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Mary Botham Howitt

Excerpt

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MARY HOWITT.



CHAPTER I.

AT CLAPTON.

1843-1848.

ON our return to England in April 1843 I was full of energy and hope. Glowing with aspiration, and in the enjoyment of great domestic happiness, I was anticipating a busy, perhaps overburdened, but nevertheless congenial life. It was, however, to be one of darkness, perplexity, and discouragement.

Just before our departure from Heidelberg we made a pedestrian excursion into the remnants of the ancient Hardt Forest. There, seated at the foot of a mighty pine-tree, Frau von Schoultz, the niece of the Royal Academician, Thomas Phillips, sang so splendidly, in Swedish, Tegnèr's "Old Gothic Lion," an heroic national air greatly beloved in Sweden, that some peasant-girls cutting an early growth in the glades of the wood came forth, and with brandished sickles kept time to the strain.

It was a lovely day and a beautiful scene, yet marked by an unspeakable sadness, which was afterwards to dim the brightness of our lives. Our handsome, nimble little Claude, then in his tenth year, and called by his pre-

ceptors, for the sweetness of his disposition and his brilliant attainments, *der goldene Junge*, was perceived to be lame. He said, "It was nothing." But when we insisted on an explanation, he confessed to his right knee being tired. "It hurt him just a little; nothing to speak of."

He continued to limp, and we, naturally troubled, to ask, "What did it mean?"—"He fancied it was sprained. He had felt it ever since —— (mentioning an English youth), following him up the staircase, had, for a joke, lifted him up by the collar over the balustrade, which was not much more than a yard above the pavement. Somehow he had slipped out of his hands and dropped, but he had lighted on his feet. He had not been hurt. He only felt his knee when he was tired."

Poor Claude! He seemed so bright and cheerful, that, by some strange chance, although shocked by the disclosure, we accepted his explanation. The entire party returned home weary; and he seeming not more so than the rest, we forgot, in the stir and occupation of leaving Heidelberg, our momentary anxiety.

But after my husband and I, with the younger children, had arrived in England, and we were busy settling in a house we had taken at Upper Clapton, we received a letter from our daughter, Anna Mary, that filled us with dismay and anguish. Claude's knee had developed the most alarming features of disease. The English physician at Mannheim, who had seen him, desired that his parents might be immediately apprised, and he taken home. With scarcely the delay of an hour, therefore, William set off to Heidelberg, and brought back the dear child from the first-rate private school where we had left him with his eldest brother.

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To ANNA HARRISON.

“*The Grange, Upper Clapton, July 23, 1843.*—My week consists generally of seven working days, or, speaking more correctly, perhaps, because my employment is very much to my mind, my week is made up of seven active Sabbaths. The first day, however, is distinguished from the other six as the day when I mostly write to those I love best.

“I do not know whether dear mother has told thee of poor Claude’s sad accident, and of his being now at home perfectly lame. Oh! it has been the saddest trial we ever had in our lives! Never was my heart so wrung; never did I shed such bitter tears as I have done over this poor child! William fetched Claude from Germany. He then took him to Mr. Liston, one of the most eminent physicians in London. He could counsel nothing but amputation. We could only consent to this as the very last means. William thought then of taking him to Sir Benjamin Brodie; but that kind, excellent man, Joseph Pease, of Darlington, a very particular friend of William’s, begged him first to ask the advice of Dr. Bevan, a Friend, a very clever and conscientious man, whom, supposing Claude were his child, he should employ.

“Dr. Bevan recommended Mr. Aston Key, and under his care, accordingly, Claude was put. He, like Liston, thought the case was most serious. He would not give us hope, but said there was a chance of his regaining the use of the limb. He advised bandaging, and accordingly that has been done. Thou canst believe, dear sister, what an awful trial this is. You have had experience of a similar affliction, and can sympathise with us. Alas! I was proud of Claude, who, I fancied, would make a

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figure in life. I am humbled now. I throw all on the mercy of God, and hope and trust that He may bless the means which we make use of to restore him.

“Poor Claude has a nice little invalid - carriage, with an inclining seat, so that he lies in it, and in it he passes nearly the entire day. Charlton, who is as sturdy as a little pony, draws him about the garden, and one of the servants when we go out all of us together. I am impatient to get the other two dear children home, for, till they are with us, I do not feel sure but that some other trouble may be impending over us. Among the many blessings that I have, I must not forget dear William. He has the heart of an affectionate woman, with all the solidity of judgment and the firmness of the most masculine mind. Night and day is he always ready to help, to comfort, to suggest, and, what is more than all, to do. He carries Claude in his arms up and down stairs. He thinks nothing a trouble; he is never out of temper. I grumble, despond, and am petulant; he is none of these.

“And now, what do I mean to do with regard to ‘the Society’? Nothing, dear Anna. If they will let me alone, I shall let them alone. We shall occasionally go to meeting, but shall endeavour to find some place of worship near us, which may suit us better than Friends’ Meeting. Our children would derive no benefit from going there, and for their sakes we must find some place of worship where we may take them regularly. I fancy in religious opinion I differ from thee, because mere creeds matter nothing to me. I could go one Sunday to the Church of England, another to a Catholic chapel, a third to a Unitarian, and so on; and in each of them find my heart warmed with Christian love to my fellow-

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creatures and lifted up with gratitude and praise to God. But indeed each day, each passing hour almost, preaches some sermon to me; and if I never entered an acknowledged place of worship, I should believe that, in my way, my worship would not be unacceptable to Heaven. Nevertheless, we feel it right that the children should be brought up with some little religious discipline as to mere outward form; and, please Heaven, we will endeavour, in the home-life, to instil into their souls the spirit of Christian love."

"*Sunday, Oct. 8, 1843.*—With the exception of Claude, we are all quite well. Little Meggie is now in the room with me. She is a regular girl, a tidy little body, who never is so happy as when she is doing some kind of woman's work. Her great delight is to arrange my things. She is as still as a mouse, and turns out my drawers and boxes and lays everything in again in the neatest way; and I never know where to find what I want. But it amuses her and gratifies her love of order.

"We have just now a great cause of annoyance, and which will be a cause of loss to us. A publisher in London, a low fellow, has brought out the remainder of Mdlle. Bremer's works for one-and-sixpence each, the very books we are now translating. It is very mortifying, because no one knew of these Swedish novels till we introduced them. It obliges us to hurry in all that we do, and we must write almost night and day to get ours out, that we may have some little chance. Though many persons will no doubt buy this cheap edition, we still hope that the circulating libraries will take ours. It made me quite poorly last week."

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“*Sunday, Oct. 15.*—How art thou, beloved sister, this fine, fresh autumn morning? Oh, how lovely everything looks! It has been a stormy week, rain, mist, and wind; but all now is calm, bright, and fresh. It does one good, for it reminds one of such periods in one’s own experience. This morning, as I went into the garden, there was a sound of church bells, a murmuring as if the very air was full of them. Now and then there dropped noiselessly a dead leaf from the trees above. There is nothing much to tell in all this, but it impressed my heart with a feeling of love and assurance that made me happy. I loved every one connected with me, and my heart sprang towards thee.

“We have apprehended for some time that the system of bandaging was not applicable to Claude’s case. A friend of ours, whose son suffered from a similar accident, confirmed our opinion, and we have now put Claude under the great homœopathic practitioner, Dr. Epps. I hope thou art not one of those who look on homœopathy as quackery.”

TO ELIZABETH BENNETT, DAUGHTER OF IMM TRUSTED, OF ROSS.

“*Upper Clapton, Oct. 19, 1843.*—Many thanks for your kind letter. We have indeed been most intensely anxious, and have had cause for deep sorrow in the case of our poor dear Claude.

“How truly did we sympathise with you in your bereavement you will believe, and had I known where to address you, should certainly have expressed it. Let me assure you how great the pleasure would be, if it suited your convenience, to call upon us and renew the personal acquaintance which began so agreeably in

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summer weather, and, as it were, among the flowers in Surrey.

“I take great interest in your children, and shall always be glad to observe how your system of education, which appeared to us so excellent and wise, answers its end in developing their characters and minds. We, who cannot devote so much time to ours as you can, have an excellent and learned young German as tutor. We hope, with the blessing of Heaven, that it may answer, and that we may in the end make them wise, good, and happy.”

TO ANNA HARRISON.

“*Sunday, Oct. 22.*—Thy last interested me deeply, and awakened in all our hearts the deepest sympathy. We are quite sure that nothing but the most sincere conviction would have induced thee to take so decided a step as joining the Church of England. We all think that thou hast done quite right; and we admire and love Daniel for his kindness and co-operation in it. I shall not, of course, write anything to our mother about thy change of opinion; but when she comes to us, as I believe she will shortly, I shall then have a talk with her, and can no doubt make her quite satisfied with it. I am sure that she will be reconciled, and most likely think, as I do, that sincere conviction is of far greater worth than an educational belief. May God give thee peace, as I do sincerely believe He will, in this step which thou hast taken.

“I am a little uneasy how we are to manage when dear mother comes, for it is our bounden duty to make her visit as pleasant as we can; and I am afraid that she will see much of which she will be inclined to dis-

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approve ; yet I hope, in the spirit of love and good sense, she will bear with us.

“ We have Eliza back, and to-day dear little Meggie has been with her to meeting, and for the first time. Charlton and Alfred go to church with Herr Müller. Charlton went to meeting one Sunday. When he came back he said, ‘ I shall always go to that meeting, I like it so much ! ’— ‘ And why, Charlton ? ’ we asked. ‘ Oh ! because there is a dog-kennel there. ’ Poor fellow ! what a reason for going to meeting ! Meggie would say she liked to go because all the people were so good to her, and smiled at her so kindly ! ”

“ *Oct. 29.*—Our dearest mother seems troubled rather by our making use of homœopathy for Claude. She has an idea, I fancy, that it is in some way connected with the spread of the Catholic religion. It is true that it was introduced by a German, and he might be a Catholic, but it is not peculiar to that body of people. Dr. Epps is almost a Friend in many of his opinions. He is a most remarkably kind person, and has something almost apostolic in his manners. We knew him first in Nottingham, after William had published his ‘ History of Priestcraft. ’ ”

“ *Sunday morning.*—Dearest sister, send me, as thou sayest, a chronicle of thy home. Tell me what thy children say and do, that I may have some knowledge of them. For myself, do not I always write the most egotistical letters in the world ? Thou must know my children well ; and I seem always to extol them, just as if they were the most perfect creatures in the world ; whereas they are not so. Anna Mary, however, is good beyond words.

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“We are now more than ordinarily busy. We have embarked a great deal of money in our publication of the Swedish novels, and the interference of the upstart London publisher, of which I have told you, is still most annoying. Mdlle. Bremer, however, has written a new novel, and sends it to us before publication. We began its translation this week, and hope, by beginning to print immediately, to be able to publish it at the New Year; about the time it will appear in Sweden and Germany. Thus we shall have a great advantage with a fair field to ourselves. We are writing as fast as possible, and with such an invalid as Claude in the house, every moment is taken up.

“I shall be able to send thy children a book at Christmas which they will like, I hope. It is ‘The Child’s Picture and Verse Book,’ which I have translated from the German work commonly called ‘Otto Speckter’s Fable-Book.’ William will send them ‘The Marvellous History of Jack of the Mill,’ a story told to our children three winters ago by their papa—literally told night after night, like an Arabian tale, and afterwards written down for them. It was a present to them last Christmas in manuscript, and whatsoever profit it produces will be their own property.

“How true is what thou sayest of the Church prayers! I always feel it so; and because the Church service is so good, so beautiful, and so applicable to all hearts and all states, the sermon itself is of less consequence.

“I think this letter of Emma’s will please and interest you all. It is a delight to see how entirely they seem to be in their right place in America; nor could I, even for the selfish pleasure of near intercourse, wish them back. When I write to Emma I shall speak of the change in

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thee, in the manner in which we think it ought to be regarded. I have never written of it to our mother, but I have spoken to her of my own views very freely, and I fancy that she takes it all now much more easily. I have told her not to trouble herself about the commotions in the Church of England, &c., &c.; and she has written more cheerfully on that subject. I imagine, nevertheless, dearly beloved sister, that thou and we should differ, not *quarrel* remember, about some points. Thou would find us desperate Radicals, Corn-Law League, universal-suffrage people. But what would that matter? We could agree heartily to differ."

"*Sunday afternoon.*—Poor dear Claude! It is one of his bad days. His leg is painful to him, and keeps him sadly fretful and uneasy. He has shed many tears, and that is by no means usual with him. We have, however, an invitation out for to-morrow evening, where we can take him; and, poor child! it is such a pleasure to him to go out now and then to see fresh people, and lie on a fresh sofa; thus I feel quite obliged to any one who will let us take him with us. This will do him good, will make him to-morrow forget his pain. He has a great quantity of books in his little carriage, and we have a boy to attend upon him, who draws him about all day long. Were he not my child, how interested should I be in the pale, sweet-countenanced boy who is always reading, let one meet him in his carriage when one may! Mr. Tegg, the publisher, has been most kind in sending him books—several pounds' worth. Oh, how grateful to Mr. Tegg I am!

"The book by William of which thou speakest is, I suppose, 'Peter Schlemihl,' by Chamisso, which he