

ENGLISH LITERATURE.

THROUGH THE WINTER.

CHAPTER I.—Continued

When Mr. Humphrey joined his family that night at the supper-table he had no cause to complain or find fault. The table was daintily spread; the cooking delicious, and Ronald and Sibyl, prettily dressed and no less of good behaviour, were in their places. The father saw and inwardly approved, but he spoke no word of praise, and little dreamed how much his young daughter's heart craved sympathy and appreciation and fatherly words of tenderness and encouragement. So, often by our silence as by our speech, we hurt the ones we love best; those whom, in our secret souls, we cherish as the dearest treasures of our life. We hurt them, and the watching angels weep, but we go on our way careless and unknowing, and never learn, perhaps, the harm we have done, the pain we have caused, until in the morning light of eternity it starts revealed.

And thus,

"Evil is wrought by our want of thought,
As well as our want of heart."

Tea was over; Mr. Humphrey engrossed with his newspaper, the boys busy with their books, and Ronald and Sibyl, wearied with their day of play, were ready for their beds.

"Helen, come," pleaded Sibyl, as her sister came in with her work-basket. "Helen, come, won't you put us to bed? We want to hear that story dreadfully."

It took but a few minutes for the little ones to undress, say their simple prayers, and nestle down in their soft beds.

"Now for the story," Ronald cried; and sitting down Helen looked at the two little golden heads before her on the pillow.

"What is the story to be about?" she asked.

"Why you said Santa Claus," Sibyl answered, promptly.

"Well, who is Santa Claus?"

"Why he's the—the—" Ronald hesitated; there was something mysterious about Santa Claus—he wasn't quite sure of the propriety of calling him a man. "He's the—somebody who brings good children presents," he said at last, triumphantly.

"And when does he bring them?"

"Tristmas time," said Sibyl, with wide-awake eyes.

"And, O Nellie, will my new red stockings be done, then?"

"Yes, dear. But, Sibyl, Ronald, why do we have a Christmas day?"

"Why, I guess," Ronald said, slowly, after a moment's thought, "I guess so little boys and girls can hang up their stockings, and get plenty of sugar plums and playthings in them."

"Isn't there any other reason?" Helen asked gently.

"No; that's reason 'nough," Sibyl said, emphatically.

"Helen," she asked, reprovingly, "why don't you tell us the story?"

"I will, dear, in a moment, but first, I want you and Ronald to tell me what you know about Santa Claus and Christmas day."

"Don't know much," Ronald said, decidedly; and Helen sighed as she acknowledged to herself how sadly true his words were. She began her story.

"It was a beautiful night many long years ago; the sky was bright with stars, that threw their soft light down on a quiet world, full of pleasant homes like ours, in which little boys and girls were tucked snugly away in warm beds sleeping and dreaming of the good times they would have. There were no wicked wars anywhere just then, and everything that night was very peaceful and still. Far away from here in the broad fields that lie around a little village named Bethlehem, there were men called shepherds, who were sitting up and keeping watch over their flocks."

"What did they watch them for?" interrupted Ronald.

"I suppose to see that they did not stray away and get lost; and that no bad dog or wild animal crept in to hurt or kill any of the sheep or little lambs. The shepherds watched their flocks, just as our Father in heaven watches over us, Ronald."

"And as they sat there, on the ground, wrapped in their blankets, suddenly a clear, wonderful light, more beautiful than any light from the moon or stars, shone round them, and an angel from heaven came down to them. And when the shepherds trembled and were sore afraid, the angel said, just what God's angels always said to God's people, 'Fear not.' And when the shepherds ceased trembling and could listen, he told them that he had come to bring them good tidings of great joy, that should make all men glad."

"And what do you think the good tidings were, Ronald?"

"I—don't—know," Ronald answered slowly.

"He told them that in the village of Bethlehem, only a short walk from where they were, there was born that night a little baby. A baby they might go and see, and which they would find lying, not in a soft, downy cradle, but in a cold, hard manger, the place in which cattle and horses are fed."

"Did the shepherds go, Nellie?"

"Very soon, Sibyl; they waited a little time, and listened, when a multitude of shining ones sang, 'Glory to God, peace and good-will to men.' When the sweet music died away, and the angel visitors went back to heaven, the light around them was only the dim, quiet light of the stars. They took up their staves, and started to see the wonderful thing that had come to pass as the Lord had made known unto them."

"Weren't they afraid to leave their sheep, Nellie?" asked Ronald.

"No, Ronald, they were not afraid of anything then; how could they be, when they had just heard the angels' song and been told to 'Fear not?' So they went to Bethlehem, and found the little child where the angel had said, and kneeling down they worshipped it, and thanked God

that they had lived to see that glorious day. And now, can you tell me who that baby was, Sibyl? It was somebody very good, and very great: who was it?"

"Was it Washington, Nellie?" Sibyl asked, doubtfully.

"I know," said Ronald; "it was Jesus, wasn't it Nellie?"

"Yes, Ronald, and the night when He was born was the first Christmas night the world had ever known, and Jesus was the first Christmas gift: who gave Him, Ronald?"

"God gave Him," Ronald said. "I learned that in Sunday school. God gave Him to make us good, Nellie," he questioned, eagerly, "is God Santa Claus?"

"No, Ronald, but He is the first and great Good-giver. Jesus was our Heavenly Father's Christmas gift to us; and we keep Christmas day, that we may never forget how and why our Saviour came, and we give presents then because we like to do all we can to make others happy on that day, especially little children. God gives us the money to buy them, or the power to make them, so He is the only true Giver of every good thing."

"And isn't there any Santa Claus with sled and reindeer now?" asked Sibyl, with a child's unwillingness to part with a fancy that had pleased her imagination.

"No, Sibyl; that is only a fairy story that little boys and girls like; but isn't it better to think at Christmas time of our dear Saviour coming to this world to be the one precious gift that will last forever, than of the Santa Claus Ronald tried to play this morning?"

"Yes," Sibyl said, sleepily, with half-closed eyes.

CHAPTER II.—REVIEWS AND EXPLANATIONS.

Helen Humphrey's home was in a pleasant sea-side town, within easy access of New York city. A quiet country place, somewhat off from the great lines of travel, though Americanized in all else, it still retained its quaint Indian name of Quineecoco; and here, through long generations, the Humphrey family had lived and died.

Her father was a lawyer, one of the numerous class who possess little business tact, and less real talent for their chosen profession; and who, in their upward strivings, seldom rise far above the ground: the top of the ladder being in no danger of overcrowding from them. Inheriting from his father a good farm and dwelling-house, and marrying a lady possessing an equal amount of property, Mr. Humphrey had always been able to provide comfortably for his family without any undue exertion on his own part.

A cold, grave, reserved man; whose warmest affections seemed always to centre upon himself; who looked at every question from the one standpoint of how it would affect him and his interest; a man to whom / was the centre of the universe, and the rest of the humanity nothing but satellites. It is hardly to be supposed that in his family he was loved devotedly, or confided in unreservedly. From the time when Helen, running to meet him with her first doll, had been coolly put aside with, "Yes; it is well enough; but don't bother me, child," to the day when the first great sorrow of her life fell upon her, she had stood in awe of her father.

It was not only a fortunate thing, as the neighbours said, but it was more—a blessed thing—for their children, that Mrs. Humphrey did not resemble her husband. Gentle and warm-hearted, naturally hopeful in temperament, and genial and sunny in disposition, with a quiet strength of character, and a capacity for patient endurance that had sustained her through many dark days and bitter trial, Mrs. Humphrey's children had found in her the sympathy and protection their young lives needed; the tenderest love, combined with the firmest guidance.

Awakening early from her illusions respecting her husband; too true and noble herself to be able to love and honour what was not true and noble, Mrs. Humphrey had borne the sorrows of her married life in quiet, uncomplaining patience. Never, to any human being, did she speak of her trials and crosses. Never was a word spoken to or of her husband that even implied reproach or disrespect.

In spite of the father's shadow the mother's sunshine made home to the children a happy place; and they were scarcely conscious of a want until that mother's health failed.

Just as Helen reached her sixteenth birthday, a lovely, happy girl, resembling her mother in character and disposition, and full of a girl's sunny dreams and hopes, Mrs. Humphrey's health began to fail. Slowly, almost imperceptibly at first—only a little cough, a little weakness, a more than common weariness in performing her daily labours. But gradually and unwillingly, one day after another was yielded up, resigned to Helen's care, or suffered to drop unnoticed. Ever bright and cheerful, it was long before Mrs. Humphrey would own, even to herself, that there was any cause for alarm; but daily the pain and weariness increased, the strength lessened, and at last it was evident to all—even the most unbelieving eyes—that she was passing away—going up higher.

To Helen the consciousness that so it was and must be was fraught with an agony almost beyond endurance. Yet blessed as Mrs. Humphrey's life had been to her children it was only in her sick-room that it was crowned, and wrought its noblest work. She had never, in her days of health, talked much of religion to her children. She had lived it before them.

Mrs. Humphrey had grieved over her silence, and earnestly prayed that grace might be given her to overcome her reserve, and to talk freely to them on this most vital subject as on every other.

The prayer was heard and answered; though it was not until she felt her feet passing down into the dark valley that the veil was withdrawn, and she ventured to take her children into the inner temple of her soul. It was to Helen that she said most, and from her that she derived her greatest comfort.

Ronald and Sibyl were too young and restless, to full of life and play to be confined in her sick-room many minutes at a time. Mournfully and reluctantly, in her weak, suffering state, the mother was forced to admit that the work, left undone in her hours of health, could not now be done by

her. The sweet old Bible stories must remain, by her lips, forever untold.

"Helen," she said once, "Ronald and Sibyl will lean upon you more than any one else when I am gone; and, darling, never be afraid to talk tenderly, solemnly to them of sacred things. Whatever else you may leave unsaid, resolve that you will never be silent when it is fitting and well for you to speak for Christ. Opportunities are like birds, Helen; if we do not catch and hold them when within our reach, they will fly from us and return no more."

And Helen heard, and comforted her mother with promises, earnest as vows, that she would try to be both mother and sister to the little ones.

Philip and Fred were boys of twelve and thirteen; old enough to understand and feel deeply how much they were losing, and in many simple, touching ways they sought to show how much they loved their mother.

They foraged the woods for the earliest and sweetest wild-flowers; they tramped long, wearied miles over meadows and hills to find some dainty bird with which to tempt her delicate appetite; they softened their shrill, boyish voices, and tip-toed in and out of her room, glad to sit there for hours, if only they could do some little thing for her, and see her smile and feel her kiss.

But it was to Helen that the mother's heart opened most fully; it was to Helen that her tenderest words of love, sympathy and advice were spoken; and it was in Helen's soul they bore their richest fruit.

Very precious, though mournful, to Helen were those last days and talks with her mother. She sought with passionate eagerness to gather all the sweetness in them, and leave the bitterness for that coming time, when that bitterness alone, she sadly thought, would remain.

Yet of that time Helen seldom trusted herself to speak or even think. C. ly once, as her head rested for a moment on the pillow by her mother, she whispered:

"Oh, mamma, if we might only both go together and be buried in one grave."

And Helen never forgot the beautiful smile with which her mother answered:

"I am glad we cannot, my darling. I want you to know something of the joys of life as well as of its sorrow. It is sweet to die when our task is done and the Master calls; but, Helen, it is also sweet to live and work for Him. I leave you in His hands, my daughter. He will not suffer you to have one trial too many. I pray not that He would take you out of the world, but that He would keep you from evil. May your be a true woman's life, my darling, with joys and honours nobly borne, and trials and sorrows, when they came, received as blessings. Coming from Him they are all blessings. God is preparing me for rest, Helen, but you, I trust, for life. Where I am going perhaps it will be my privilege to watch for you, and I pray that your coming may be not in the morning, nor at noontide, but at the sunset of a beautiful day; after the harvest has been faithfully gleaned and you can come with rejoicing, bringing your sheaves with you."

So strengthened and girded for the life before her, Helen watched her mother calmly pass through the dark valley, having, like Faithful, sunshine all the day, until the end was reached; and for Mrs. Humphrey there remained only the rest of heaven—the paradise of God.

Helen came back from her mother's grave to a home out of which it seemed at first as if all sunshine had faded. There were many sad changes.

The faithful nurse and housekeeper, who was with them during the latter part of Mrs. Humphrey's illness, and who had proved not only an efficient aid but also a sympathizing friend, was soon obliged to leave, and a sister of Mr. Humphrey came to remain with them, and Helen prepared to resume once more her long-neglected school duties.

But Aunt Sarah was like her brother, cold reserved, and silent. She did not like children: Ronald and Sibyl, she said, were enough to wear out the patience of a saint. And though there might have been a diversity of opinions as to Aunt Sarah's saintliness, there could be none, not the slightest, as to the fact that at the end of a few weeks she was tired out and her patience exhausted; and it was a relief to all the family when Aunt Sarah left—the last day of November—the day prior to that during which we have already followed Helen.

That night she was conscious of having made many mistakes.

It was a very pure though pale face that bent over her little Bible; and it was with an humble but peaceful spirit that she read—

"God is our refuge and strength, a very present help in trouble."

It was that she wanted—it was there she rested—a very present help.

More soothing than music were the words to her weary mind. Helen lingered long over it, then went on to the next verse—

"Therefore will not we fear—" She read no farther, her heart took up the glad refrain and repeated in over and over.

"No," thought Helen, "I must not be discouraged; I cannot fail while this assurance is true. David tested it, so did mamma; they found it sure, and I will believe it. I will leave the future with God. He shall teach me His own lessons, in His own way, and I will learn them and not be afraid."

And on the pillow of the promises Helen laid her tired head, and slept the sleep they only know.

"Who trust and rest."

CHAPTER III.—TEACHING AND TAUGHT.

"Daughter, they seem to say,

Peace to thy heart!

We too, yes, daughter,

Have been as thou art.

Hopelifted, doubt-depressed,

Seeing in part—

Tired, troubled, tempted,

Sustained—as thou art."