



The Family Circle.

"Home, Sweet Home."

Helen.

(Concluded from January No.)

Once, when she had laid her in her crib and was sitting alone, still humming softly to herself the old cradle song she had been singing to Helen, a sudden vision came to her of the years that were gone and the life that could never be recalled—her sister's life and her own. The love that she showered upon the child upstairs—how much of it had she showered to her young sister? The kisses that were rained upon her face—could she not remember the time when Milly had pleaded for only one, and reproached her that she never gave it voluntarily? Could she not remember how the tears had dropped one by one over Milly's face when she told her, very gently indeed, that she was fanciful and unreasonable in doubting her love because it could not take that childish form? Did she think it childish now, when Helen's little hand was laid against her lips? and did the God who sent loving, child-like hearts into the world mean that they should be left to wear themselves out with pain because they were not schooled in the self-contained dignity of calmer natures?

For the second time the lesson appointed to her, the light that was to light her path, came in pain, came at the hands of the child she had named Helen, the light of her life. From that day Miss Laureston learned to distrust herself. Remembering her own childhood, it made her uneasy to see Helen grave even for a moment, or turning from her play to books. It pleased her best when the child was busiest at mischief and every corner of the dim rooms echoed with her laughter, so that she was fairly in danger of being left to grow up in ignorance, if Miss Laureston's common-sense had not finally come to the rescue. She was eager that Harry should spend much of every day at her house, in order that Helen might have some one of her own age to play with. And when the two had succeeded in devising any specially unheard-of prank, the cheerfulness with which she went round inspecting damages was an indelible exasperation to the unlucky servant who had to restore order.

The two children grew up inseparable in all their plays, having only one chronic bone of dispute between them—for Harry would not own that Helen was as pretty as his sister. The little lady felt herself greatly aggrieved at such complimentary speeches, and always retorted by leaving him to himself, and running away to find Aunt Agnes. Harry soon found wisdom to be the better part of valor, and compromised his principles for his comfort in the most unheroic manner by admitting that his playmate might some time be almost as pretty as Kitty, Providence permitting.

But this was not till the young lady was twelve years old, and Master Harry considered himself to have arrived at years of discretion. They had many a pitched battle before that time, but generally agreed to a truce the first pleasant day afterward. In rainy weather they took the great garret for a field of operations, and Miss Laureston never suspected that Milly's picture, so many years forgotten, was dragged out by their childish fingers, and with some difficulty restored to a perpendicular position. They named it "the pretty lady," and Helen dusted it off with her white dress. Afterward they often pretended that it was alive, and the silent, sweet face of "the pretty lady" was made a sharer in many of their impromptu plays. As she grew up, Helen, in her more quiet moods, used often to slip away and sit for hours facing the portrait, weaving her own quaint fancies in this unknown presence.

When she was fifteen, and was beginning to put on the shy, delicate ways of young womanhood, Miss Laureston was nearing what the world calls old age. And when, as often now, she realized this, and saw the whiteness on her hair, and knew that the one dear love which made her able to meet old age gladly and peacefully was the love that came to her that Christmas night to be the light of her life, she had no words for the blessings that her heart poured out on Helen's head, no words for the penitence and humility that filled her when she thought of her sister. These twenty-five years had passed without sign from Milly, and she did not now believe her to be alive. But with a longing desire for atonement, she sometimes tried to find her way into the hearts and lives of the poor. The sense that she failed in this was the only failure that greatly troubled her. For those she tried to benefit gave her gratitude and gladness, and even a distant, respectful affection, but she never knew how to find the way to their natural spontaneous love, and they never knew how to show it.

At fifty-five a nature can not be wholly changed, if indeed it ever can. Miss Laureston did not understand that there were uses for all kinds of natures, and she was painfully trying to change her own to a model it never could have fitted. Her youthful fault had lain, not in being reserved and uncommunicative, but in expecting everyone else to be so too; and now she was making the opposite mistake of refusing her own character any place or usefulness in the world.

But whoever else misunderstood her, Helen never did so, or was other than fearless in the presence of the love that had sheltered her from all the storms of life. It occurred to the girl one day to ask Miss Laureston about the picture in the garret, and why it was not hung down stairs. In all those fifteen years she had never put a question about it before, for it was so completely a part of her childhood that it seemed never to have any other history or name.

Miss Laureston had forgotten the existence of the picture, and was struck with a keen remorse. She at once ordered it to be brought down stairs and hung in a place of honor, at the same time giving Helen the outline of her sister's story.

It was a bright sunny day in late October that the picture was rehung, and the clear eyes of Milly Laureston looked down upon the home life as they had done long ago. Miss Laureston was late at breakfast that morning, and Helen, while waiting for her, went up to the picture and stood before it in an idle attitude very much like that of the figure before her. While so gazing, and having forgotten all about breakfast, she was startled by a sharp cry behind her, and looking round to see her aunt, white and trembling, standing in the doorway and looking from her to the picture in a bewildered way that was wholly unaccountable. She called the girl Milly first, and then Helen, and seemed not to know in whose presence she stood; but when Helen would have hurried to her, she begged her to remain where she was. So she stood still, rather frightened, while Miss Laureston looked at the marvellous likeness before her. Line for line, feature for feature, Helen's face and the pictured face were exactly the same. The ages, too, were nearly alike, and no stranger would have doubted that the young girl standing in front of it was the original of the portrait.

Miss Laureston was so shaken that she was unable to think or reason, but she knew in her inmost heart that such a likeness could not be accidental. If Helen was not Milly's child, she must be in some way related to the family, and have drawn her face from the same distant ancestor who had bequeathed it to Milly Laureston. It was hours before she recovered her calmness, and then her first step was to send for the lawyer. To him she showed the likeness, and to him she committed the charge of making every possible search for the relatives or friends of the woman, supposed to be Helen's mother, who had died in so sad a way. She also recalled to his memory the fact that the name on the handkerchief—Camilla—was the same as her sister's, and that the article was of different quality from the rest of the child's clothing.

"You told me, too, that the woman was dark, and in feature wholly unlike Helen, did you not?" she asked.

"H'm, yes," said Mr. Adams, as he took in the suggestions of the strange story—"yes, I said so, certainly; but this likeness may be wholly accidental. And there will be great difficulty in finding proof at this distance of time."

Miss Laureston was silent; she felt convinced that the likeness was not an accidental one.

"In fact, there is only one way," continued Mr. Adams—"to put the matter into the hands of private detectives. And I fear that will be very unpleasant to you."

Miss Laureston winced, but gave orders that it should be done immediately.

The next month passed like a dream. Her feeling of the unreality of all that surrounded her, her dread of yielding up Helen to another, waged incessant war with her love for her sister. At times she almost dreaded to find Milly, because she might have a better right than herself to the love of her treasure; at other times she bitterly reproached herself with selfishness and hardness; at all times she was conscious that her life was coming to meet her with steady tread, and she could neither evade nor resist it.

At last, one frosty night, a little, dark, alert man, with eyes like an eagle's, presented himself at her door, and she knew that he was a detective, and that he had come with news. It was very quickly told, the story that she had been dreaming so long. Mrs. Camilla Beckwith was alive, and was now residing in a town about eighty miles distant. Previous to her second marriage she had been a Mrs. Gessner. Her husband had died in the tenth year of their married life, leaving her with no children and in extreme poverty. Afterward she had married Mr. Beckwith, who had befriended her in her poverty, and who was a gentleman nearly twice her own age, of good means and standing. By him she had one child, which, before it was two years old, had been stolen from her by a sister of her former husband, who had always been violently jealous of the second marriage, and was believed to have been insane. At the same time her husband fell ill with his speed search could not be made for the child. It was afterward ascertained that the woman had drowned herself, and they never doubted that the little girl perished with her, knowing the hatred she had borne to the child's father. The one passion of her life had been her handsome, dissolute brother Paul, and after his death she had set herself bitterly against the marriage of his widow with any other man.

Mrs. Beckwith, the detective added, had been sick for a long time, but finally recovered and was now leading a quiet, retired life, greatly respected and beloved by the whole neighborhood.

Such, in substance, was the detective's story; and if he knew more than this, if he knew Mrs. Gessner's name before her first marriage, or guessed whose child Miss Helen Laureston really was, he gave no sign of it.

After his departure Miss Laureston sat and thought in sore bewilderment. Not as to her duty, for that was clear; it was to go at once to her sister and take Helen with her. But that Milly—little Milly the baby—the willful child, should have gone through such an experience, while her older sister was watching one uneventful year add itself to another in the quiet old home, seemed to her a thing incredible. She had been twice married, she had had a child of her own, and had tried all the depths of bereavement and anguish, and perhaps also its strange strength, for did not the man say that "she was greatly beloved and respected by all who knew her?"

How the words repeated themselves over in Miss Laureston's brain that night, and refused to harmonize with any recollections of that lost sister, little Milly, who had always been the weak one, to be taught and protected! And yet the weakness of the one had gone out to battle with many sorrows, while the strength of the other had been left to learn in silence and in safety the lessons of life. In her bewilderment Miss Laureston almost forgot her pain at the thought that any one else had a claim upon Helen.

But morning came, and with it the need of action. She told Helen as gently as possible the story of her life, and this late discovery of her mother. It comforted her not a little when she child clung to her and refused to leave her even for the sake of an unknown mother, who was to her only a dream.

In order to reach the town where Milly lived they had to leave home by an early train and travel all day. Miss Laureston held Helen's hand fast in hers when the train rolled into the station after that silent journey. In her confusion she had neglected to find out exactly where Mrs. Beckwith lived, and though she knew the street, she did not know the house.

It was a quiet country town, so peaceful under the last light of the setting sun that the trouble unconsciously slipped from her heart as they walked together up the climb-

dered street. But she still kept Helen's hand in hers, and did not let it go even when they saw the name they had come to find, and turned up into the shady street where Milly lived.

"Now we must ask where Mrs. Beckwith lives, auntie," said Helen, her voice trembling in spite of her. "These seem to be houses of poor people along here. Shall we stop at one of them, or go further on?"

"Stop here, Helen," said Mrs. Laureston eagerly. "They will not notice us as other people would."

So they went up to the nearest house, a very humble cottage, and asked a rough-looking man who sat smoking a pipe at the door if he knew where Mrs. Beckwith lived.

"Mrs. Beckwith?" repeated the man slowly—"do I know where Mrs. Beckwith lives? Just you step in here, mistress, a minute."

Miss Laureston hesitated; but Helen had noticed the glow that shone over the man's stolid face and drew her on.

When they were inside the rude door the man lifted a sort of curtain which was the only separation between that and an inner room.

"Just look here, mistress," he said again; and following his motions they saw a little boy fearfully deformed, who could not have been more than seven years old, lying on a low bed. His restless hand was grasping at some flowers that lay scattered on his breast, and in strange contrast with the poor house a lovely Madonna looked down upon the suffering child.

The man's hand shook a little as he grasped the curtain.

"It's all her doings—the posies and the other things," he whispered hoarsely, not to disturb the boy. "Me and wife can't count the nights that she's sat here when the boy were wild w' the pain; an' the saints knew it were as good for him to look at her face as the holy face up there," crossing himself as he looked up at the Madonna.

"Do you mean Mrs. Beckwith," asked Helen, for her aunt did not speak.

"Sure, who else could I mean? There's not her like here in the whole country round. The Widow Reilly, that's next door, knows it too, for her boy and girl ran wild till Mrs. Beckwith found them and just dressed them up and sent them off to school. There's never a house in all the town, if trouble comes in at the door, that the dear lady doesn't follow hard after. Does I know Mrs. Beckwith? Our Lady up there knows her if I don't"—with another look at the picture.

"There, there, the mistress only wants to know where Mrs. Beckwith lives," interposed his wife soothingly.

The man dropped the curtain and turned away, still muttering to himself, while she followed them to the door and told them how far to go and what houses they must pass before they came to Mrs. Beckwith's.

They had no trouble in finding it; it was a large quiet house deeply set in among the trees. They waited a few minutes in the dim parlor and a lady came softly in through the door. A lady with silvered hair, in a silver-gray dress, with the soberness of age lightly resting on her like a blessing.

Could that be the child Milly?

Miss Laureston stood in silence before her, while Mrs. Beckwith looked from the young girl to the white-haired elderly lady who held her hand so closely.

With their youth far behind them, and twenty-five years crowded in between them, Agnes and Milly Laureston were face to face again. And the calm strength of the one bowed down to the humility of the other.

"Beloved and respected by all!"

It was so, indeed; toil and poverty and pain had borne witness to it. The child's weakness had grown into the woman's strength.

"Milly! Milly!" whispered Agnes, and felt her sister's arms round her neck before the words left her lips.

Only one prayer had Milly—to be forgiven for the wrong she did her sister; only one feeling, when the long story was told, and the lost child given back to her—a gratitude and blessing for her sister that all loving words and caresses failed to make known.

Yet even with Milly's hands clasping hers, Miss Laureston's eyes wandered constantly to Helen, and all her thoughts were trembling round the fear that Milly would take Helen away from her.

"You will come and live with me now, Milly, will you not?" she asked at last, putting the question with intense dread; for if her sister said No, would it not be natural that she should expect her daughter to stay with her?

Mrs. Beckwith looked up and saw anxious faces—the sister's she had left and the daughter's she had never known—waiting for her answer; saw and understood that they were more to each other than she could be to either of them. Her lips quivered as she asked wistfully, "Are you afraid I shall want to take your little girl away from you? I will go with you, Agnes, anywhere that you wish. I was wrong when I would not stay with you before, and now I will try to make up for it."

She raised her face to kiss her sister, sober, middle-aged lady that she was, in the very same humble way that she used to do in her childhood, and Agnes understood a little of the love that must go out before love of others can come in.

But she never understood in all her life the simple self-sacrifice with which Milly gave her child over to the sister whose life was in her, and consented to go to the home where she would take only a second place as in the days of her childhood, and could be first in the heart neither of sister nor child. Milly only said to herself how natural it was that they should love each other best, and took the pain into her own heart rather than throw a shadow of it upon them.

Miss Laureston and Helen staid with her for several weeks, and when they went home she went with them. In that time something of the strangeness which separated them had worn away. The old house received them back to itself, and the picture of the Angel Gabriel watched over its happy Christmas as it had watched over the lonely one fifteen years ago.

On dark nights, when the fire shone brightly, the window again threw back the figures of the two sisters—the one white-haired, the other gray-haired—both going down to old age peacefully while that young and beloved life clung to the morning slopes beside them.

Harry was away at college now, and now and then looked at Helen's picture as if he might sometime come to think it prettier than any other face in the world. But before that time came his child-sister had fallen asleep with the immortal beauty on her face, and left to Harry and Helen only a dear memory sacred forever from all rivalry of earthly loveliness.