

CHOICE LITERATURE.

THROUGH THE WINTER.

CHAPTER X.—A TROUBLED BIRTHDAY.

As torrents in summer,
Half dried in their channels,
Suddenly rise, though the
Sky is still cloudless.
For rain has been falling
Far off at their fountains;
So hearts that are fainting
Grow full to overflowing,
And they that behold it
Marvel and know not
That God at their fountains
Far off has been raining.—*Longfellow.*

It was Monday morning, December twenty-third, and it was Helen's eighteenth birthday. She had fallen asleep the previous night while forming many brave resolutions, and making many hopeful promises for the new year she was to begin on the morrow. The "future should not copy fair the past," she resolved. Growing older, she would grow wiser and better.

So dreamed Helen; pure, lovely dream, one which angels could not but smile in approval. She only forgot one thing—the one thing we are all so prone to forget when making the good resolutions we so quickly forget.

Helen felt very strong in herself just then. She did not hear a low voice whispering, "Not by might, nor by power, but by my Spirit, saith the Lord."

She forgot, but He, by whom our lives are so closely watched, did not forget, and in tender faithfulness there were appointed, even for her birthday, lessons that were to teach her, so plainly that she could never forget it, the solemn truth—"Without Me ye can do nothing."

Very early in the morning, before the stars grew dim, she was awakened by Fred's voice at her door.

"Helen," he called, "get up, get up quick; papa is very sick."

Helen did not need a second call; springing out of bed, and dressing with telegraphic haste, she was speedily in her father's room. Mr. Humphrey had been taken suddenly and violently ill, and was suffering acute pain. To send Philip in haste for their family physician, to rouse Matsie, heat water, and prepare warm applications for her father was Helen's first work.

Again and again her eyes were blinded with the tears she dared not permit to fall, and even before the sun rose, Helen knew that her birthday would be much like other days, in that there would be much to bear from others, much for her to forgive, and much to be forgiven.

Philip was soon back with Dr. Sullivan, and under his skilful treatment Mr. Humphrey was in a short time comparatively comfortable. His fears had, however, been greatly excited, and he was disposed to take a very gloomy, desponding view of his own state.

"Tut, tu," Humphrey, said Dr. Sullivan, after listening to him for a few minutes; "this is all nonsense. My word for it, man, you will be well enough to-morrow, all you want now is rest. Take these powders as I have directed, and keep quiet, and to-morrow, if you please, you may go to church. You won't die yet. You'll find that to 'shuffle off this mortal coil' will be a far less easy task than you seem to imagine. Make yourself comfortable, and look on the bright side of life. There's no philosophy in digging your grave before you need it."

"Is that the way you talk to all your patients?" Mr. Humphrey asked, indignantly. "There is about as much sympathy in you as one might expect to find in the sphinx. If there is any one thing a doctor should be, when called to the bedside of the sick and dying, it is sympathetic."

"Humph! Well that's according to the interpretation of the word sympathy. If I am to receive yours, I would suggest that it might in certain cases, like yours, for instance, be even more desirable for a doctor to be skilful than sympathetic. And as to my talk, why, like physic, I give different kinds to different natures. Naturally when I meet a bear I take to growling in self-defence. Now keep still, Humphrey, and I will call in again about noon," and taking his hat, Dr. Sullivan went out. In the hall he met Helen, and his really kind face grew very gentle as he took her hand.

"How is papa?" she asked, with trembling lips; "is he in great danger, Dr. Sullivan?"

"Danger? not a whit! no more than we always are, my child. Violent attacks like his are soon over, and in this case there is nothing to create alarm either for the present or future. Make yourself easy, my dear, and don't mind if your father does fret and fume. It is the way with us men; patience is a dress we cannot wear as gracefully as you women."

"Helen's smile was very faint, but cheered and comforted by the doctor's encouraging words, after a hasty look at her father, she went back to the kitchen.

There a new trouble awaited her. Matsie, in her zeal for doing, had managed to upset a pot of boiling coffee on her hand and arm. Her cries of pain were piteous and uncontrolled, and once again Philip's swift feet were sent in quest of Dr. Sullivan.

"Well," he grumbled pleasantly, as he came into the kitchen; "Miss Helen, I believe you are conspiring among you to make this house a hospital, to-day. It is a fortunate thing it is not one for incurables, though. Softly, my girl," he continued, as he applied healing lotions to the blistered hand, "softly, or in spite of all I can do, the neighbours will think it is the hospital for the insane. Why, my girl, stop, stop. Crying never healed any smart yet—praying has, a great many. Miss Helen, while you are waiting upon the invalids in this house, who is going to wait upon you?"

"There is no school to-day," Helen answered, trying to speak brightly, "the boys will be home, and they can do a good deal."

"Tut; yes, I know something about what boys' hands are in a kitchen. Very willing but, like some savings banks, dreadfully uncertain. It isn't safe to trust them very far, Miss Helen. Well, my dear, you must take things easy as you can. I'll look in again before night."

"Take things easy as she could," Poor Helen! the easiest way promised that day to be a very hard one. Upstairs lay her father groaning, more from the recollection of suffering than from any present consciousness of it, and demanding constant attention, with which he was, after all, never satisfied. Nothing pleased him, and through the long day Helen wearied herself sick, in vain efforts to anticipate his wishes. Downstairs in the kitchen, Matsie, with her bandaged arm in a sling, sat over the stove, crying and grumbling by turns.

Fred and Philip, after waiting about the house for an hour or two, had tired of the confinement and gone off to their ordinary Saturday avocations; while Ronald and Sibyl were, as children commonly are when anything unusual occurs in a family, restless and excited, and requiring constant watching, and innumerable precepts in the form of "Don't do this," and "Do that."

Helen's way seemed hedged in by thorns on every side, and saddest of all was the fact that, like Christian in his contest with Apollyon, she had gone into the day's struggles regardless of her armour.

"And take to gird thee for the strife
The panoply of prayer."

Helen had forgotten to do so.

The hours wore away until dinner-time.

"Will dinner be ready soon, Helen?" Fred asked pleasantly, coming in just then.

"Oh, dear, no," she answered fretfully; "one pair of hands can't do everything, Fred. I do believe you boys think of nothing but eating; you have just about as much feeling for me as if I was a machine. I feel very much as if I was one, and should soon be ground to pieces with this incessant work, work, work."

Fred looked astonished.

"Why, Nellie," he said kindly, "I only asked, but I don't care much whether I have dinner or not. How is papa? Can't I do something to help you?"

"Papa's no worse," Helen replied, coldly. "No, you can't do anything; it all falls upon me. I wish I was all hands: then perhaps I could do all that is expected of me."

Helen's peevish, impatient words were producing their natural results. "If one life shines, the life next to it will shine also," and it is no less true that if one life hides, though but for a while, its light under a bushel, the life that walks beside it will feel the darkness and be chilled by it.

"Well," Fred said, angrily; "I don't know how many more hands you want, Helen, but I do know you'd be better off if you had less tongue. When I profess to be a Christian, I hope I'll be able to give a decent answer when a fellow speaks kindly to me."

And with this parting salute Fred marched off, slamming the door behind him.

Poor Helen! Fred's bitter words cut her to the heart; but her eyes were opened at last: she saw her mistake, her sin, and with a full cry of sorrow and want she turned for help and forgiveness where alone they were to be found.

Helen's head dropped, and standing where she was, she covered her face with her hands. When she looked up it was with a sad, humble and yet sweet expression. Matsie wondered at the change in her words and manner, yet the cause was easily explained.

When, an hour after, the boys came in they found dinner ready, and Helen, with a gentle, pleasant face, waiting for them.

Fred's first look at her was a doubtful one, but as he met her smile the colour flushed his cheeks and his eyes fell. He waited with restless impatience for an opportunity to speak to Helen alone.

"Helen," he said, when at last chance favoured him, "I am sorry I spoke to you as I did; will you forgive me?"

It was a wonderful acknowledgment for proud, wilful Fred to make; and Helen received it with the meekness of one who knows she had erred and may err again.

"Dear Fred," she said, "I have nothing to forgive; it was my fault that you spoke so; you must forgive me, dear. There is one thing I want to say, though," she said, speaking low and slow. "When Christians do as I did this morning, and get cross and impatient, it is not because Christ is not able and willing to keep them from such sins; but it is because they do not lean upon him, and ask him so to keep them."

Fred went off, touched and thoughtful.

"Nellie had reason enough to be cross this morning," he said to himself. "And there is something in religion when it makes a girl look and speak as she did just now. Well, I will try harder than ever to please her and do as she wants me."

But the day's worries were not over yet.

As Dr. Sullivan went his rounds that morning, he had called on a kindly disposed, inquisitive neighbour, and to her he had mentioned his early summons to Mr. Humphrey.

"Dear me," said Mrs. Brown, compassionately, "is Mr. Humphrey sick? Poor man, how much he does have to bear!"

"Humph!" replied Dr. Sullivan, in the indifferent manner in which it was his wont to meet sympathy or sentiment that he thought false or misapplied. "Humph! every man has his load: just how heavy Mr. Humphrey's is I am not prepared to say. But whether he bears much or little, I make no mistake in saying he is decidedly bearish."

"Why, doctor, how you talk! He always seems such a pleasant, polite man."

"Humph!" growled Dr. Sullivan again, laying his hand on the door, handsomely grained in imitation of black walnut; "there is a great deal of painting, Mrs. Brown, that is not easy at first sight to tell from real wood. Sickness is a great detective of what is true and false in a man: nothing like it for taking off polish that is only a thin veneering. There's Humphrey's daughter, though," the doctor went on, his voice growing suddenly genial and kind, "there is no

venereering about her. She's true, like gold, and I am afraid like gold, she's subjected sometimes to pretty hot fires. Now, Mrs. Brown, if you want to do a real, kind, neighbourly act, just go and see that poor girl to-day, and give her a helping hand and word."

"Why, so I will doctor: I am right glad you mentioned it; I've been meaning to go there for some time, and now I will this very afternoon."

"Never will be a better time," said the doctor, as he ended his call and went his way.

In the kindness of his heart, Dr. Sullivan had made his suggestion, and in the kindness of hers, Mrs. Brown proceeded, after an early dinner, to array herself for her visit.

Attired in her Sunday dress, with her knitting in her pocket, she wended her way to Mr. Humphrey's; and just as Helen was putting away her last dish, a ring at the door-bell summoned her to receive her visitor.

Mrs. Brown was soon relieved of her shawl and bonnet; and then, as she seated herself by the fire, and produced her knitting, she said:

"Dr. Sullivan told me your pa was sick, and you are feeling kinder lonely like, Helen: so I thought I'd just come round and sit with you a spell this afternoon." And the good lady's needles clicked with complacency, as she thought of the kind deed she was doing. If Dr. Sullivan could only have seen and heard her!

Has any one in Helen's situation ever received just such a call?

Outside, in the kitchen, there was the Saturday sweeping and cleaning to be done; there was cake to be baked. There was her father to be waited on; the children to be washed and made neat for the afternoon; and here, the picture of supreme content, sat good Mrs. Brown in her rocking-chair, to be entertained and talked with.

Helen's heart sank. She had good cause just then to remember a little thought she had somewhere read: "Interruptions are as much God's work for us, as the tasks we set ourselves."

It was hard to smile cheerfully, and listen with kind attention, while Mrs. Brown talked of the weather, and the minister, the last wedding in Quinnececa, and the one that next was to occur. Poor Helen's morning's experience was not to prove barren of good fruit. "She means to be very kind," she thought, "and I must be grateful."

And so she gave her visitor the quiet attention always so pleasing to a great talker; and although she had frequently to excuse herself, yet she managed so that Mrs. Brown could neither feel neglected, nor imagine what a weight on the free movement of the household machinery she was. If only she could have been content with this, and not, with a curiosity worthy of a better object, sought to pry into matters with which she had no concern.

"La, now, Helen," she said, as after one of her brief absences Helen came back to her, "do tell me what's all this about you and those rich Waldermars? They do say you are getting so intimate with them that you go the: visiting and they come here. And," dropping her voice to a peculiar, confidential tone, "they do say, Helen, that that young doctor is very smiling and attentive round here. Now, Helen, I don't ask out of curiosity, but you ain't got no ma, and I feel interested; do tell me now, is this true?"

Helen's cheeks burned, and her eyes blazed with indignation. During her mother's life she had always been shielded from impertinence, and she knew very little of that spirit of gossip—that demon so hard to be exercised—which reigns, with almost undisputed sway, in country places like Quinnececa.

And then to be questioned in that prying, meddlesome manner as to her friendship for the Waldermars, and their kindness to her! Helen felt as if it was an insult offered to their dignity as well as to her own. Quick, haughty words rose to her lips, but she suppressed them.

"I am sorry, Mrs. Brown," she answered quietly, "that I cannot gratify your curiosity; but I have nothing to tell you."

"Come now, Helen, you needn't try to make as if there's nothing in it. I've heard all about it. I know about the doctor's coming here in the evening, and taking you riding, and walking home with you from church. You needn't be ashamed to own it; there isn't a girl in Quinnececa but would jump to be in your shoes; and I'll tell you, Helen, just what I said to my own girls about their beaux, when you get a good chance, you better hold fast."

"Mrs. Brown!" Helen voice fairly frightened herself, "oh, how can you talk so to me!" she cried; "it is cruel; you don't know how cruel," and in her distress and excitement Helen broke down and sobbed bitterly.

Poor Mrs. Brown was completely bewildered. "Come now, Helen," she said, "I didn't mean any harm. Why I always thought girls liked to be joked about their beaux."

"But he isn't any beau. I am ashamed to hear you talk so. He is the best man I ever knew."

"Well," replied Mrs. Brown, as she rolled up her knitting, "I don't know who should have the best man if it isn't you. I am sure you are worthy of him."

Helen wiped his eyes, and, making a great effort to speak calmly, said: "Mrs. Brown, you are under a great mistake. I hope you will never speak of this again. If anybody speaks of it to you, please say it is a mistake. Mrs. Waldemar has been very kind to me; they have all been kind and to have Dr. Waldemar gossiped about in this way pains me—you don't know how it pains me; it is so unjust, so unworthy of him."

"Humph!" Mrs. Brown answered, coolly, "I guess his shoulders are broad enough to bear it; it is my private opinion he wouldn't feel as dreadfully about it as you seem to; but I won't say any more about it, Helen, if you don't want me to; and now if you'll give me my things I guess I'll go home."

And the really kind hearted but inconsiderate, inquisitive woman went home, little dreaming of the extra evening's toil she had given Helen, nor of the arrow she had left ranking in her mind. It seemed to Helen, for a while after Mrs. Brown had gone, as if she hated Quinnececa and all the Quinnececa people. To be gossiped about in that manner—her sensitive nature shrank as if it had felt a blow.