

Choice Literature.

MISUNDERSTOOD.

BY FLORENCE MONTGOMERY.

CHAPTER IX.

There was an unusual stir in the quiet household of Wareham Abbey that evening; for at nearly eight o'clock the two little boys had not returned home.

Virginie had not been very much concerned at their absence during the first few hours, as they very often ran on before her, and then betook themselves to some of their favourite haunts.

But when tea-time came and passed, she got uneasy, and went to look for them. Her uneasiness changed to alarm when she had visited in vain the dairy, laundry, swing and dog-kennel. Then, when it came on to rain her anxiety increased; and when from dizzing it changed to a steady down-pour her "nerves" gave way completely, and she returned home to consult with the other servants as to what steps had best be taken.

She went into the housekeeper's room, wringing her hands, and prognosticating all sorts of evils to Miles. "Never, never, would he recover from the effects of such a wetting!"

The gardener was despatched one way and the coachman another, bearing umbrellas and goloshes.

The two little culprits were soon discovered sitting in a damp ditch, sheltering themselves under a hedge.

Humphrey took great credit to himself for having hit upon this plan.

"The fact was," he said, "the pond and the water lilies had been so engrossing, that he had forgotten all about the time till he saw the sun beginning to sink; then starting off in a great hurry, they had taken the wrong turning out of the field and lost their way in the wood."

They were wandering on in the wrong direction, when they met a boy, who had pointed out their mistake and brought them back to the high road. Here Humphrey had suddenly recollected that rain was apt to give his little brother cold, and with great pride in his own forethought had established him, dripping wet as he already was, under the hedge where they had been sitting for about half an hour before the coachman found them.

It was no use Virginie venting her wrath upon Humphrey. All that could be done now was to get Miles into bed as quickly as could be, and ward off its effects if possible.

But the mischief was done. Miles tossed about all night, and woke next morning with an oppression on his chest, which was always with him the forerunner of an attack on the lungs.

The doctor came to see him, and ordered him to be kept in bed.

Humphrey spent the morning with his little brother, but was dismissed at last, as talking only made Miles cough.

In the afternoon Miles got worse, and Virginie sent off again for the doctor.

Humphrey kept out of her way, feeling that he was in disgrace, and went out into the garden. He felt dull and solitary without his little brother, but, childlike, he had not begun to be anxious, for Miles had often been ill before, and had always got well again. Still there was no fun in anything without him, no exploit any satisfaction, without his applause. Humphrey betook himself at last to the little garden, where he had a friend in the person of Dolly, the laundry maid. The gardens were close to the laundry, and often, when she was ironing at the window, Dolly had watched the children at their play, and overheard their long conversations. She was, perhaps, the only person who had seen Humphrey in his serious moods. Unknown to him, she had witnessed one of his rare bursts of feeling at the time of his mother's death, and after that, she had been one of his staunchest supporters. She could never forget how the little fellow had sobbed over the mustard and cress he had sown for his mother and which had come up too late!

The weather had been dry for some time previously, and it had shown no sign of coming up. Every day he had visited it, that he might cut it for her to eat with her afternoon tea; but every visit had been in vain. Then, on that sad day, when the funeral train had borne away all that remained of her, he had come to his garden in his restless longing to escape from his sorrow, and the first thing that had met his eye was the green A. D. mocking him with its freshness and luxuriance.

"It's no use now," Dolly had heard him sob; "I wish it had never come up!"

This was the very day he had been chasing the young lambs in the meadow, while his father watched him from the window and this was how it had ended.

Humphrey found a good deal to do in his garden, and worked away busily for some time; he then assisted Dolly to turn the mangle, and boiled some soap suds for future bubble blowing. He also informed her of the honour in store for her at the harvest home, and anxiously asked her what gown she meant to wear on the occasion. She must be very smart, he said awfully smart! Dolly confided her intention of investing in a new print dress, and consulted him as to the colour.

Casting his thoughts back to the smartest thing he had lately seen, they reverted to the cigar case, and he suggested crimson and gold.

Dolly look rather scared, and expressed her doubts as to the probability of those colours being found in any print sold in the village.

"Yellow would do, you know," said Humphrey, and it would be like the corn."

So Dolly promised to try and procure a yellow print, with a red stripe or spot; and, if that were impossible, a plain yellow one could no doubt be found.

Time slipped by very quickly, but still Humphrey rather wondered at last that no one should call him into his tea; and after a while he put his tools away, and wished Dolly good-bye.

He gathered a few young radishes for a treat for Miles, and then ran home.

He was surprised to find the nursery door locked, and began to kick it.

"Miles!" he called out, "I've brought you some radishes. Ouvrez, Virginie, c'est moi!"

The door was opened with an angry jerk, and Virginie flounced into the passage.

Humphrey saw at a glance that she was in one of what he and Miles called "her states," but whether it was of anger or alarm, he could not at first make out. It was always a bad sign when her face was enveloped in flannel, as was now the case. Virginie always tied up her face on the smallest provocation, though to what end the children had never discovered. But anyhow, she was sure to be out of temper when she did so, and Humphrey waited rather anxiously to hear what she had to say.

She burst into a voluble flow of talk, which, owing to her excitement, the boy found it difficult to follow. He managed however, to gather that Miles was very, very ill, that the doctor was very much alarmed about him; that it was all his (Humphrey's) fault; that he had woke Miles by kicking at the door just as he had hoped he was going to get some sleep; that he was to go away and keep away, and that everybody, including the doctor, was very angry with him.

Then she retreated into the room and shut the door, leaving him standing in the passage, with his bunch of radishes in his hand.

All the light faded out of Humphrey's face, as he tried to think over what he had just heard.

"Miles so ill that the doctor was frightened."

That was the most prominent idea at first, and in his dread and apprehension, Humphrey hardly dare move.

Sometimes he put his eye to the keyhole, to see if he could discover what was going on in the room, and then, lying down on the door mat, he listened with all his might.

The silence within, only broken by whispering voices, frightened him, and his heart began to beat loudly.

If only the child could have looked into the room and seen his little brother lying in bed half asleep, and Virginie putting a linseed poultice on his chest, or whispering to Jane to bring her his cooling draught, his fears would have vanished.

But it is ever so with sudden illness. Those who are kept in the dark always have the worst of it; for mystery and suspense are, like anticipation, always worse than reality. Imagination runs riot, and brings great suffering to the outsider. How much are children to be pitied on these occasions! Every one's thoughts are necessarily with the invalid, and no one has time to bestow a word on the poor little trembling things standing outside the sick room. They feel they are useless, and considered in the way; and do not dare make inquiries of the maids who are in and out of the room with important faces, who probably could not stop to answer even if they did; and so are left to magnify every sound into some terrible significance, which probably has no foundation but in their own disordered fancies.

There is a terror in whispering voices, agony in the sharp ringing of a bell, mystery even in the calling for spoons and glasses, and their jingling as they are handed in.

All this, and more, was experienced by little Humphrey Duncombe. I say more, because his fears were not those of ordinary children. The dread I have been describing is for the most part a nameless dread; the children know not why they fear, nor what; it is all vague and undefined, because they have no experience of sorrow.

But remember that this child was no stranger to sickness and death; that into his little life they had already entered; that the grim visitor had swept through the walls of his home, and left it very empty. What had happened once might happen again. So he gave it all up at once, "Miles was dying! perhaps already dead!"

A child of Humphrey's disposition suffers intensely when face to face with sorrow. Granted that the power of being easily distracted is a mitigation, it does not alter the feeling for the time. Life, past and future, is grafted into the misery of the present, and existence itself is a blank.

He was so tender hearted, too, poor little fellow! so remorseful for his errors, so sensitive to any unkind word. Yet, as we have seen, with all this, he was so heedless, thoughtless and volatile that no one could give him credit for any depth of feeling; and even his father (though he would not have had it otherwise, though he rejoiced that he should have the capabilities of turning into enjoyment, both for himself and Miles, every event of this lonely child life) had marvelled at him, and had more than once said to him self, "The boy has no heart!"

No heart! why, as we see him there in the passage, his poor little heart is filled to bursting.

Stung by Virginie's harsh words, wrung with fear for his little brother, alarmed as much for his father's grief as his father's anger, and remorseful at the thought of his own broken promise, Humphrey sank down on the ground and cried as if his heart would break.

In addition to grief, it was such a dreadful feeling, that, in a trouble like this, no one cared to help him; that he was looked upon as the cause of it all; that his hand seemed against every man, and every man's hand against him.

His sorrow must be greater than theirs, he reflected. Was not Miles more to him than to Virginie? And yet they left him—sobbing and crying—unheeded.

Lying there, touched up by the door such an awful sense of loneliness came down upon the boy's soul. In the hour of his trouble he needed pity so much, and no one gave it to him.

Then there arose in his heart such a terrible longing for his mother; such a yearning that would not be quieted, for all that he had had, and all that he had lost, such an overwhelming sense of the void in his life, that he could not bear it, and he started to his feet with a sob which was almost a cry.

This feeling must go, he could not bear it, and he fought with it with desperation; for it was an old enemy, one with whom he had often wrestled in desperate conflict before,

and upon whose attacks he always looked back with horror. Deep down in his heart it had its being, but it was only every now and then that it rose up to trouble him.

Of late it had assailed him much less, its attacks had been weaker, and occurring at much longer intervals. Why has it risen with such resistless force now? How is he to resist it? How is he to fight with it? This blank, empty feeling, how is he to drive it away?

He tried to think of his garden, of his games, and of all the things which constituted the joy of his young existence.

Children of a larger growth, but children in understanding still, do not many of us wrestle with this undefined feeling in the same way? This mysterious thing, which we, with our maturer experience, call sorrow, is not our first thought when it assails us, "How shall we drive it away?" Call it grief, despair, disappointment, anxiety, care—call it what you will, do we not try to drown it in change of thought of some kind? Does it not drive the rich to society, travelling or excitement, and the poor to the public house?

Here were the passages where he had romped with Miles; here were the stairs down which he had jumped that very morning, and the balustrades down which he had slid; why did they look so different?

God help him! the emptiness in his heart was so great, that it was repeating itself on all around. There was no help to be got from the feeling of his recent happiness in the old house. Never had it seemed so dreary; never had he realized before what an empty house it was, occupied only in one corner by a nurse and two little boys.

There was no sound, no life anywhere; the twilight was creeping over the silent hall and staircase, and he knew it was deepening in the uninhabited rooms below. And then, as if to mock him with the contrast, came before him so vivid a recollection of life with his mother in the house; of her voice and her laugh upon that staircase; of her presence in those rooms; so clear and distinct a vision of her soft eyes and gentle smile, that the motherless child could bear it no longer, and covering his face with his hands to shut out the sight of the emptiness, he fled away down the passage, as if he thought to leave the desolation behind.

But the emptiness was with him as he went; all down the stairs and through the hall it pursued him; it gained upon him as he stood with his hand upon the drawingroom door; it preceded him into the darkened room, and was waiting for him when he entered.

The light that came in through the chinks of the shutters was very faint, but his longing eye sought the picture, and he could just distinguish the sweet face and the smiling babe in her arms.

He ran forward, and threw himself on the sofa beneath it. "Mother!" he sobbed, "I want you back so much! Every one is angry with me, and I am so very miserable!"

Cold, blank silence all around; mother and child smiled on, unconscious of his words; even as he gazed the light faded away from the picture, and he was left alone in the gathering darkness!

In vain he tried to fancy himself once more the child in the picture; in vain he tried to fancy he felt her arms around him, and her shoulder against his head. It would not do! In fits of passion or disobedience he had come here, and the memory of his mother had soothed him and sent him away penitent; but in this dreadful sense of loneliness he wanted comfort, and of comfort he found none.

Yet was there comfort near, if he would but ask for it, and of the very kind he wanted: "As one whom his mother comforted, so will I comfort you." He knew it not; he cried not for it. He was not ignorant of God's omnipresence; in ordinary times the boy believed with a child's simple faith that God was always near him, but in the hour of his trouble he was incapable of deriving any comfort from the knowledge, incapable of any thought but his own sorrow.

Children of a larger growth, but children in understanding still, do not many of us, in spite of our maturer experience, do likewise? "There is no help," we say; "our trouble is greater than we can bear." We lie like the child, crushed and despairing, and God, who at other times we feel to be so near, seems hidden from us altogether.

But thank God it is only seems, not is. He is unchangeable and unaffected by our changeability. Hidden, it may be, by the cloud we have ourselves raised, the dark cloud of hopelessness, He is still there, the Same whose presence we realize so fully in happier moments. "He," says a writer of the present century, "is immutable, unchangeable, while we are different every hour. What He is in Himself, the great unalterable I Am, not what we in this or that moment feel Him to be, that is our hope."

The comfort, then, for us and for the stricken child is, that though we may not at such times do our part, He is ever ready to do His; and it would almost seem as if He were providing for this state of feeling when He says, "Before they call, I will answer." But what could be done for the child in the terrible hour of his trouble? We know not, but God knew. The little heart was open before Him, and He knew that his sorrow would flee at morning light, and that he only wanted comfort for the present moment. So, looking pityingly down upon the lonely child, He sent him the only thing that could help him—laid gently upon his heavy eyelids the only gift that do him any good—giving him the peace of unconsciousness till the hour of sorrow and sighing should pass away!

There one of the maids found him an hour or so later, and carried him up to bed without waking him.

(To be continued.)

The Rev. John M. Johnson, rector of Scorton, Norfolk, who died the other day, served in his youth for many years in the Royal Navy, and began to study for the Church at the age of thirty-one.

Mr. THOMAS COOK, the founder of the railway excursion system, in a brochure, giving some of his personal reminiscences, says he had very hard work at first, in convincing travellers in the Highlands, of the absolute safety of abstaining from whisky.