

Choice Literature.

MISUNDERSTOOD.

BY FLORENCE MONTGOMERY.

CHAPTER XII.

It was a lovely day, real harvest weather, when Sir Everard Duncombe and his two little boys took their way to the corn fields to see the new machine at work.

Sir Everard was going up to town that evening, but it was for the last time; and then, to the children's delight, he had promised to come down for good, and he had settled that the Harvest Home should take place early in the ensuing week.

The corn-field presented a gay appearance when they reached it. The new machine, drawn by two fine horses, and driven by the bailiff, was careering along the corn, with the reapers all running by the side. Down fell the grain on all sides, and eager hands collected and bound it up.

With a shout of joy, Humphrey was among them, hindering every one and alarming his father by continually getting in the way of the machine and the horses.

Of course he was not long content with so subordinate a part in the proceedings; and came to beg his father to let him mount up on the little seat by the bailiff's side.

Sir Everard assisted him up, and the machine went off again, followed by the reapers.

By and by, Sir Everard looked at his watch, and found it was time to be making his way to the station. The children were so happy, he had not the heart to take them away.

"They are quite safe," he reflected, "with so many people about; and I will send Virginia to them, as I pass the house."

Humphrey was out of sight, so Sir Everard told Miles (who was playing with the "little girl at the lodge") to look out for Virginia, and to say "good-bye" for him to Humphrey.

Little Miles held up his face to be kissed—a thin face it was still—and said: "You'll come back soon, I ardie, and not go away any more?"

"Very soon, my darling; and then not leave you again till next year! We'll have great fun, and you must be a good little man, and not get ill any more."

"I promise, Fardie."

Sir Everard smiled rather sadly, kissed the child over and over again, and then waved away.

When he got to the gate, he turned round to have one more look at the gay scene. Miles was still standing where he had left him, gazing after his father, and kissing his hand. His was the prominent figure in the foreground, surrounded by the golden corn. Away behind him stretched the lovely landscape, and in the background was the machine returning to its starting point, followed by the reapers. Humphrey, sitting by the bailiff, had now got the reins in his own hands, and was cheering on the horses as he came.

So Sir Everard left them.

Excitement cannot last for ever, and after a time, Humphrey got tired of driving, and got down to play with his little brother. They followed the machine once or twice, picking up the corn, but it was hot work, and they went to rest under the hedge.

"It's very hot, even here," said Humphrey, taking off his hat and fanning himself. "I think we'll go and sit under the tree in the next field, where we sat the Sunday Uncle Charlie was here. Come along."

They climbed over the gate, and made for the tree, where they sat on the grass.

"How jolly Uncle Charlie's stories were," sighed Humphrey; "how I wish we could hear them all over again. It's a great pity father ever told me not to climb the bough that sticks out. It would have been the very thing to crawl along, like the man in that story. Father says it is rotten and unsafe. I think he must make a mistake, it looks as strong as possible!"

He sighed again, and there was a long pause.

Presently he resumed. "I don't see why we shouldn't go and look. It would be so cool by the pond."

"Oh! Humphie, please don't. We shall lose our way, and Virginia will be so angry."

"But I know the way quite well from here, Miles. It was only because we started from Dyson's cottage that I lost it before."

"But Humphie, if we get wet again! I promised Fardie not to get ill."

"The rain made you wet, Miles, not the pond; and it's not going to rain to-day. Look what a blue sky!"

The two brothers gazed upward. It was clear overhead, but there was a suspicious bank of clouds in the distance.

"Those clouds won't come down till night," Humphrey observed. "Come along. It's not very far."

"Better not, Humphie."

"I'm only going to look, Miles. What are you afraid of?"

"Don't know, Humphie," answered the little fellow, with a tiny shake in his voice; "but please, don't let us go!"

"Well, you needn't come if you don't like. I'll go alone—I shan't be long."

But Miles did not like being left in the field by himself; so with a sigh he got up, and put his hand in his brother's.

"I'll come," he said resignedly.

"That's right," said Humphrey; "there's nothing to be afraid of—is there?"

"No," said the child; but his face was troubled, and his voice still shook a little.

So over the grass the two little brothers went, hand in hand, till in an adjoining field they saw the waters of the pond gleaming like silver in the summer sunshine. Side by side they stood on its brink.

"We're only going to look, you know," said Humphrey.

They were the first words he had spoken for some time,

and they came so suddenly that Miles startled as they fell on the still air. They seemed to rouse the inhabitants of that secluded spot, for birds flew out of the tree, and soared away with a scared chirrup, which fell with a melancholy sound on the children's ears; and a water-rat bounded from under a lily-leaf, and plunged with a dull splash into another part of the pond.

Innumerable insects skimmed across the surface of the water, and one or two bees droned idly, as they flew from one water lily to another.

The branches of the tree that stretched over the pond dipped its topmost leaves into the water with a sleepy sound; as the breeze swayed it gently backward and forward, the water-lilies danced lightly with the movement of the water; and there was over the whole place a sense of repose and an isolation which infected the children with its dreaminess, keeping even Humphrey silent, and making little Miles feel sad.

"Let's go, Humphie."

"Not yet," answered Humphrey, recovering from his fit of abstraction, and moving toward the tree: "I want to look at the branch. Why, it's not rotten a bit!" he exclaimed, as he examined it. "I do believe it will hold us quite well."

He clasped his arms round the trunk of the tree, and propelled himself upward, where he was soon lost to view in the thick foliage.

Miles gave a little sigh; he could not shake off the melancholy that oppressed him, and he was longing to get away from the place.

Presently Humphrey's ringing laugh was heard, and Miles, looking up, saw him crawling along the branch which stretched out over the water. His face was flushed, and his eyes sparkling with excitement, and he was utterly regardless of the shivering and shaking of the branch under his weight. When he had got out a certain distance he returned, and throwing his arms once more round the upper part of the trunk, he raised himself to his feet and stood upright, triumphant.

"There!" he exclaimed—"I've done it. Who says it's dangerous now? It's as safe as safe can be. Come up, Miles. You can't think how jolly it is!"

Miles drew a long breath. "Must I really, really come?"

"Why not? you see how easily I did it. Give me your hand, and I'll help you up."

Bright and beautiful was the aspect of the elder boy, as he stood above, with his graceful figure clearly defined against the green foliage, one arm thrown carelessly round a bough, and the other outstretched to his little brother; and very lovely the expression of wistful uncertainty on the face of the younger one, as he stood below, with his eyes upraised so timidly to his brother's face, and his hands nervously clasped together.

Involuntarily he shrank back a little, and there was a pause.

He looked all around the secluded spot, as if to find help, as if to discover a loophole whereby he might escape, even at the eleventh hour. But the insects skimming from side to side of the pond, the water-lilies dancing gently on the surface, were still the only animate things to be seen, and no sound was to be heard save the dipping of the branch into the water, and the splash of the active water-rat. They were powerless to help him, and so he resigned himself to Humphrey's will.

"I know I shall be *kilt*, but I'll come," he said; and he held out his shaking little hand.

Humphrey grasped it tightly, and got him up by degrees to the same level as himself. Then he carefully dropped down on his hands and knees, and helped Miles to do the same.

Slowly they both began to move, and gradually they crawled along the branch that stretched over the water! Clinging tightly with arms and legs, and listening to Humphrey's encouraging voice, little Miles settled himself on the branch in fancied security.

Humphrey got close up to him behind, and put his arms round him. "Hurrah!" he shouted; "here we both are!"

They had been so engrossed that they had not noticed how the weather had clouded over. The bank of clouds they had noticed was nearly over their heads, the air was becoming thick and oppressive, far in the distance was heard the growl of approaching thunder, and some big drops of rain fell.

Humphrey remembered, with a start, his father's injunctions about Miles, and the ill effects of their last adventure. "We must go home," he exclaimed; and, forgetting their perilous position, he moved so suddenly, that he nearly sent his little brother off the branch. Instinctively he reached out his hand to save him, and Miles nearly overbalanced himself in his attempt to cling to it.

Their combined movements were too much for the decaying wood, already rocking beneath their weight. It swayed—it shivered—it creaked . . . and then with a crash it broke from its parent bark!—and boys and branch were precipitated into the water below.

CHAPTER XIII.

Sir Everard Duncombe pursued his way to the stables on leaving the harvest field, and as he passed the house he called out to Virginia, who was sitting at work in the nursery window, to go and join the children.

On arriving in London, he went to his club for his letters, and, meeting a friend on the steps, they walked down Piccadilly together, and turned into the park at Hyde Park Corner.

They stood by the railings for a little while, watching the streams of carriages and their gaily-dressed occupants; but it was very hot, and after a time Sir Everard took leave of his friend, and strolled toward the Serpentine, in search of a little air.

Miles' delicacy, ever the subject rising uppermost in his mind, occupied his thoughts as he walked along. He wondered to himself whether he would outgrow it, whether a

winter abroad would set him up, and whether it would not be wise to bring him to London, and show him to one of the great chest doctors.

The sight of the waters, as he approached the Serpentine, recalled to his mind the pond at Wareham, and the expedition which had been the cause of the mischief. He remembered, with a start, how near he had left the children to the tempting spot, for the pond was almost within sight of the field where they were reaping.

For a moment he debated whether he had been wise to trust Humphrey again; but then he reflected how soon Virginia must have joined them, and how many people there were about.

Besides they were quite taken up with the reaping, and when he remembered his own severe words to Humphrey, and the boy's penitence and remorse, he could hardly fancy he would transgress again.

Still, he could not get it out of his head, and as he stood watching the water, he wished there were such a thing as the magic glass he had read to the children about; that he might see as far as Wareham, and satisfy himself about them.

Had his wish been satisfied at that moment, he would have seen Humphrey and Miles astride on the rotten bough, with flushed and exultant faces.

The same change of weather now took place as was taking place at Wareham. Umbrellas and carriage-hoods were quickly put up, and very soon the park was empty.

Sir Everard retraced his steps to his club and was closing his umbrella leisurely in the hall, when a telegram was put into his hand.

He glanced his eye hastily over it, and then dashed into the street, and hailed a hansom.

"Waterloo Station," he shouted, as he threw himself into it; "double fare if you catch the train!"

Bustle and confusion, though no doubt, uninteresting and unpoetical, are, certainly, at such times useful. They keep the mind from dwelling too much on the painful, and thus rub off the sharp edge of the first moment.

So it was not till Sir Everard was in the train, and tearing swiftly though quietly to Wareham, that he realized his position.

Till then, his thoughts had been entirely taken up with passing this carriage, shaving that omnibus, or rounding that corner. He had chafed at every stoppage, fumed at every delay, and been able to think of nothing but whether or no he should catch the train.

And now, the strain over, he leant back in the railway carriage and examined the telegram at leisure.

There was not much to be learnt from it; it was terse and unsatisfactory, like most messages of the kind—just sufficiently clear not to quell all hope, and yet undefined enough to give reins to the imagination. It contained these words: "An accident has happened. Both the young gentlemen have fallen into the pond, but neither are drowned. Come directly."

Those who have read and re-read such missives, and vainly endeavoured to extract something from them, will best understand how Sir Everard tortured himself during the next quarter of an hour. Might not this be a part of the truth, and the rest concealed? Might it not be meant as a preparation?

But, no—unless the message told a deliberate falsehood, "neither were drowned." Why, then, bid him come directly, unless Miles' condition after his immersion in the water was all but hopeless. "A ducking would not hurt Humphrey," he reflected; "so, of course, it is Miles."

He thought of Miles' fragile appearance as he stood in the corn-field. How little he was fitted to cope with such an accident! Fragile and flushed, with traces of his late illness lingering about his lustrous eyes and colourless lips.

He worked himself into a terrible state of anxiety as the train neared Wareham, and restlessly he laid the blame of the accident on everything and everybody.

What business had they at the pond? he angrily questioned; it was the most flagrant act of disobedience on Humphrey's part he had ever heard of.

For a moment he felt as if he could never forgive the boy for such a barefaced breach of his command. Over and over again had Miles' health, life even, been endangered by Humphrey's heedlessness.

Heedlessness!—wilfulness he felt inclined to call it. Perhaps he was too indulgent. Stricter measures should be enforced; the boy must and should learn to obey. He had been weak, but he would be so no longer. No punishment could be severe enough for Humphrey; and punished he should certainly be.

Then he thought perhaps it was too much to expect from such a young creature, and he began to lay the blame on others. Virginia—why was she not there? Why did not she prevent their going to the pond?

Even the reapers and the bailiff came in for a share of his anger. Surely, among so many people, somebody might have prevented the two children from leaving the field!

But, after all, Humphrey was the chief offender, and he felt he ought not to try to shield him, by throwing the blame on others.

There was no carriage waiting for him at the station, and no one could give him any information beyond that contained in the telegram.

He ordered a fly, and then, unable to bear the delay, walked on without it. He got more and more anxious as he neared the Abbey. He took a short cut to the house. There was no one about—not a servant, not a gardener. His heart misgave him as he strode on. He reached the hall door, passed in, ran upstairs to the nursery. Still no sound—no voice. The nurseries were empty! He called. No answer. He shouted. How horrible his voice sounded in the empty passages! He rang the bell furiously, and, without waiting the answer, he ran downstairs again, and opened the library door.

A confused hum of voices struck upon his ear, a confused group of people swam before his eyes, but he only distinguished a little form that ran forward with outstretched arms; and with an exclamation of fervent thanksgiving he clasped Miles safe, warm and unhurt in his arms!