"It would be fun to see you introduced," she said, gayly.

"I wonder what Helen would say or do."

"Mamma," she called, suddenly, "mamma, won't you send and invite Helen here this afternoon? Do, mamma; I believe it would do her good to come. She must be nervous and excited; and if she came here and took tea with us, she would get rested and calmed, and would sleep a great deal better to-night, I am positive. Won't you send for her, mamma?"

"What do you think, Guy?" his mother asked, doubtfully.

"Oh, Guy thinks with me," Margaret said. "I am sure he ought, being a doctor," she added, mischievously.

He smiled a little. "I hardly know, mother," he answered. "After the excitement of last night, I should say sleep would be much better for Miss Humphrey than society."

"Mrs. Waldermar considered for a few minutes.

"I will write and ask her to come, and bring the two little ones," she said. "We will have an early tea and send them home in good season, in time for them to obey the old precept and go early to bed, which would certainly be the wisest thing Helen could do."

Helen was moving languidly about the house, with pale cheek and aching head that morning. Both body and mind were suffering from the effects of her sad night-vigil.

"You were very foolish to go, Helen," her father said at breakfast, as he saw how weary she looked.

"Sakes alive, Miss Helen," Matisse had said, after favouring her with a long and critical survey; "I do hope next time there's a wreck, you'll stay in bed, like a sensible Christian, and not go tramping to the beach at midnight, just like some witch on Endor. I do declare, Miss Helen," she concluded, as she rolled up her sleeves and plunged with good will into her Monday's washing, "you want somebody to take care of you awful bad. If you only had some one, I guess you wouldn't have been out last night in all that gale."

Sadly Helen acknowledged to herself that her father and Matisse were right. It would have been wiser if she had remained at home. But then she would never have heard that sweet, solemn singing, the very memory of which thrilled her whole being; she would not have seen the early dawn, nor read the holy lesson that was hidden in it. "After all," she said to herself, "I believe I am glad I went. The pain and fatigue will soon pass, but the remembrance of those